

Starship Troopers

Robert A. Heinlein. 1959

CHAPTER 1

Come on, you apes! You wanna live forever? -- Unknown platoon sergeant, 1918 I always get the shakes before a drop. I've had the injections, of course, and hypnotic preparation, and it stands to reason that I can't really be afraid. The ship's psychiatrist has checked my brain waves and asked me silly questions while I was asleep and he tells me that it isn't fear, it isn't anything important -- it's just like the trembling of an eager race horse in the starting gate. I couldn't say about that; I've never been a race horse. But the fact is: I'm scared silly, every time. At D-minus-thirty, after we had mustered in the drop room of the Rodger Young, our platoon leader inspected us. He wasn't our regular platoon leader, because Lieutenant Raszak had bought it on our last drop; he was really the platoon sergeant, Career Ship's Sergeant Jelal. Jelly was a Finno-Turk from Iskander around Proxima -- a swarthy little man who looked like a clerk, but I've seen him tackle two berserk privates so big he had to reach up to grab them, crack their heads together like coconuts, step back out of the way while they fell. Off duty he wasn't bad -- for a sergeant. You could even call him "Jelly" to his face. Not recruits, of course, but anybody who had made at least one combat drop. But right now he was on duty. We had all each inspected our combat equipment (look, it's your own neck -- see?), the acting platoon sergeant had gone over us carefully after he mustered us, and now Jelly went over us again, his face mean, his eyes missing nothing. He stopped by the man in front of me, pressed the button on his belt that gave readings on his physicals. "Fall out!" "But, Sarge, it's just a cold. The Surgeon said --" Jelly interrupted. " `But Sarge!" " he snapped. "The Surgeon ain't making no drop -- and neither are you, with a degree and a half of fever. You think I got time to chat with you, just before a drop? Fall out!" Jenkins left us, looking sad and mad -- and I felt bad, too. Because of the Lieutenant buying it, last drop, and people moving up, I was assistant section leader, second section, this drop, and now I was going to have a hole in my section and no way to fill it. That's not good; it means a man can run into something sticky, call for help and have nobody to help him. Jelly didn't downcheck anybody else. Presently he stepped out in front of us, looked us over and shook his head sadly. "What a gang of apes!" he growled. "Maybe if you'd all buy it this drop, they could start over and build the kind of outfit the Lieutenant expected you to be. But probably not -- with the sort of recruits we get these days." He suddenly straightened up, shouted, "I just want to remind you apes that each and every one of you has cost the gov'ment, counting weapons, armor, ammo, instrumentation, and training, everything, including the way you overeat -- has cost, on the hoof, better'n half a million. Add in the thirty cents you are actually worth and that runs to quite a sum." He glared at us. "So bring it back! We can spare you, but we can't spare that fancy suit you're wearing.

