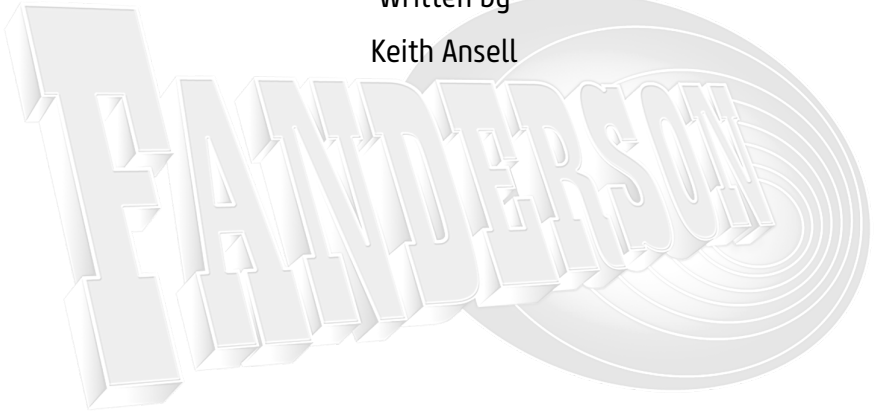


COLD ENCOUNTER

A Thunderbirds Story

Written by

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PROLOGUE

How the hell Robert Scott had managed to reach the South Pole 115 years ago was beyond Captain Paul Abbot and his men, who were attempting to retrace the famous explorer's footsteps.

It was damned hard going even with all the advantages of 21st Century polar gear and equipment. Abbot and his five-man team had left their base on Ross Island on November 1st - the same day Scott had started out on his ill-fated expedition back in 1911.

The Antarctic winter did not begin until April. There should have been plenty of time to reach the Pole and get back to base again before the bad weather took hold but present conditions were like nothing they had ever imagined in their wildest nightmares.

The snow was being whipped into a blinding blizzard and the temperature was down to minus 50°C but the chill factor was more like minus 60.

"This is crazy, Paul" shouted Rob Holbrook over the howling winds. "We can't go on any further in this. Let's set up camp until the storm blows over."

Grudgingly Abbot agreed and his party set about erecting their tent.

The pride of the World Navy rested on his shoulders and he did not want to call in a rescue helijet yet - but if things got any worse Abbot wondered if even a helijet would be able to reach them.

The Antarctic was like another planet at the best of times - conditions were now harsher than on the surface of Mars and that was saying something.

"Paul, Paul, look over there" came the half-crazed voice of Jim Steele, the youngest member of the expedition.

"I can't see anything but this damned snow" said Abbot unpacking his sleeping bag.

"There was someone over by the ridge."

"Don't be crazy man, you're imagining it" responded Abbot. "Come and help with the tent or we'll freeze to death out here."

"He's right, Paul. I saw something as well," said Gary Carter. "There were two figures over there. They were watching us but they've gone now - at least I can't see them any more in this blizzard."

"Calm down, all of you" ordered Abbot. "Set the tent up. Martin, keep a look out. If there is anybody over there, they may need help."

A feeling of unease had settled over the World Navy expedition even though there were no further sightings of the mysterious figures.

The tent was erected with practised ease and all five men squeezed inside. Their microwave soon produced hot soup and coffee but Abbot's team still felt chilled to the bone.

The weather was getting worse. It was as if time had speeded up and they were now in the middle of the Antarctic winter. The eternal daylight was fading before their eyes and it was getting dark - but that was impossible!

Fear was beginning to grip Abbot and his men. What the blazes was happening to the weather? Was there anybody out there in the storm - or were the figures just a figment of their overwrought imaginations.

No-one could sleep as they became aware there was something outside their tent - something threatening. The sense of dread was so real no-one could ignore it.

Abbot decided to call base for the helijet before it was too late - he reached for his belt transmitter and activated its pre-recorded distress call. Suddenly an intense white light enveloped the tent. Every man within it covered his eyes to try to shut it out without success.

The mayday message was instantly snuffed out - no one could save Abbot and his men now from a very cold encounter... an encounter of the third kind.



CHAPTER ONE

"Calling International Rescue ...Calling International Rescue. We need your help. Please answer. Over."

The distress call was weak and highly distorted by static interference but the state-of-the-art detection equipment aboard International Rescue's orbiting Space Station Thunderbird 5 locked onto it immediately.

John Tracy had just fallen asleep after a long day's shift working on his next astronomical research book - things had been pretty quiet on the rescue front since that business with Skyship One.

