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# Shipwreck in the Sky

Eando Binder



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*There is a warm feeling about welcoming back into the pages of a science fiction magazine the work of a writer who is a legend in the genre. So, here's Binder and a neatly wrapped-up package of a folktale of the future.*

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**shipwreck**  
**in**  
**the**  
**sky**

by ... Eando Binder

## The flight into space that made Pilot-Capt. Dan Barstow famous.

**T**HE FLIGHT was listed at GHQ as *Project Songbird*. It was sponsored by the Space Medicine Labs of the U.S. Air Force. And its pilot was Captain Dan Barstow.

A hand-picked man, Dan Barstow, chosen for the AF's most important project of the year because he and his VX-3 had already broken all previous records set by hordes of V-2s, Navy Aerobees and anything else that flew the skyways.

Dan Barstow, first man to cross the sea of air and sight open, unlimited space. Pioneer flight to infinity. He grinned and hummed to himself as he settled down for the long jaunt. Too busy to be either thrilled or scared he considered the thirty-seven instruments he'd have to read, the twice that many records to keep, and the miles of camera film to run. He had been hand-picked and thoroughly conditioned to take it all without more than a ten percent increase in his pulse rate. So he worked as matter-of-factly as if he were down in the Gs Centrifuge of the Space Medicine Labs where he had been schooled for this trip for months.

He kept up a running fire of oral reports through his helmet radio, down to Rough Rock and his CO. "All Roger, sir ... temperature falling fast but this rubberoid space suit keeps me cozy, no chills ... Doc Blaine will be happy to hear that! Weightless sensations pretty queer and I feel upside-down as much as rightside-up, but no bad effects.... Taking shots of the sun's corona now with color film ... huh? Oh, yes, sir, it's beautiful all right, now that you mention it. But, hell, sir, who's got the time for aesthetics now?... Oops, *that* was a close one! Tenth meteor whizzing past. Makes me think of flak back on those Berlin bombing runs."

Dan couldn't help wincing when the meteors peppered down past. The "flak" of space. Below he could see the meteors flare up brightly as they hit the atmosphere. Most of those near his position were small, none bigger than a baseball, and Dan took comfort in the fact that his rocket was small too, in the immensity around him. A direct hit would be sheer bad luck, but the good old law of averages was on his side.

"Yes, Colonel, this tin can I'm riding is holding together okay," Dan continued to Rough Rock. If he paused even a second in his reports a top-sergeant's yell from the Colonel's throat came back for him to keep talking. Every bit of information he could transmit to them was a vital revelation in this USAF-Alpha exploration of open space beyond Earth's air cushion, with ceiling unlimited to infinity.

"Cosmic rays, sir? Sure, the reading shot up double on the Geiger ... huh? Naw, I don't feel a thing ... like Doc Baird suspected, we invented a lot of Old Wives' Tales in *advance*, before going into space. I feel fine, so you can put down cosmic ray intensity as a Boogey Man.... What's that? Yeah, yeah, sir, the stars shine without winking up here. What else?... Space is inky black—no deep purples or queer more-than-blacks like some jettied-up writers dreamed up—just plain old ordinary dead black. Earth, sir?... Well, it does look dish-shaped from up here, concave.... Sure, I can see all the way to Europe and—say! Here's something unexpected. I can see that hurricane off the coast of Florida.... You said it, sir! Once we install permanent space stations up here it will be easy to spot typhoons, volcano eruptions, tidal waves, earthquakes, what have you, the moment they start. If you ask me, with a good telescope you could even spot forest fires the minute they broke out, not to mention a sneak bombing on a target city—uh, sorry, sir, I forgot."

Dan broke off and almost retched as his stomach turned a flip-flop to end all flip-flops. The VX-3 had reached the peak of its trajectory at over 1000 miles altitude and now turned down, lazily at first. He gulped oxygen from the emergency tube at his lips and felt better.

"Turning back on schedule, Rough Rock. Peak altitude 1037 miles. Everything fine, no danger. This was all a cinch.... HEY! Wait.... Something not in the books has popped up ... stand by!"

Dan had felt the rocket swing a bit, strangely, as if gripped by a strong force. Instead of falling directly down toward Earth with a slight pitch, it slanted sideways and spun on its long axis. And then Dan saw what it was....

Beneath, intercepting his trajectory, coming around fast over the curvature of Earth, was a tiny black worldlet, 998 miles above Earth. It might be an enormous meteor, but Dan felt he was right

the first time. For it wasn't falling like a meteor but swinging parallel to Earth's surface on even keel.

He stared at the unexpected discovery, as amazed as if it were a fire-breathing dragon out of legend. For it was, actually, he realized in swift, stunned comprehension, more amazing than any legend.