I don't want any heroes in this outfit; the Lieutenant wouldn't like it. You got a job to do, you go down, you do it, you keep your ears open for recall, you show up for retrieval on the bounce and by the numbers. Get me?" He glared again. "You're supposed to know the plan. But some of you ain't got any minds to hypnotize so I'll sketch it out. You'll be dropped in two skirmish lines, calculated two-thousand-yard intervals. Get your bearing on me as soon as you hit, get your bearing and distance on your squad mates, both sides, while you take cover. You've wasted ten seconds already, so you smash-and-destroy whatever's at hand until the flankers hit dirt." (He was talking about me -- as assistant section leader I was going to be left flanker, with nobody at my elbow. I began to tremble.) "Once they hit -- straighten out those lines! -- equalize those intervals! Drop what you're doing and do it! Twelve seconds. Then advance by leapfrog, odd and even, assistant section leaders minding the count and guiding the envelopment." He looked at me. "If you've done this properly -which I doubt -- the flanks will make contact as recall sounds . . . at which time, home you go. Any questions?" There weren't any; there never were. He went on, "One more word -This is just a raid, not a battle. It's a demonstration of firepower and frightfulness. Our mission is to let the enemy know that we could have destroyed their city -- but didn't -- but that they aren't safe even though we refrain from total bombing. You'll take no prisoners. You'll kill only when you can't help it. But the entire area we hit is to be smashed. I don't want to see any of you loafers back aboard here with unexpended bombs. Get me?" He glanced at the time. "Raszak's Roughnecks have got a reputation to uphold. The Lieutenant told me before he bought it to tell you that he will always have his eye on you every minute . . . and that he expects your names to shine!" Jelly glanced over at Sergeant Migliaccio, first section leader. "Five minutes for the Padre," he stated. Some of the boys dropped out of ranks, went over and knelt in front of Migliaccio, and not necessarily those of his creed, either -- Moslems, Christians, Gnostics, Jews, whoever wanted a word with him before a drop, he was there. I've heard tell that there used to be military outfits whose chaplains did not fight alongside the others, but I've never been able to see how that could work. I mean, how can a chaplain bless anything he's not willing to do himself? In any case, in the Mobile Infantry, everybody drops and everybody fights chaplain and cook and the Old Man's writer. Once we went down the tube there wouldn't be a Roughneck left aboard -- except Jenkins, of course, and that not his fault. I didn't go over. I was always afraid somebody would see me shake if I did, and, anyhow, the Padre could bless me just as handily from where he was. But he came over to me as the last stragglers stood up and pressed his helmet against mine to speak privately. "Johnnie," he said quietly, "this is your first drop as a non-com." "Yeah." I wasn't really a non-com, any more than Jelly was really an officer. "Just this, Johnnie. Don't buy a farm. You know your job; do it. Just do it. Don't try to win a medal." "Uh, thanks, Padre. I shan't." He added something gently in a language I don't know, patted me on the shoulder, and hurried back to his section. Jelly called out, "Tenn . . . shut!" and we all snapped to. "Platoon!" "Section!"

Migliaccio and Johnson echoed. "By sections-port and starboard-prepare for drop!" "Section! Man your capsules! Move!" "Squad!" -- I had to wait while squads four and five manned their capsules and moved on down the firing tube before my capsule showed up on the port track and I could climb into it. I wondered if those oldtimers got the shakes as they climbed into the Trojan Horse? Or was it just me? Jelly checked each man as he was sealed in and he sealed me in himself. As he did so, he leaned toward me and said, "Don't goof off, Johnnie. This is just like a drill." The top closed on me and I was alone. "Just like a drill," he says! I began to shake uncontrollably. Then, in my earphones, I heard Jelly from the center-line tube: "Bridge! Raszak's Roughnecks . . . ready for drop!" "Seventeen seconds, Lieutenant!" I heard the ship captain's cheerful contralto replying -- and resented her calling Jelly "Lieutenant." To be sure, our lieutenant was dead and maybe Jelly would get his commission... but we were still "Raszak's Roughnecks." She added, "Good luck, boys!" "Thanks, Captain." "Brace yourselves! Five seconds." I was strapped all over-belly, forehead, shins. But I shook worse than ever. It's better after you unload. Until you do, you sit there in total darkness, wrapped like a mummy against the accelerations, barely able to breathe -- and knowing that there is just nitrogen around you in the capsule even if you could get your helmet open, which you can't -- and knowing that the capsule is surrounded by the firing tube anyhow and if the ship gets hit before they fire you, you haven't got a prayer, you'll just die there, unable to move, helpless. It's that endless wait in the dark that causes the shakes -- thinking that they've forgotten you . . . the ship has been hulled and stayed in orbit, dead, and soon you'll buy it, too, unable to move, choking. Or it's a crash orbit and you'll buy it that way, if you don't roast on the way down. Then the ship's braking program hit us and I stopped shaking. Eight gees, I would say, or maybe ten. When a female pilot handles a ship there is nothing comfortable about it; you're going to have bruises every place you're strapped. Yes, yes, I know they make better pilots than men do; their reactions are faster and they can tolerate more gee. They can get in faster, get out faster, and thereby improve everybody's chances, yours as well as theirs. But that still doesn't make it fun to be slammed against your spine at ten times your proper weight. But I must admit that Captain Deladrier knows her trade. There was no fiddling around once the Rodger Young stopped braking. At once I heard her snap, "Center-line tube . . . fire!" and there were two recoil bumps as Jelly and his acting platoon sergeant unloaded -- and immediately: "Port and starboard tubes -- automatic fire!" and the rest of us started to unload. Bump! and your capsule jerks ahead one place -- bump! and it jerks again, precisely like cartridges feeding into the chamber of an oldstyle automatic weapon. Well, that's just what we were . . . only the barrels of the gun were twin launching tubes built into a spaceship troop carrier and each cartridge was a capsule big enough (just barely) to hold an infantryman with all field equipment. Bump! -- I was used to number three spot, out early; now I was Tail-End Charlie, last out after three squads. It makes a tedious wait, even with a capsule being fired every second; I