He staggered from his bunk and quickly shut off the 'night' alarm before heading for the main monitor room dressed only in his boxer shorts. Two minutes later John was at his monitor station and responding.

"This is International Rescue. I am receiving you. What is your position and how can we help you?"

"Thank God. You were my last hope - I couldn't raise base and I doubt if they could have reached us in these conditions anyway."

"Okay Mister. Calm down and tell me who you are and tell me what your situation is. We can help you" said John, the pride in his organisation evident in his voice.

"I am World Navy Captain Paul Abbot. My men and I are slowly freezing to death. We are almost out of food and power, with no chance of getting back to Ross Island. We were trying to reach the South Pole on foot to celebrate Robert Scott's achievement back in 1911 when the weather seemed to go crazy. The conditions are worse than I've ever known them in December."

"It's June" cut in John, puzzled.

"It can't be" gasped Abbot over his rapidly failing radio. "Time distortion...I wonder..."

"Abbot - can you hear me, Abbot?" shouted John as the signal broke up altogether for a few seconds.

"Yes - yes I can. There are six of us trapped down here. I can't give you a location - the compass and the instruments are going crazy. None of the readings are reliable. There seems to be some form of power drain. Please help us - pleas....."

John lost the signal altogether this time but TB5's tracers would give him a pretty accurate map reference for a rescue attempt. He often thought it would be good to get involved in the action a bit more, if only to improve his flying skills in Thunderbird 1 but he was happy to pass on this one - besides 'John of the Antarctic' just did not have the same ring to it.

Scott would need to wear more than just his boxer shorts on this rescue mission.

Within five minutes of John relaying the rescue call to Tracy Island, Thunderbird 1 was on its way to Antarctica at 15,000 mph - it would take him a little over 2 hours to reach the area that Abbot's mayday call had come from. Actually finding the six man expedition in a raging blizzard would take a little longer but Brains' new body heat detectors would be up to the job.

Jeff Tracy had decided there was no need to send International Rescue's heavy transporter Thunderbird 2 - all Scott needed to do was to pick up the six men and get out of there before everyone froze to death.

Scott had already turned up the cabin heating system and prepared the passenger compartment just behind his pilot seat as TB1 crossed the Ross Sea - it would be a tight squeeze but there was no other option. Time was

definitely of the essence in this rescue - the men could have frozen solid by the time TB2 had arrived at her slower speed of 2,000 mph.

Scott wondered if he could really feel the drop in temperature as he scanned the Antarctic surface. Thunderbird 1 had flown above the worst of the blizzard since reaching Antarctica but now Scott felt his reconnaissance craft being buffeted in all directions as he attempted to hold her steady only 300 feet above the rescue zone. If he lost control for a second it would be seven men who would lose their lives at the bottom of the world.

One hour later and Scott was beginning to think that it was hopeless - the body heat detectors had registered nothing whatsoever. If only one man had been lost in the Antarctic wilderness Brains' new invention should have detected him - but six men huddled together in a tent would shine like a beacon on TB1's scanners.

Scott had almost given up when something appeared on the detector screen - one blip, then two, then all six!

"Thunderbird 1 to base. Dad, I've found them!"

"Well done, son" came Jeff Tracy's voice over the radio receiver - relayed by Thunderbird 5.

"Now be careful when you pick them up - it's mighty cold down there."

"Don't forget your thermal underwear " quipped Gordon's voice in the background.

Scott could imagine him on his way out for a dip in the swimming pool as the sun blazed down on Tracy Island.

"At least I haven't gotta worry about sunblock - careful you don't get your tongue burnt" he responded savagely.

Scott broke contact with base and lowered Thunderbird 1 onto the permafrost next to a large tent from which the signals emanated.

TB1 was almost blown over as she touched down. Cold sweat poured down Scott's brow as he closed down the motors and anchored his craft into the ice with rocket driven chocks.

He put his polar gear on over his blue IR uniform and zipped it up as high as it would go before pulling the hood up over his head. The thought of going out into the blizzard was no picnic but it was the only way.

The loudhailer would be useless in this weather and the men might need help getting into TB1. Scott lowered himself down the exit ladder onto the ice and looked at the tent, now only 50 yards away. Half expecting to find six frozen corpses in the tent Scott gingerly unzipped the doorway after battling across to it in the howling winds - his torch casting shadows in the gloom of the Antarctic winter night.

Abbot and his men sat staring at Scott as he entered the tent.

"Thank you for coming to rescue us Scott Tracy" said the figure he assumed must be Paul Abbot.

Scott was taken off-guard. There was something strange happening here - how did they know his name?

