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RECESSIONAL

BY ALGIS BUDRYS

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

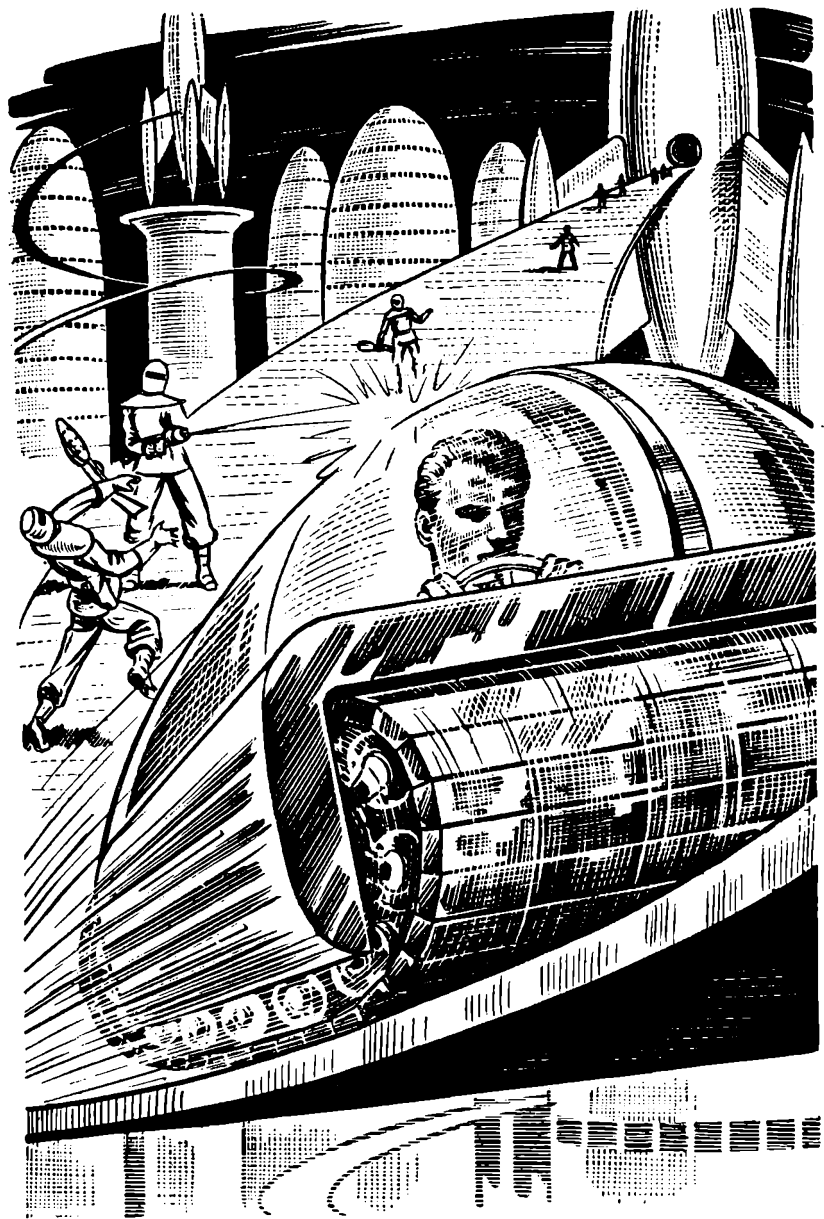
It was a lousy spot for them to be caught in the First Interstellar war. Against the implacable Kiti, they didn't have a chance, and they knew it—and fought all the harder. But their real enemy was an abstraction known as History!

The incredible sun of McMillen's Planet rose over the jagged ridge in front of us and struck our faces. Along the scattered line we pulled our visors over our eyes and peered at the broken foothills through slitted eyelids. Below us, the wounded pack animal that had screamed all night kicked a stone loose with one of its good legs and set it to clattering down the side of the hillock where we lay. Little clumps of dust rose and settled again as a hot wind dodged briefly through the valley.