tried to count the bumps -bump! (twelve) bump! (thirteen) bump! (fourteen -- with an odd sound to it, the empty one Jenkins should have been in) bump! -And clang! -- it's my turn as my capsule slams into the firing chamber -- then WHAMBO! the explosion hits with a force that makes the Captain's braking maneuver feel like a love tap. Then suddenly nothing. Nothing at all. No sound, no pressure, no weight. Floating in darkness . . . free fall, maybe thirty miles up, above the effective atmosphere, falling weightlessly toward the surface of a planet you've never seen. But I'm not shaking now; it's the wait beforehand that wears. Once you unload, you can't get hurt -- because if anything goes wrong it will happen so fast that you'll buy it without noticing that you're dead, hardly. Almost at once I felt the capsule twist and sway, then steady down so that my weight was on my back . . . weight that built up quickly until I was at my full weight (0.87 gee, we had been told) for that planet as the capsule reached terminal velocity for the thin upper atmosphere. A pilot who is a real artist (and the Captain was) will approach and brake so that your launching speed as you shoot out of the tube places you just dead in space relative to the rotational speed of the planet at that latitude. The loaded capsules are heavy; they punch through the high, thin winds of the upper atmosphere without being blown too far out of position -- but just the same a platoon is bound to disperse on the way down, lose some of the perfect formation in which it unloads. A sloppy pilot can make this still worse, scatter a strike group over so much terrain that it can't make rendezvous for retrieval, much less carry out its mission. An infantryman can fight only if somebody else delivers him to his zone; in a way I suppose pilots are just as essential as we are. I could tell from the gentle way my capsule entered the atmosphere that the Captain had laid us down with as near zero lateral vector as you could ask for. I felt happy -- not only a tight formation when we hit and no time wasted, but also a pilot who puts you down properly is a pilot who is smart and precise on retrieval. The outer shell burned away and sloughed off -- unevenly, for I tumbled. Then the rest of it went and I straightened out. The turbulence brakes of the second shell bit in and the ride got rough . . . and still rougher as they burned off one at a time and the second shell began to go to pieces. One of the things that helps a capsule trooper to live long enough to draw a pension is that the skins peeling off his capsule not only slow him down, they also fill the sky over the target area with so much junk that radar picks up reflections from dozens of targets for each man in the drop, any one of which could be a man, or a bomb, or anything. It's enough to give a ballistic computer nervous breakdowns -- and does. To add to the fun your ship lays a series of dummy eggs in the seconds immediately following your drop, dummies that will fall faster because they don't slough. They get under you, explode, throw out "window," even operate as transponders, rocket sideways, and do other things to add to the confusion of your reception committee on the ground. In the meantime your ship is locked firmly on the directional beacon of your platoon leader, ignoring the radar "noise" it has created and following you in, computing your impact for future use. When the second shell was gone, the third shell

