

Castaways in Space

by Richard Elam

The two of them had just shoved the supply case against the chute door when the space ship gave an unexpected burst of rocket power, knocking Skip Miller against the release lever. The escape door shot up and a big square of black space opened before the boys' eyes.

Glen Hartzell was stunned to see his friend go spinning down the incline and follow the supply case toward the open door. Automatically, Glen stretched his lean body full length trying to grasp Skip's space suit before he escaped. But his momentum sent him skidding down the slope and the next thing he knew he was out in space, too.

A week ago Glen wouldn't have cared whether he faced death or not. He and Skip had just made the scorned fraternity of "Wockies," washed-out cadets. His failure had cut like a knife. He had wanted to pilot ships through the depths of space more than anything else in the world. Instead, he and Skip had been assigned to ground crews on Mars. That, at least, had been their destination until Skip's elbow unexpectedly made them castaways in space.

Glen's first thought was directed to Skip, who looked like a toy balloon as he drifted through the vacuum. "Skip!" he called over his space suit radio. "Do you hear me, Skip?"

"Yeah, Glen," Skip's reply was scarcely more than a squeak.

Glen looked down and ahead where a massive rock some ten miles in diameter hung in the starry emptiness. "If we can make Phobos, we may be all right."

"We're done for," Skip groaned.

"We're not!" Glen's wits were sharpened by the danger. "We're lined up pretty well with Phobos. She doesn't have any gravity to speak of and we may be able to land on her."

"We won't make Phobos," Skip argued. "We'll either run into Mars' gravity field and crash on its surface or float through space until our air runs out."

"Shut up, Skip!" Glen's tone was sharp. "Listen to me. See if you can pick up a little speed by kicking out behind with your feet and hands. If you can catch up with the supply case, hang on."

Skip didn't reply but Glen saw his arms and legs begin to move. Glen worked his own. It was a grueling effort, but Glen found that he was able to increase his speed much in the manner of a space ship's thrust. By the time Glen touched Skip's suit, both of them were sucking freely of their precious oxygen.

"What's the idea?" Skip asked as his gloved hand clutched the strap of the supply case and Glen held onto him.

"We'll use the case as a buffer to break our fall," Glen explained. "Remember, it's covered with foam rubber so that it won't shatter when it hits."

The two had been preparing to drop the emergency supply case on Mars at the time of the accident. Glen was glad now that they'd donned space suits.

Glen saw that the space ship was now only a tiny needle against the red disk of Mars. He and Skip had probably not even been missed by the crew. When they did find out, they wouldn't know where to look for the boys.

Phobos was a jagged, frightening giant below, but Glen held nothing but love for it. Their speed had increased slightly, but it did not look as if they would hit the ground dangerously fast.

Glen felt Skip's muscles tense for the landing.

"Steady, fellow!" Glen breathed.

He felt a rough jar in the pit of his stomach. Glen bounced off Skip's back as though he were rubber. He spread out his arms to ease his fall, then was surprised to find his body settling down to rest as lightly as a leaf.

Glen felt a prickly chill in his cheeks. "We've got practically no weight at all!" he breathed. Skip had almost drifted off into space again, but Glen grabbed his leg and pulled him back.

"It's a crazy world, isn't it?" Skip searched the rocky landscape that sloped down from them on both sides. It was weird to be on a globe so tiny you were conscious of its roundness.

Glenn nodded. "We've *really* got to keep both feet on the ground!"

"What if they don't find us, Glen?" Skip asked. "What then?"

"I don't know, Skip," Glen sighed. "Let's see what's in the supply case."

Glen was able to crawl better than he could walk over to the supply case. Skip followed. Glen pressed a button on the case and the top sprang up.

"Whew! There's not much that isn't included!" Skip said. "Spare oxygen tanks, a bubble tent outfit, food capsules, water maker, first-aid, flares, books, electronic stove-heater."

"Let's put up the bubble tent," Glen said. "It'll help save our heat."

As he had learned in cadet training, he removed a cylinder from the outfit and pulled a lever. It popped open and a plastic bubble began growing out of it. The bubble, which was slightly oblong and transparent, enlarged to about seven feet, then detached itself from the cartridge airtight. After it had hardened for several minutes, Glen took an electric saw from the kit and cut a small door in the side. They made hinges from self-sealing plastic strips.

They used the foam rubber from around the case for flooring, then put the supplies inside the bubble. They turned on the heater and then turned off the heat units in their suits.

"How long do you figure our supplies can last, Glen?" Skip asked.

"They're supposed to last two people ten days," Glen replied. "Don't you remember that question on our exam?"

"Don't remind me!" Skip said. "I'm tired of hearing about the cadet corps."

"I know," Glen said bitterly.

"How could they flunk us on one question?" Skip asked. "It wasn't fair."

"I agree with you," Glen answered, "but the fact remains that we've got to take it."

Skip chuckled grimly. "You talk as if we have a lifetime ahead of us. We don't know whether we've got *tomorrow*."

"Which reminds me, we'd better send off some flares to let somebody know where we are." Glen picked up some of the rocket flares and "drifted" out of the bubble tent. He set up a flare on its tripod legs, pointed it at Mars' ruddy face and pulled on the release catch. But it wouldn't move.