On my left I heard the unmistakable sound of a Blevens bolt being opened to allow the anxious Automatic Weapons platoon

to check the badly designed ejector arm. On my right the Company Commander argued with his radio tech in a low, vicious voice as they tried to raise Griffon Base. Behind me someone jabbed a bayonet into the lid of a ration can. A heavy body swept crunching pebbles away as someone inched toward me.

"Captain!" I turned my head. Behind a scuffed, sweat-beaded visor, I made out a completely unfamiliar face. The corporal was a thin-jawed, smooth-faced boy with a startling scar from what must have been a mushroom bullet that had struck his left cheekbone, flattening it before traveling up, just missing



his ear, and scything away the hair at his temple. The scar was still pink, which meant he must have gotten it at Darkarte. His lip was slightly turned up at the left corner, either from nervousness or bad surgery on the wound.

"Yes, Corporal?"

"Major Law would like to see you, Sir." I looked over toward the Company Commander's position. Law was looking at me through the polaroid of his visor, one hand raised. I took a quick look up at the ridge. God knows why, because it was still in shadow and I couldn't see anything, but I noticed that the corporal threw it a glance himself before we bellied over the sharp stones into the small foxhole, half expecting to be cut to ribbons by concentrated small arms fire from the ridge.

I think both of us were mildly surprised when we slid head first into the foxhole without any sign from the ridge, but the bad side of the corporal's face was toward me, so I couldn't judge his expression.

"Hello, Mike," I said as I scrambled up and sat down with my back to a boulder. The corporal stayed on his belly, since the hole was too small to give him adequate cover in any other position. He tried all angles.

Mike Law nodded to me. He was a stocky man of about forty-five, with damn little hair left under his helmet, two deep furrows from behind his nostrils to the sides of his chin, a nose that started out as a ski-slide but became a small potato at its tip, and a thinness of lip that could only have come from years of compression. His eyes weren't ice-blue, but only because ice never looked as cold. The brain behind them was tremendous. He was a Reserve officer—if he'd been a regular all the chuckleheads this side of hell couldn't have kept him from being ComStaff. He didn't belong on McMillen any more than any other Political Geographer, but he was doing a better job than any West Pointer they'd ever sent out to this heat-struck rock.

"Harbin!" he said over his shoulder, and the radio tech winced, as though that carborundum-on-glass voice had been plaguing him from early childhood.

"Yes sir!"

"Quit fiddling with that thing. If we can't raise Griffon, maybe we can get somebody else. Start sending a CQD on allwave broadcast. Get cracking!"

"But, Sir, if we do that the Kiti'll know we're in bad trouble." The radio tech didn't seem to like that idea very much.

Law kept his eyes on the ridge. "I'm pretty sure they know all about it, Harbin," he said softly. "Get with it!"

"Yes sir!"

The corporal laughed harshly from the bottom of the foxhole at the tech's jump back to the radio, and Law looked down at him curiously.

"Oh, you still here?" he said gently. "See if you can dig up Lieutenant Grannery, will you please?" The corporal nodded and slipped over the edge of the hole. I could hear gravel being displaced by his progress, but I didn't stick my head out from behind my rock to watch him.

"I'm going to get that boy killed pretty soon, Ben," Law told me with the assurance of a man reading over the Recording Angel's shoulder, "but what else can I do? These damn helmets muffle sound until you can't shout for a man, and walkie-talkie's no good with this static. Even the big set's a laugh when this rockpile's orbit brings us as close to the sun as we are now." He shoved his insulated plastic hat back from his forehead, shutting his eyelids tight to keep out the savage glare of sunlight, scratched angrily at the few hairs that remained anchored on the top of his scalp, and jammed the helmet back on quickly. He pulled a folded map out of his

hip pocket, snapped it into contour, and pointed to a low hill surrounded by higher ground. The dotted red line of a trail ran beside the hill and kinked its way toward Griffon Base through the jagged terrain.

"That's where we are," he said. He traced a circle with his finger over the surrounding bluffs and ridges. "That's where they are."