automatically opened my first ribbon chute. It didn't last long but it wasn't expected to; one good, hard jerk at several gee and it went its way and I went mine. The second chute lasted a little bit longer and the third chute lasted quite a while; it began to be rather too warm inside the capsule and I started thinking about landing. The third shell peeled off when its last chute was gone and now I had nothing around me but my suit armor and a plastic egg. I was still strapped inside it, unable to move; it was time to decide how and where I was going to ground. Without moving my arms (I couldn't) I thumbed the switch for a proximity reading and read it when it flashed on in the instrument reflector inside my helmet in front of my forehead. A mile and eight-tenths -- A little closer than I liked, especially without company. The inner egg had reached steady speed, no more help to be gained by staying inside it, and its skin temperature indicated that it would not open automatically for a while yet -- so I flipped a switch with my other thumb and got rid of it. The first charge cut all the straps; the second charge exploded the plastic egg away from me in eight separate pieces -- and I was outdoors, sitting on air, and could see! Better still, the eight discarded pieces were metal-coated (except for the small bit I had taken proximity reading through) and would give back the same reflection as an armored man. Any radar viewer, alive or cybernetic, would now have a sad time sorting me out from the junk nearest me, not to mention the thousands of other bits and pieces for miles on each side, above, and below me. Part of a mobile infantryman's training is to let him see, from the ground and both by eye and by radar, just how confusing a drop is to the forces on the ground -because you feel awful naked up there. It is easy to panic and either open a chute too soon and become a sitting duck (do ducks really sit? -if so, why?) or fail to open it and break your ankles, likewise backbone and skull. So I stretched, getting the kinks out, and looked around . . . then doubled up again and straightened out in a swan dive face down and took a good look. It was night down there, as planned, but infrared snoopers let you size up terrain quite well after you are used to them. The river that cut diagonally through the city was almost below me and coming up fast, shining out clearly with a higher temperature than the land. I didn't care which side of it I landed on but I didn't want to land in it; it would slow me down. I noticed a dash off to the right at about my altitude; some unfriendly native down below had burned what was probably a piece of my egg. So I fired my first chute at once, intending if possible to jerk myself right off his screen as he followed the targets down in closing range. I braced for the shock, rode it, then floated down for about twenty seconds before unloading the chute -- not wishing to call attention to myself in still another way by not falling at the speed of the other stuff around me. It must have worked; I wasn't burned. About six hundred feet up I shot the second chute . . . saw very quickly that I was being carried over into the river, found that I was going to pass about a hundred feet up over a flat-roofed warehouse or some such by the river . . . blew the chute free and came in for a good enough if rather bouncy landing on the roof by means of the suit's jump jets. I was scanning for Sergeant Jelal's beacon as I hit. And found that