"It's jammed!" Glen tried another rocket and got the same result. Then another, and another. They were all useless, all the catches warped, possibly from having been kept too near a heat source in the ship.

"How are we going to signal Mars now?" Skip asked.

"Anything we toss out will be drawn to the planet by its gravitation," Glen was thinking out loud.

"How about throwing out some of the extra supplies we have?" Skip proposed. "We can attach a note."

"It's a million-to-one shot they'd be found. Don't you realize that only a fraction of Mars has colonists? No, I'm afraid we'd wait here until doomsday if we had to count on that."

"But what else is there to do?" Skip's eyes were round with dread.

Glen fought down his own sudden despair. "It looks as though we'll have to get to Mars on our own, Skip."

"Now you're crazy! We'd be smashed to pieces!"

"Not the way I'm thinking." A plan was forming in Glen's mind, as he scrambled into the bubble tent and came out with one of their engineering books. Skip watched in amazement as Glen began working math problems in the dirt with a piece of stone.

After a while, Glen said, "I think it'll work, Skip. Want to take a chance?"

"I'd like to know what it is first."

“We can use the chute from the supply case and attach it to the bubble,” Glen explained. “Then we can ride in the bubble to Mars.”

“It sounds fantastic!”

“I’ve figured it every way I know,” Glen said. “At least, it’s better than sitting here and hoping we’ll accidentally be found. Shall we try it?”

Skip shrugged. “If it’s our only chance. But I hope you’ve figured all the angles!”

“We’d better get started right away,” Glen advised. “We may need all our air tanks if we have to do some walking when we land.”

They set to work fastening the lines of the chute around and under the plastic bubble. They used more of the plastic strips to secure the lines tightly. The chute was still folded, since the vacuum on Phobos had failed to trip the automatic release. The boys decided to carry only a minimum of supplies to make their weight as light as possible. When they were ready to go, they climbed into the bubble and Glen shoved them off with one foot outside the door. Then he closed the door.

“How long will it take us to get there?” Skip asked.

“I’ve figured on about a hundred hours,” Glen answered. “That should put us close to Mars City, figuring on Mars’ rotation. But if it doesn’t, we should be able to reach some research settlement.”

They moved slowly at first. Glen hoped for only enough speed to carry them into Mars’ gravity pull. As they approached the red planet, their speed would increase and that worried Glen. If they whacked into Mars’ air blanket too fast, the chute might be ripped from the bubble.

To while away the many hours, the boys dozed and took turns reading the one novel they had brought along. Their legs soon became cramped and sore, and they would have given a good deal to have been able to stretch or walk about.

On the third day, the boys could see the canals criss-crossing in a tangled network on the ruddy globe of Mars. On the fourth day, just as Glen had figured, the glassite domes of Mars City began to show through the violet haze of atmosphere. Glen wondered how fast they were going. There was no way to tell because their insulation kept them from feeling the rush of air.

“Cross your fingers, Skip,” Glen warned. “Our chute should open in the next few minutes.”

The seconds appeared to last hours as they waited, and Glen suffered a torture of suspense. What if the chute did not open? In that case, they would end up in fragments on Mars’ red earth. Or what if the force of the air should jerk the chute off the bubble?

Even as Glen worried, he felt a sharp drag and was tumbled over on Skip.

“Look! The chute’s open!” Skip pointed overhead.

Some minutes later, the red ground rushed up at them like an enfolding blanket. Their final problem faced them now. If they landed safely, they would have conquered space in a way no

spaceman had ever done before.

Glen's muscles drew tight and his heart thumped rapidly as the last few hundred feet melted away. He wanted to close his eyes during these final seconds but he forced himself to watch the rising ground so that he could brace himself at the moment of contact. He was glad they had the foam rubber cushion beneath them.

Glen counted off the last few feet. "A hundred—fifty—twenty—!"

As they struck, Glen was thrown against the ceiling of the bubble. Plastic clattered against plastic as the bubble rolled over on the ground many times before stopping. Glen straightened himself out. He was shaken up but he was unhurt. He looked across at Skip.

"We made it," Glen said, but his voice shook, as if he wasn't yet able to believe it. He tore off the door seals, shoved out the door. Then they got out and stretched their legs. Looking at the domes of Mars City in the distance, Glen asked, "Ready to start walking?"

"After being cooped up like a chicken, I'm willing to walk all over Mars. Let's go." Skip's natural good humor had returned.

Less than an hour later, an astonished captain at the Mars City spaceport heard the boys' strange story.

"Your courage and ingenuity have been incredible!" the captain said when they had finished. "I can't believe that you two are Wockies. If you weren't flunked for reasons of scholarship, I'm sure you'll be reinstated."

"We weren't flunked for that reason, sir," Skip said.

"For what reason then?" the captain asked.

Glen smiled wryly as he replied, "We were flunked, sir, because we failed the test to determine whether we could bear up in an emergency or not!"

Source:

Elam, Richard. "Castaways in Space." *Young Readers Science Fiction Stories*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Inc., 1957. 144 – 157. Electronic.