It was a lousy spot for us to be in. Periodically, fire from the high ground smashed down on our position, probed at the scattered foxholes, ricocheted off the boulders and outcrops, kicked up bursts of gravel, and thunked into flesh. Lousy or not, though, it was much better than it might have been.

I'd been riding a crawler at the tail end of the column, and hoping we'd make it to Griffon Base by morning. McMillen is all rocks, and the base was almost the only flat spot on it. Aside from the attractiveness of the idea of walking around without having to climb up and down, there was also a BOQ that boasted an air conditioning system. I'd been looking forward to sacking out and not waking up in a puddle of sweat.

Until three days earlier, there'd been exactly two samples of civilization on McMil-

len's ugly surface. Now that we'd wrecked the smelting and reducing plant to keep the Kiti from making any use of it, Grifon was all that was left.

This was in the early stages of the First Interstellar War, when there wasn't any hope of holding the isolated systems against the Kiti. The civilian personnel had gone home in their own ships, but the Constab detachment had been ordered to reinforce the base garrison until a government transport could pick us all up.

The front end of the column was atop a rise in the trail when the Kiti hit it. I heard the crash and whine of fragmentation shells going off among them, the shocked pause and silence, and then the smallarms fire, overborne by the Blevens, which jammed almost immediately, cleared, then jammed again.

"Get up there!" I yelled to my driver, and riflemen in my platoon jumped aboard the crawler as we picked up speed. I began firing at ridges beside the trail with the crawler's gun, and some of the Kiti fire shifted. It mowed into the pack animals tethered to the crawler by lead ropes, and my men began to curse as they cut them loose. Then the Kiti got their range right, and slugs began pounding around the driver's position. The crawler

slewed off the trail, mounted a sixty degree bank, and turned over while my men and I jumped clear. We scattered into shelter behind rocks at the edge of the trail and began firing back.

My men were scattered for a hundred yards along the trail. Some distance further up, Law's men were being cut up despite their heavier firepower, which was less effective than it might have been if infra-red scopes had been of any use on this heat soaked ball of rock. I realized that if the two halves of the column remained apart, we'd be butchered separately. We began fighting our way up the trail, running for a few seconds, then diving back among the rocks and firing up into the ridges. I hadn't seen any Kiti yet, nor, with their ambushing tactics, did I expect to. We simply fired at gun flashes in the darkness.

We were still fifty yards away from Law and his men when I heard him shouting orders above the lashing uproar. He was standing on the trail, firing his sidearm.

"That hill! Get up that hill! If we stay down here, we haven't got a chance," he shouted. I joined my men with his, and we began working our way up the hillock where we now were. We'd been helped by the fact

that downhill fire is always inaccurate, and, after a nightmare fifteen minutes, we'd cleared the Kiti off the hilltop, taken up some kind of positions, and, after rolling a liberal supply of frag grenades down on the enemy troops trying to come up the hill after us, had settled down to a night of sporadic fire fights and nerve-wrenching attempts at infiltration.

Law looked up from his map. "Where's that crawler of yours, Ben?" he asked. I pointed out the spot where the machine lay, and his forehead moved under his visor. "Not so good. I was hoping it was closer than that." He put a cigarette between his lips, lit it, and let the smoke drift out of his nostrils until he dispersed it with an angry snort.

"God damn it, I told them an overland march wasn't the brightest idea in the world!" he said savagely. I remembered he'd suggested ferrying the men to Griffon in the civilian ships, but Colonel Dentick at Griffon had refused to authorize it. Since all Griffon had were some light survey and scout craft, that had been that.

The corporal and Lieutenant Grannery crawled into the foxhole. There wasn't room enough for five men to take cover, but the corporal began widening the hole with an entrenching tool,

piling up rocks into a barrier as he did so. Law looked at him for a moment, then shook his head wonderingly. The Kiti fire had picked up a little, but the boy seemed to have come through it without injury.