I was on the wrong side of the river; Jelly's star showed up on the compass ring inside my helmet far south of where it should have been -- I was too far north. I trotted toward the river side of the roof as I took a range and bearing on the squad leader next to me, found that he was over a mile out of position, called, "Ace! dress your line," tossed a bomb behind me as I stepped off the building and across the river. Ace answered as I could have expected -- Ace should have had my spot but he didn't want to give up his squad; nevertheless he didn't fancy taking orders from me. The warehouse went up behind me and the blast hit me while I was still over the river, instead of being shielded by the buildings on the far side as I should have been. It darn near tumbled my gyros and I came close to tumbling myself. I had set that bomb for fifteen seconds . . . or had I? I suddenly realized that I had let myself get excited, the worst thing you can do once you're on the ground. "Just like a drill," that was the way, just as Jelly had warned me. Take your time and do it right, even if it takes another half second. As I hit I took another reading on Ace and told him again to realign his squad. He didn't answer but he was already doing it. I let it ride. As long as Ace did his job, I could afford to swallow his surliness -- for now. But back aboard ship (if Jelly kept me on as assistant section leader) we would eventually have to pick a quiet spot and find out who was boss. He was a career corporal and I was just a term lance acting as corporal, but he was under me and you can't afford to take any lip under those circumstances. Not permanently. But I didn't have time then to think about it; while I was jumping the river I had spotted a juicy target and I wanted to get it before somebody else noticed it -- a lovely big group of what looked like public buildings on a hill. Temples, maybe . . . or a palace. They were miles outside the area we were sweeping, but one rule of a smash & run is to expend at least half your ammo outside your sweep area; that way the enemy is kept confused as to where you actually are -- that and keep moving, do everything fast. You're always heavily outnumbered; surprise and speed are what saves you. I was already loading my rocket launcher while I was checking on Ace and telling him for the second time to straighten up. Jelly's voice reached me right on top of that on the all-hands circuit: "Platoon! By leapfrog! Forward!" My boss, Sergeant Johnson, echoed, "By leapfrog! Odd numbers! Advance!" That left me with nothing to worry about for twenty seconds, so I jumped up on the building nearest me, raised the launcher to my shoulder, found the target and pulled the first trigger to let the rocket have a look at its target -- pulled the second trigger and kissed it on its way, jumped back to the ground. "Second section, even numbers!" I called out ... waited for the count in my mind and ordered, "Advance!" And did so myself, hopping over the next row of buildings, and, while I was in the air, fanning the first row by the riverfront with a hand flamer. They seemed to be wood construction and it looked like time to start a good fire -- with luck, some of those warehouses would house oil products, or even explosives. As I hit, the Y-rack on my shoulders launched two small H. E. bombs a couple of hundred yards each way to my right and left flanks but I never saw what they did as just then my first rocket hit -that unmistakable (if you've ever

seen one) brilliance of an atomic explosion. It was just a peewee, of course, less than two kilotons nominal yield, with tamper and implosion squeeze to produce results from a less-than critical mass -- but then who wants to be bunk mates with a cosmic catastrophe? It was enough to clean off that hilltop and make everybody in the city take shelter against fallout. Better still, any of the local yokels who happened to be outdoors and looking that way wouldn't be seeing anything else for a couple of hours -- meaning me. The dash hadn't dazzled me, nor would it dazzle any of us; our face bowls are heavily leaded, we wear snoopers over our eyes -- and we're trained to duck and take it on the armor if we do happen to be looking the wrong way. So I merely blinked hard -- opened my eyes and stared straight at a local citizen just coming out of an opening in the building ahead of me. He looked at me, I looked at him, and he started to raise something -- a weapon, I suppose -- as Jelly called out, "Odd numbers! Advance!" I didn't have time to fool with him; I was a good five hundred yards short of where I should have been by then. I still had the hand flamer in my left hand; I toasted him and jumped over the building he had been coming out of, as I started to count. A hand flamer is primarily for incendiary work but it is a good defensive anti-personnel weapon in tight quarters; you don't have to aim it much. Between excitement and anxiety to catch up I jumped too high and too wide. It's always a temptation to get the most out of your jump gear - but don't do it! It leaves you hanging in the air for seconds, a big fat target. The way to advance is to skim over each building as you come to it, barely clearing it, and taking full advantage of cover while you're down - and never stay in one place more than a second or two, never give them time to target in on you. Be somewhere else, anywhere. Keep moving. This one I goofed -- too much for one row of buildings, too little for the row beyond it; I found myself coming down on a roof. But not a nice flat one where I might have tarried three seconds to launch another peewee A-rocket; this roof was a jungle of pipes and stanchions and assorted ironmongery -- a factory maybe, or some sort of chemical works. No place to land. Worse still, half a dozen natives were up there. These geezers are humanoid, eight or nine feet tall, much skinnier than we are and with a higher body temperature; they don't wear any clothes and they stand out in a set of snoopers like a neon sign. They look still funnier in daylight with your bare eyes but I would rather fight them than the arachnids -those Bugs make me queezy. If these laddies were up there thirty seconds earlier when my rocket hit, then they couldn't see me, or anything. But I couldn't be certain and didn't want to tangle with them in any case; it wasn't that kind of a raid. So I jumped again while I was still in the air, scattering a handful of ten-second fire pills to keep them busy, grounded, jumped again at once, and called out, "Second section! Even numbers! . . . Advance!" and kept right on going to close the gap, while trying to spot, every time I jumped, something worth expending a rocket on. I had three more of the little A-rockets and I certainly didn't intend to take any back with me. But I had had pounded into me that you must get your money's worth with atomic weapons - - it was only the second time that I had been allowed to carry them.