Dan kept his voice calm. "Hello, Rough Rock.... Listen ... nobody expected *this* ... hold your hat, sir, and sit down. I've discovered a *second moon* of Earth!... Uhhuh, you heard me right! a second moon! Tie that, will you?... Sure, it's tiny, less than a mile in diameter I'd say. Dead black in color. Guess that's why telescopes never spotted it. Tiny and black, blends into the black backdrop of space. It has terrific speed. And that little maverick's gravitational field caught my rocket.... Of course it can't yank me away from Earth gravity, but the trouble is—yipe! my rocket and that moonlet may be in for a mutual *collision* course...."

Dan's trained eye suddenly saw that grim possibility. Barreling around Earth in a narrow orbit with a speed of something near or over 12,000 miles an hour the tiny new moon had, since his ascent, charged directly into his downward free fall. It was a chance in a thousand for a direct hit, except for one added factor—the moonlet exerted enough gravity pull out of its many-million ton bulk to warp the rocket into its path. And the thousand-to-one odds were thus wiped out, becoming even money.

"Nip and tuck," reported Dan, answering the excited pleadings and questions from Rough Rock. "It won't be a head-on crash. I may even miss entirely.... Oh, Lord! Not with that spire of rock sticking up from it.... I'm going to hit that ..."

Dan had heard an atomic bomb blast once and it sounded like a string of them set off at once as the rocket smashed into the rocky prominence. The rock splintered. The rocket splintered. But Dan was not there to be splintered likewise. He had jammed down a button, at the critical moment, and the rocket's emergency escape-hatch had ejected him a split-second before the violent impact.

But Dan blacked out, receiving some of the concussion of the exploding rocket. When his eyes snapped open he was floating like a feather in open, airless space. His rubberoid space suit, living up to its rigid tests, had inflated to its elastic limit. But it held and within its automatic units began feeding him oxygen, heat and radio-power. He had a chance, now, because he had been ejected cleanly from the rocket, without damage to the protective suit.

The stars wheeled dizzily around him. Dan finally saw the reason why. He was not just floating as a free agent in space. He was circling the black moonlet, at perhaps a thousand yards from its pitted surface.

"Hello, Rough Rock," he called. "Still alive and kicking, sir. Only now, of all crazy-mad things, *I'm* a moon of *this* moon! The collision must have knocked me clear out of my down-to-Earth orbit.... I must have been ejected in the same direction as the moonlet's course, in its gravity field.... I don't know. Let an electronic brain figure it out some time.... Anyway, now I'm being dragged along in the orbit of the moonlet—how about *that*? Yes, sir, I'm circling down closer and closer to the moonlet.... No, don't worry, sir. It was a weak gravity pull, only a fraction of an Earth-g. So I'm drifting down gently as a cloud.... Stand by for my landing on Earth's second moon!"

The bloated figure in the bulging space suit circled the black stony surface several more times, in a narrowing spiral, and finally landed with a soft skidding bump that didn't even jar Dan's teeth. He bounced several times from a diminishing height of fifty-odd feet in grotesque slow-motion before he finally came to a stop.

He sat still for a moment, adjusting to the fantastic fact of being shipwrecked on an unchartered moonlet, crowding down his pulse rate which might be over ten percent normal now.

"Okay, Rough Rock, I hear you.... You're telling me, sir?... Obviously, I'm *marooned* here. No rocket to leave with. No way to get back to terra firma ... what? If you'll pardon my saying so, sir, that's a silly question.... Of course I'm scared! Scared green. Sorry about the rocket, sir, losing it for you.... Me, sir? Thank you, sir. But stop apologizing, will you? I know you haven't got any duplicates of the VX-3 ready, no rescue rocket...."

Dan listened a moment longer then broke in roughly. "Oh, for Pete's sake, will you stop crying over me, sir? So I get mine here. I might have gotten it over Berlin, too. Forget it—sir."

Dan grinned suddenly. "Look, what have I got to kick about? I'll go out in a flash of glory—at least one headline will put it that way—and I'll get credit in the history books as the man who discovered that Earth has *two* moons! What more could I ask, really?"

Dan blushed at the reply from Rough Rock. "Will you lay off please, Colonel? How else should a man

take it? I'm still scared silly inside. But, look, I've really got something to report now. This little runt moon makes tracks around Earth in probably two hours minus. If I remember my Spacenaautics right I'm already looking down over the Grand Canyon, heading west. I'm going to get a pretty terrific bird's-eye view of the whole world in two more hours, which is just about how much oxygen I've got left.... Lucky, eh?"

Dan looked down, watching in fascination the majestic wheeling of the Earth below him. His little moonlet did not rotate, or rather it rotated once for each revolution around Earth, as the Moon did, keeping one face earthward, giving him an uninterrupted view. The Sierras on Earth hove into clear view and the broad Pacific. There would follow Hawaii, then Japan, Asia, Europe.... No, he saw he was slanting southwest. It would be across the equator, past Australia, perhaps near the South Pole, then up around over the top of the world past Greenland, following that great circle around the globe. In any case, his was the speediest trip around the world ever made by man!