Grannery had been wounded the night before. There was a lump in his sleeve where it stretched over a bandage, and his helmet must have been taken from a corpse to replace his own, because the stylized lightning bolt of an electrical technician had been daubed over with a medic's crayon and replaced by a crude single bar. The suit couldn't have been his own either, since there was no patch over the wound in his arm. He sank to the foxhole's floor and pulled up his knees, the breath grunting out of his throat. "Christ!" he said, getting the word out rapidly.

"How's it, Phil?" Law asked him. Grannery just nodded an "all right." He drew a hand over a mouth that had wide lips which were badly chapped. Law handed him a cigarette, and he lit it with short puffs.

"I've seen it better," he said finally.

"How's that gun of yours holding up?" Law said gently.

"'Bout as well as a Blevens can be expected to, I guess," Grannery answered. "Who the

devil sandbagged Procurement into accepting that machinist's nightmare, anyway?"

"I suppose you both know that if we don't let Griffon know what kind of a mess we're in, we're cooked," Law said. He turned his head back to the radio. "Harbin!" The tech threw an apprehensive glance over his shoulder.

"Yes sir!"

"Getting anywhere?"

"No, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Um. Well, stay with it." Law turned back to us. "Not much hope there," he said shortly. "We're not due at the base for almost a day yet, and they won't get too worried about us for awhile after that. What's more, their garrison's so small they can't take a chance and come looking for us until they're absolutely sure something's gone wrong."

He flicked his cigarette over the edge of the foxhole.

"We've got to get a message through," he said. "Unless Harbin works an improbable miracle with the radio, it's going to have to be by courier. There's no possibility of fighting our way out of here, but the crawler just might make it, if we can get a few men down to it."

"Kiti'll line each side of the trail and keep shooting until

they hit the driver," Grannery said listlessly.

"I don't think so. It'll be rough at the start, but we'll be able to cover the getaway. Once it gets rolling, the crawler can outdistance a man on foot. This is a small bunch of scouts that saw a chance to get into a strategically superior position and has us pinned down. You'll notice they've either run out of ammunition for their rocket launchers or else they're so low they're conserving it," Law said. "It'd be different if they controlled the trail from here to Griffon, and could eventually snipe the messengers down, but I doubt if there's more than a company of them, at best. They must have snuck in on one ship to look the situation over."

For a minute I thought that Law hadn't seen that the Kiti must have called for a larger force by now. Then I realized that he'd thought of it long before I did, but didn't want to depress the already apathetic lieutenant any further. If we moved fast, we might just get away with this scheme, which, in the light of Law's estimate of the situation, wasn't as harebrained as it would ordinarily have been.

"The hardest part of this whole deal will be getting to the crawler and getting it back on

the trail. It'll mean working under fire in an exposed area. That's where you come in, Phil. We'll cover you with rifle fire while you get the Blevens set up so you can sweep both ridges above the crawler. You, in turn, will cover the men working on the machine, and then you and the riflemen'll cover the crawler's passage through the Kiti. It's a damn shame, but we can't wait for darkness."

"I want you to get back to your crew and get that Blevens in the best shape it's ever been in. We can't afford to have it jam. The minute you're ready, let me know, and we'll get going. Okay?"

Grannery nodded. He dropped his cigarette, stepped on it, and began to crawl down the slope to his position. He bellied his way from boulder to boulder, exposing himself as little as possible. Even so, I saw something pluck at the leg of his suit before he disappeared into his own hole.

The Kiti must have realized something was up, for their fire intensified. Law, the corporal, and I dropped to the bottom of the foxhole. Harbin hunched down behind the armored radio.

"You two are going," Law said without preamble. "The corporal'll drive, and you'll be

free to handle the gun, Ben." I was about to say an officer wasn't needed when he cut me off. "What say we get some breakfast, Corporal?" he said. The boy began rummaging through a ration pack, and Law pulled me aside. "Both of you are going for a reason, Ben. The corporal because I owe him this chance, and a medal for valor besides, and you because I'm afraid it'll take an officer to convince Dentick to get us out of here."