Right now I was trying to spot their waterworks; a direct hit on it could make the whole city uninhabitable, force them to evacuate it without directly killing anyone -- just the sort of nuisance we had been sent down to commit. It should -- according to the map we had studied under hypnosis -- be about three miles upstream from where I was. But I couldn't see it; my jumps didn't take me high enough, maybe. I was tempted to go higher but I remembered what Migliaccio had said about not trying for a medal, and stuck to doctrine. I set the Y-rack launcher on automatic and let it lob a couple of little bombs every time I hit. I set fire to things more or less at random in between, and tried to find the waterworks, or some other worth-while target. Well, there was something up there at the proper range -waterworks or whatever, it was big. So I hopped on top of the tallest building near me, took a bead on it, and let fly. As I bounced down I heard Jelly: "Johnnie! Red! Start bending in the flanks." I acknowledged and heard Red acknowledge and switched my beacon to blinker so that Red could pick me out for certain, took a range and bearing on his blinker while I called out, "Second Section! Curve in and envelop! Squad leaders acknowledge!" Fourth and Fifth squads answered, "Wilco"; Ace said, "We're already doin' it -- pick up your feet." Red's beacon showed the right flank to be almost ahead of me and a good fifteen miles away. Golly! Ace was right; I would have to pick up my feet or I would never close the gap in time -- and me with a couple of hundredweight of ammo and sundry nastiness still on me that I just had to find time to use up. We had landed in a V formation, with Jelly at the bottom of the V and Red and myself at the ends of the two arms; now we had to close it into a circle around the retrieval rendezvous . . . which meant that Red and I each had to cover more ground than the others and still do our full share of damage. At least the leapfrog advance was over with once we started to encircle; I could quit counting and concentrate on speed. It was getting to be less healthy to be anywhere, even moving fast. We had started with the enormous advantage of surprise, reached the ground without being hit (at least I hoped nobody had been hit coming in), and had been rampaging in among them in a fashion that let us fire at will without fear of hitting each other while they stood a big chance of hitting their own people in shooting at us -- if they could find us to shoot at, at all. (I'm no games-theory expert but I doubt if any computer could have analyzed what we were doing in time to predict where we would be next.) Nevertheless the home defenses were beginning to fight back, coordinated or not. I took a couple of near misses with explosives, close enough to rattle my teeth even inside armor and once I was brushed by some sort of beam that made my hair stand on end and half paralyzed me for a moment -- as if I had hit my funny bone, but all over. If the suit hadn't already been told to jump, I guess I wouldn't have got out of there. Things like that make you pause to wonder why you ever took up soldiering -- only I was too busy to pause for anything. Twice, jumping blind over buildings, I landed right in the middle of a group of them - jumped at once while fanning wildly around me with the hand flamer. Spurred on

