

War No. 81-Q

Cordwainer Smith  
1928

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# War No. 81-Q

by

Cordwainer Smith

a pseudonym for

Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger

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This was a Linebarger's first published story, appearing  
in a high school publication.

Note this story was later rewritten; this is the original.

("Karloman Jungahr")

It came to war.

Tibet and America, each claiming the Radiant Heat Monopoly, applied for a War Permit for 2127, A.D.

The Universal War Board granted it, stating, of course, the conditions. It was, after a few compromises and amendments had been effected, accepted by the belligerent nations.

The conditions were:

- a. Five 22,000-ton aero-ships, combinations of aero and dirigible, were to be the only combatants.
- b. They were to be armed with machine-guns firing nonexplosive bullets only.
- c. The War Territory of Kerguelen was to be rented by the two nations, the United American Nations and the Mongolian Alliance, for the two hours of the war, which was to begin on January 5, 2127, at noon.
- d. The nation vanquished was to pay all the expenses of the war, excepting the War Territory Rent.
- e. No human beings should be on the battlefield. The Mongolian controllers must be in Lhasa; the American ones, in the City of Franklin.

The belligerent nations had no difficulty in renting the War Territory of Kerguelen. The rent charged by the Austral League was, as usual, forty million dollars an hour.

Spectators from all over the world rushed to the borders of the Territory, eager to obtain good places. Q-ray telescopes came into tremendous demand.

Mechanics carefully worked over the giant war-machines.

The radio-controls, delicate as watches, were brought to perfection, both at the control stations in Lhasa and in the City of Franklin, and on the war-flyers.

The planes arrived on the minute decided.

Controlled by their pilots thousands of miles away, the great planes swooped and curved, neither fleet daring to make the first move.

There were five American ships, the *Prospero*, *Ariel*, *Oberon*, *Caliban*, and *Titania*, and five Chinese ships, rented by the Mongolians, the *Han*, *Yuen*, *Tsing*, *Tsin*, and *Sung*.

The Mongolian fleet incurred the displeasure of the spectators by casting a smoke screen, which greatly interfered with the seeing. The *Prospero*, every gun throbbing, hurled itself into the smoke screen and came out on the other side, out of control, quivering with incoordinating machinery. As it neared the boundary, it was blown up by its pilot, safe and sound, thousands of miles away. But the sacrifice was not in vain. The *Han* and *Sung*, both

severely crippled, swung slowly out of the mist. The *Han*, with a list that clearly showed it was doomed, was struck by a lucky shot from the *Caliban* and fell several hundred feet, its left wing ablaze. But for a second or two, the pilot regained control, and, with a single shot, disabled the *Caliban*, and then the *Han* fell to its doom on the rocky islands below.

The *Caliban* and *Sung* continued to drift, firing at each other. As soon as it was seen that neither would be of any further use in the battle, they were, by common consent, taken from the field.

There now remained three ships on each side, darting in and out of the smoke screen, occasionally ascending to cool the engines.

Among the spectators, excitement prevailed, for it was announced from the City of Franklin that a new and virtually unknown pilot, Jack Bearden, was going to take command of three ships at once! And never before had one pilot commanded, by radio, more than two ships! Besides, two of the most famous Mongolian aces, Baartek and Soong, were on the field, while an even more famous person, the Chinese mercenary T'ang, commanded the *Yuen*.

The Americans among the spectators protested that a pilot so young and inexperienced should not be allowed to endanger the ships.

The Government replied that it had a thorough confidence in Bearden's abilities.

But when the young pilot stepped before the television screen, on which was pictured the battle, and the maze of controls, he realized that his ability had been overestimated, by himself and by everyone else.

He climbed up on the high stool and reached for the speed control levers, which were directly behind him. He leaned back, and fell! His head struck against two buttons: and he saw the *Oberon* and *Titania* blow themselves up.

The three enemy ships cooperated in an attack on the *Ariel*. Bearden swung his ship around and rushed it into the smoke screen.

He saw the huge bulk of the *Tsing* bear down upon him. He fired instinctively—and hit the control center.

Dodging aside as the *Tsing* fell past him, he missed the *Tsin* by inches. The pilot of the *Tsin* shot at the reinforcements of the *Ariel's* right wing, loosening it.

For a few moments, he was alone, or, rather, the *Ariel* was alone. For he was at the control board in the War Building in the City of Franklin.

The *Yuen*, controlled by the master-pilot T'ang, rose up from beneath him, shot off the end of his left wing, and vanished into the mists of the smoke screen before the astonished Bearden was able to register a single hit.

He had better luck with the *Tsin*. When this swooped down on the *Ariel*, he disabled its firing control. Then, when this plane rose from beneath,

intending to ram itself into the *Ariel*, Bearden dropped half his machine-guns overboard. They struck the *Tsin*, which exploded immediately.

Now only the *Ariel* and the *Yuen* remained! Master-pilot faced master-pilot.

Bearden placed a lucky shot in the *Yuen's* rudder, but only partially disabled it.

Yuen threw more smoke-screen bombs overboard.

Bearden rose upward; no, he was still safe and sound in America, but the *Ariel* rose upward.

The spectators in their helicopters blew whistles, shot off pistols, went mad in applause.

T'ang lowered the *Yuen* to within several hundred feet of the water.

He was applauded, too.

Bearden inspected his ship with the autotelevisation. It would collapse at the slightest strain.

He wheeled his ship to the right, preparatory to descending.

His left wing broke under the strain: and the *Ariel* began hurtling downward. He turned his autotelevisation on the *Yuen*, not daring to see the ship, which carried his reputation, his future, crash.

The *Yuen* was struck by his left wing, which was falling like a stone. The *Yuen* exploded forty-six seconds later.

And, by international law, Bearden had won the war for America, with it the honors of war and the possession of the enormous Radiant Heat revenue.

All the world hailed this Lindbergh of the twenty-second century.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.  
[The end of *War No. 81-Q* by Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger (as Cordwainer Smith)]