"Before we're out of mutual range, Rough Rock, I'm going to explore this new moon. Me and Columbus! Stand by for reports."

Dan did his walking in huge leaps that propelled him fifty feet at a step with slight effort, due to the extremely feeble gravity of the tiny body. What did he weigh here? Probably no more than an ounce or two.

"Nothing much to report, Colonel. It's a dead, airless pip-squeak planetoid, just a big mile-thick rock, probably. No life, no vegetation, no people, no nothing. Guess you might call me the Man in the Second Moon—and the joke's on me! Well, one and three-quarter hours of oxygen left, by the gauge, or 105 minutes—sounds like more that way.... What's that, sir? Your voice is getting faint. Any last requests from me? Well, one favor maybe. Pick up my body some day with another rocket.... Yeah, it'll stay preserved up here in this deep-freeze of space.... Thanks, sir.... Can't hear you much now. Going out of range. Give Betty my fondest. You know, the blonde.... Well, sir—goodbye now."

Dan was glad that Rough Rock's radio voice faded to a whispery nothingness. It wasn't easy to stay casual now. There was nothing more to say, really, and he didn't want to hear any more crying from the CO. The Old Man had sounded almost hysterical. He wanted just to be alone with his thoughts now, making his final peace with the universe....

He checked the gauge with his watch—ninety minutes of oxygen to zero. Or, he thought with a grin, eternity minus ninety minutes.

He was beginning to have trouble breathing. But it was awesomely grand, watching the sweep of Earth beneath him, the procession of dots that were islands strung across the Pacific South Seas like a necklace of green beads. He was still within radio range of ships below at sea. Yet he didn't contact them. He had nothing to say, like a ghost in the sky.

Idly, he kept pitching loose stones, watching their rifle-like speed away from him. Again a phenomenon of the weak gravity of the moonlet. Actually, he was able to pick up a boulder ten feet across and heave it away with ease. *We who are about to die amuse ourselves*, he thought. Then, because a thread of stubborn hope still clung in a corner of his mind, he got an idea. It had lurked just beyond his mental grasp for some time now. Something significant....

Abruptly, face alight, Dan switched on his radio and contacted a ship below, asking them to relay him to Rough Rock with their more powerful transmitter.

"Aho, Rough Rock! Stop adding up my insurance, Colonel! I'm coming back.... No, sir, I haven't gone out of my head, sir. It's so simple it's a laugh, sir.... See you in a few hours, sir!"

And he did.

Dan grinned when they hauled his dripping form from the sea. Aboard the search plane they cut him out of the space suit to which was still attached his emergency twin parachute. But his helmet was gone, ripped loose, for Dan had been breathing fresh Earth air during the long parachute descent.

They stared at him as at a dead man come alive.

"Impossible to escape?" He chuckled, repeating their babble. "That's what *I* thought too, until I remembered those data tables on gravity and Escape Velocity and such—how, on the Moon, the Escape Velocity is much less than on Earth. And on that tiny second moon—well, my clue was when I threw a stone into the air *and it never came back*."

Dan gulped hot coffee.

"I got off the moonlet myself then, got up to more than a mile above it where I was free of its feeble gravity. But I was still in the same orbit circling Earth. I'd have continued revolving as a human

satellite forever, of course, but for this emergency gadget hooked to my belt."

Dan held up the metal gun with its empty tank and needle-nose half burned away.

"Reaction pistol. Fires hydrazine and oxidizer, ordinary jet-rocket principle. Aiming it toward the stars, opposite earth, its reactive blasts shoved me Earthward, thanks to Newton. I needed a speed of about one-half mile a second. The powerful little jet gun had only my small mass to shove in free space, without gravity or friction. That broke me from free-fall *around* Earth to gravity-fall *toward* Earth.

"Then I spiraled down under gravity pull. I reached lung-filling air density just in time, before my oxygen gave out. One more danger was that I began heating up like a meteor due to air friction. I flung out a prayer first, followed by my twin parachutes, designed for extreme initial shock. They held. Slowed me to a paratrooper's drift the rest of the way down."

"Wait," a puzzled pilot objected. "Your story doesn't hang together. *How* did you get off that moonlet? How did you get up there, a mile above it, away from its gravity? There was nobody to throw *you*, like a stone."

"I threw myself," said Dan. "First I ran as fast as I could, maybe halfway around that moonlet, to get a good running start. And then—"

Dan Barstow's grin then was undoubtedly the biggest grin in history....

"Well, then, since the feeble gravity couldn't pull me back again, what I really did was to *jump clear off that moon.*"

### **Transcriber's Note:**

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