this way, I closed about half of my share of the gap, maybe four miles, in minimum time but without doing much more than casual damage. My Y-rack had gone empty two jumps back; finding myself alone in sort of a courtyard I stopped to put my reserve H.E. bombs into it while I took a bearing on Ace -- found that I was far enough out in front of the flank squad to think about expending my last two A-rockets. I jumped to the top of the tallest building in the neighborhood. It was getting light enough to see; I flipped the snoopers up onto my forehead and made a fast scan with bare eyes, looking for anything behind us worth shooting at, anything at all; I had no time to be choosy. There was something on the horizon in the direction of their spaceport -- administration & control, maybe, or possibly even a starship. Almost inline and about half as far away was an enormous structure which I couldn't identify even that loosely. The range to the spaceport was extreme but I let the rocket see it, said, "Go find it, baby!" and twisted its tail - slapped the last one in, sent it toward the nearer target, and jumped. That building took a direct hit just as I left it. Either a skinny had judged (correctly) that it was worth one of their buildings to try for one of us, or one of my own mates was getting mighty careless with fireworks. Either way, I didn't want to jump from that spot, even a skimmer; I decided to go through the next couple of buildings instead of over. So I grabbed the heavy flamer off my back as I hit and dipped the snoopers down over my eyes, tackled a wall in front of me with a knife beam at full power. A section of wall fell away and I charged in. And backed out even faster. I didn't know what it was I had cracked open. A congregation in church -- a skinny flophouse -- maybe even their defense headquarters. All I knew was that it was a very big room filled with more skinnies than I wanted to see in my whole life. Probably not a church, for somebody took a shot at me as I popped back out just a slug that bounced off my armor, made my ears ring, and staggered me without hurting me. But it reminded me that I wasn't supposed to leave without giving them a souvenir of my visit. I grabbed the first thing on my belt and lobbed it in -- and heard it start to squawk. As they keep telling you in Basic, doing something constructive at once is better than figuring out the best thing to do hours later. By sheer chance I had done the right thing. This was a special bomb, one each issued to us for this mission with instructions to use them if we found ways to make them effective. The squawking I heard as I threw it was the bomb shouting in skinny talk (free translation): "I'm a thirty-second bomb! I'm a thirty-second bomb! Twenty-nine! . . . twenty-eight! ... twenty-seven! -- " It was supposed to frazzle their nerves. Maybe it did; it certainly frazzled mine. Kinder to shoot a man. I didn't wait for the countdown; I jumped, while I wondered whether they would find enough doors and windows to swarm out in time. I got a bearing on Red's blinker at the top of the jump and one on Ace as I grounded. I was falling behind again -- time to hurry. But three minutes later we had closed the gap; I had Red on my left flank a half mile away. He reported it to Jelly. We heard Jelly's relaxed growl to the entire platoon: "Circle is closed, but the beacon is not down yet. Move forward slowly and mill around, make a little more trouble - but mind

the lad on each side of you; don't make trouble for him. Good job, so far -- don't spoil it. Platoon! By sections . . . Muster!" It looked like a good job to me, too; much of the city was burning and, although it was almost full light now, it was hard to tell whether bare eyes were better than snoopers, the smoke was so thick. Johnson, our section leader, sounded off: "Second section, call off!" I echoed, "Squads four, five, and six -- call off and report!" The assortment of safe circuits we had available in the new model comm units certainly speeded things up; Jelly could talk to anybody or to his section leaders; a section leader could call his whole section, or his noncoms; and the platoon could muster twice as fast, when seconds matter. I listened to the fourth squad call off while I inventoried my remaining firepower and lobbed one bomb toward a skinny who poked his head around a corner. He left and so did I -- "Mill around," the boss man had said. The fourth squad bumbled the call off until the squad leader remembered to fill in with Jenkins' number; the fifth squad clicked off like an abacus and I began to feel good . . . when the call off stopped after number four in Ace's squad. I called out, "Ace, where's Dizzy?" "Shut up," he said. "Number six! Call off!" "Six!" Smith answered. "Seven !" "Sixth squad, Flores missing," Ace completed it. "Squad leader out for pickup." "One man absent," I reported to Johnson. "Flores, squad six." "Missing or dead?" "I don't know. Squad leader and assistant section leader dropping out for pickup."