"Huh?" was all I could say. Law smiled grimly.

"Ever read any Kipling, Ben? A poem called *Recessional*, specifically."

"Something about 'Lest we forget', or something like that, wasn't it?"

"'Far-called, our navies melt away; on dune and headland sinks the fire: Lo, all our pomp of yesterday is one with Ninevah and Tyre!'" he quoted softly.

God knows, I've heard a lot of poetry, but I never expected to hear Kipling from Mike Law at the bottom of a foxhole on Mc-Millen.

"When Kipling wrote that," Law said, "he saw what was coming for the empire of which he was a citizen. It's bound to happen to any system that goes ahead blindly, putting its trust in "reeking tube and iron shard," and devil take the hindmost. It's

happening to us, because we plowed right into Kiti territory without thinking of the consequences. It's not that we're any more wrong than they are, no more than the Twentieth Century British were wrong when their empire began to break up on them. It's simply a system that requires constant effort for its maintenance, and if that effort ever has to be diverted, even for a short time, everything collapses.

"Ben, when we win this war, and we will, the whole philosophy of interstellar expansion will have to change. If we don't get rid of the imperial system and substitute a federation of equal and sovereign solar systems, we'll be in a continuous series of wars. Space is too big to be held by force or prestige. Somebody'll always be revolting.

"But there are a lot of people who are born imperialists, Ben. Dentick's one of them, and so is most of the top brass. They have to be, or they wouldn't be where they are in the hierarchy. While the empire's running smoothly, they're all right, but when a thing like this happens, they panic. They're liable to gloss over the loss of a planet here and another there, and talk about the 'Overall Picture' and, in final desperation, about 'Living to fight another day.' To them, the

individual solar systems lose their importance. As long as the form of the empire is preserved, they care more about that than the fact that the empire encompasses less territory every day.

"That's the kind of thinking that produced Czarist movements fifty years after the Russian revolution. They just can't see that the old system is obsolete. Right or wrong, bad or good, it just won't work any more."

"I still don't see why Dentick would need convincing to get you out of here, though," I said.

"Well, it's a bit hard to explain without going into the background, like I have," Law said, "but in a spot like this, with the Kiti swarming all over the frontier, and with a strong force due to arrive here any time, Dentick'll be in a stew. He's never been too bright, or too brave. Ordinarily, it would look like hell on his record if he left the remains of a company to sure death. He'd be forced to come after us, no matter how little he liked it. But the way things stand now, with all the empire builders running around and wringing their hands, and nobody very sure of just what's going on, he's in a perfect spot to shake his head regretfully, get very indignant about the 'massacring aliens', spout some gabble about how our heroic stand

will be avenged, and how our martyrdom will furnish a shining example, and then sit on his hindquarters and do nothing. Believe me, Ben, I know Dentick. He never moves until he's got a regiment for every enemy company." He spat over the foxhole's edge.

"Supposing that's true," I said, "how'm I going to convince him to risk his precious tail?"

Law grimaced. "That's up to you, I'm afraid. If you can put enough pressure on him, and make him worry if you'll raise a big stink about it, he might take the chance."

Grannery signaled from his position. I took Law's hand and squeezed it in mine. "I'll do my damndest," I said.

The crawler bounced and spun its tracks down the trail. The corporal hung on the steering levers grimly, while I almost cut myself in half against the gunner's seat belt. Law's plan had worked, and he'd been right about the strength of the Kiti force. We'd had a bad time getting the crawler righted and under way, but once we'd broken through the Kiti line and revved up to top speed, the trip had settled down to a grueling dash down the kinking trail.

I wondered how Law was making out. The fire from the ridges

had been murderous, and once, looking over my shoulder as the corporal flung the crawler out of the trap, I thought I saw the major's stocky figure fall, but he'd gotten to his feet immediately, and I'd wiped the sweat off my jaw in relief.

We clattered over a ridge, and I saw Griffon's radio tower for a few seconds before we dipped down into a valley again.