"Johnnie, you let Ace take it." But I didn't hear him, so I didn't answer. I heard him report to Jelly and I heard Jelly cuss. Now look, I wasn't bucking for a medal -it's the assistant section leader's business to make pickup; he's the chaser, the last man in, expendable. The squad leaders have other work to do. As you've no doubt gathered by now the assistant section leader isn't necessary as long as the section leader is alive. Right that moment I was feeling unusually expendable, almost expended, because I was hearing the sweetest sound in the universe, the beacon the retrieval boat would land on, sounding our recall. The beacon is a robot rocket, fired ahead of the retrieval boat, just a spike that buries itself in the ground and starts broadcasting that welcome, welcome music. The retrieval boat homes in on it automatically three minutes later and you had better be on hand, because the bus can't wait and there won't be another one along. But you don't walk away on another cap trooper, not while there's a chance he's still alive -- not in Rasczak's Roughnecks. Not in any outfit of the Mobile Infantry. You try to make pickup. I heard Jelly order: "Heads up, lads! Close to retrieval circle and interdict! On the bounce!" And I heard the beacon's sweet voice: " -- to the everlasting glory of the infantry, shines the name, shines the name of Rodger Young!" and I wanted to head for it so bad I could taste it. Instead I was headed the other way, closing on Ace's beacon and expending what I had left of bombs and fire pills and anything else that would weigh me down. "Ace! You got his beacon?" "Yes. Go back, Useless!" "I've got you by eye now. Where is he?" "Right ahead of me, maybe quarter mile. Scram! He's my man ." I didn't answer; I simply cut left oblique to

reach Ace about where he said Dizzy was. And found Ace standing over him, a couple of skinnies flamed down and more running away. I lit beside him. "Let's get him out of his armor - the boat'll be down any second!" "He's too bad hurt!"

I looked and saw that it was true -- there was actually a hole in his armor and blood coming out. And I was stumped. To make a wounded pickup you get him out of his armor . . . then you simply pick him up in your arms -no trouble in a powered suit -- and bounce away from there. A bare man weighs less than the ammo and stuff you've expended. "What'll we do?" "We carry him," Ace said grimly. "Grab ahold the left side of his belt." He grabbed the right side, we manhandled Flores to his feet. "Lock on! Now . . . by the numbers, stand by to jump -- one -- two!" We jumped. Not far, not well. One man alone couldn't have gotten him off the ground; an armored suit is too heavy. But split it between two men and it can be done. We jumped -- and we jumped -- and again, and again, with Ace calling it and both of us steadying and catching Dizzy on each grounding. His gyros seemed to be out. We heard the beacon cut off as the retrieval boat landed on it -I saw it land . . . and it was too far away. We heard the acting platoon sergeant call out: "In succession, prepare to embark!" And Jelly called out, "Belay that order!" We broke at last into the open and saw the boat standing on its tail, heard the ululation of its take-off warning -- saw the platoon still on the ground around it, in interdiction circle, crouching behind the shield they had formed. Heard Jelly shout, "In succession, man the boat -- move!" And we were still too far away! I could see them peel off from the first squad, swarm into the boat as the interdiction circle tightened. And a single figure broke out of the circle, came toward us at a speed possible only to a command suit. Jelly caught us while we were in the air, grabbed Flores by his Y-rack and helped us lift. Three jumps got us to the boat. Everybody else was inside but the door was still open. We got him in and closed it while the boat pilot screamed that we had made her miss rendezvous and now we had all bought it! Jelly paid no attention to her; we laid Flores down and lay down beside him. As the blast hit us Jelly was saying to himself, "All present, Lieutenant. Three men hurt -- but all present!" I'll say this for Captain Deladrier: they don't make any better pilots. A rendezvous, boat to ship in orbit, is precisely calculated. I don't know how, but it is, and you don't change it. You can't. Only she did. She saw in her scope that the boat had failed to blast on time; she braked back, picked up speed again -- and matched and took us in, just by eye and touch, no time to compute it. If the Almighty ever needs an assistant to keep the stars in their courses, I know where he can look. Flores died on the way up.