For some reason, though, for once, I didn't agree with his logic, I couldn't get Law's statements out of my mind. I couldn't conceive of Colonel Dentick's actually leaving the company to be overrun, but the more I thought about it, and combined that with what I knew of Dentick's thought processes, the more I worried.

We broke out of the rocks and began to roll across the flat plain toward the base. I slapped the corporal on the back. "By God, we made it!" I shouted, and he grinned in answer. I began thinking of ways to pressure Dentick.

Then I saw the transport squatting on the field. It bulked over the buildings and threw a long shadow across the Administration building.

"Must have come in ahead of schedule," the corporal said. There was a faint frown on his face. "They'll hold it until they

get the major out, won't they?" he asked.

"Of course they will," I said.

We rolled past the gates and headed for the transport. There'd been no guard at the gate, and I couldn't see anybody moving around on the base. We came around the corner of a barracks, and I saw why. A long file of men and equipment was going up the transport's ramp. The base was being abandoned.

"Get up that ramp!" I yelled to the corporal, and we caterpillared past the line of men, up the metal ramp, and into the ship.

I jumped out of the crawler and ran toward a knot of officers. Dentick saw me and turned in my direction.

"Knowles!" he said. "Then the column did get here in time." He turned his head and spoke to an officer from the transport. "Commander Williams, this is Captain Knowles of the column from the smelting plant. Can you make arrangements to take his company aboard after all?"

I stood staring at him. They'd been ready to take off without us. Even our scheduled arrival time would have been too late.

"Colonel Dentick," I said rapidly, "the column isn't here."

"Isn't here?" He turned around back to me and looked

at me in surprise. "Then what are you doing here?"

"The column's been cut off and trapped by a force of Kiti," I said. "Major Law tried to raise you on the radio, but the static was too bad."

Dentick blanched. "Kiti! Here on McMillen? Commander, did you hear that?" He and the transport officer ran to the head of the ramp. "Get aboard!" Dentick yelled down to the men still coming up the ramp. "Hurry it up. Come on, get moving!" I ran after them.

"Aren't you going to go after Major Law and his men, Sir?" I shouted.

"Go after Law? Are you crazy, man? There's a whole force of Kiti on its way here. If we don't get off in a half hour, we'll be trapped ourselves. You can't expect me to risk the base personnel and the transport for the sake of the remains of a company. I've got to think of the relative strategic importance of an interstellar vessel and the skilled men under my command in a case like this." He began waving a truck up the ramp with impatient hand motions. "I'm sorry, Captain, but Law will just have to stay where he is."

I stared at him incredulously. Then I realized that Law had been right after all. I turned away from him and walked back

to the crawler. The corporal looked at my face.

"They're going to leave the Major behind, aren't they?" he said. There was nothing I could do but nod. I watched the men come marching up the ramp, followed by the cursing men who drove the various mobile equipment.

"Knowles!" Dentick shouted from across the ramp, "Come here and supervise this, will you? The commander and I have to see to the stowage of all this equipment."

I walked to the head of the ramp and began directing the traffic. I looked at the faces of the men as they filed past me. Their faces were pale, and their hands on their rifle slings were sweaty.

I heard the clattering of the crawler's treads behind me. The corporal sat behind the steering levers, his visor over his face. He pointed the crawler down the ramp and began sliding it toward

the ground. Men and equipment got hastily out of his way.

"Got to let the major know," he yelled back in answer to my shout, and pushed his speed up the limit. The crawler hit the ground and whipped away across the field and back toward the mountains.

I stood watching him until he disappeared behind a row of buildings. The men kept filing past me into the transport, and the sun was hot on my face.

And that's the story of the famous Lost Company. The history schoolbooks are full of it, and all the members got the Congressional Medal of Honor, posthumously. I had to settle for a Presidential pardon after I broke Dentick's jaw for him, and once in awhile, whenever I hear about the glories of war in space, about the huge fleets englobing whole planetary systems, of great fleet actions in the deeps of interstellar distances, I go out and get drunk.