"We know everything there is to know about you and your organisation" responded Abbot - almost as if he had read Scott's mind.

"Who are you? What's going on here?" asked Scott reaching for his machine-pistol.

Suddenly an intense white light enveloped him. He threw his hands up to his eyes to try and shut it out without success....

CHAPTER TWO

Jeff Tracy sat behind his desk in the lounge of his luxury island home waiting tensely for word from his eldest son. It had been eight hours since Scott last radioed in - something must have gone badly wrong. Jeff was about to despatch Virgil in Thunderbird 2 to find out what had happened when the eyes on Scott's portrait, hanging on the wall opposite, began to pulse with light. At the flick of a hidden switch beneath his desk Jeff converted the painting into a live image.

"Dad, I've found Abbot and his men and they're alive!" came Scott's voice over the two-way video link.

"Great news, son. Get them all aboard and get them out of there as quick as you can. John tells me the Antarctic weather is getting worse."

"I can't, Dad. I'm afraid there's something else here which is preventing any of us from leaving."

"What are you talking about Scott - explain" bellowed Jeff feeling apprehension mounting.

"Abbot and his people - they've been taken over by aliens, Dad" said Scott hesitantly. "I know it sounds crazy but it's true. There is a crashed UFO down here. The aliens need our help to dig it out of the ice."

"You're kidding!" said Jeff.

"No, Sirree! They crashed down in Antarctica two years ago. Abbot and his expedition were the first people to come near their space craft. The aliens are trapped in the ship - they used psychic projections to possess Abbot and the others. It was the only way the aliens could contact us and they have kept Abbot and his men alive. Without them the Navy guys would have frozen to death in the Antarctic winter on foot."

"Do you trust them?" asked Jeff.

"I think so Dad" said Scott "I don't think we have any other option but to trust them" he added quietly.

"Well, what are we waiting for? We set up this organisation to rescue people and if that includes extraterrestrial aliens then so be it" said Jeff stoically
"What hardware do you need?"

"The Mole and all our other digging equipment...plus the Recovery Vehicles" said Scott with hardly a second thought.

"Okay they are on their way. I just hope Antarctic conditions will allow our equipment to operate effectively" added Jeff to himself as he cut off the video link.

"They-they should do Mister Tracy" said Brains, International Rescue's bespectacled engineering genius, having listened to the whole conversation
"I think the-the operators may have a t-tough time though".

"Right boys" said Jeff turning to his assembled family "Virgil, you'll take TB2 with Gordon, Alan and Brains. Thunderbirds are Go!"

Thunderbird 2 homed in on TB1 as soon as it came within range and 15 hours later landed vertically beside her sister ship.

The storm continued to rage but the greater bulk of the giant green transporter was able to resist all but the strongest buffeting. Virgil could hardly see Thunderbird 1 - now completely covered in snow.

None of the Tracy brothers could accept that they had come to rescue a UFO - the idea was just too incredible for words.

Brains on the other hand had accepted the situation and was quietly devising the best course of action to retrieve the space craft. The benefits of the scientific mind thought Virgil as he raised TB2 on her hydraulic legs to expose the equipment pod.

Scott entered the pod through the side personnel door and waited for his brothers to meet him beside the Mole which stood gleaming yellow waiting to trundle forward into action.

The first thing Virgil noticed was the slightly distant look in Scott's eyes - almost as if he were half asleep.

"Scott, are you okay Big Brother?" questioned Virgil.

"They scanned my mind" said Scott "They know everything about us - but I have a gut feeling they haven't told us everything about this rescue. The aliens seem friendly but there's a strange feel to all this - if that doesn't sound crazy..."

"Pull yourself together Scott" said Alan "The sooner we dig that flying saucer out of the ice the sooner we can get out of here. I reckon this place is colder than the Moon."

Half an hour later Brains had worked out the fine details to put Scott's rescue plan into action.

The Mole would be used to drill a number of tunnels down to the space craft so that the Recovery Vehicles could attach their hawsers to it. Then would come the tricky business of hauling the UFO to the surface of the ice.

The alien that had taken over Captain Abbot's body seemed nervous when Scott outlined this to him.

"You must be very careful not to damage the hull of our vessel" said 'Abbot' "The consequences could be disastrous for your planet."

"P-please explain yourself" stammered Brains standing next to Scott.

"I cannot" said the alien "The fact that you know of our existence is dangerous enough. I must only tell you what you need to know to help us escape from your planet - no more."

The feeling of unease that the Tracy brothers had felt since arriving at the rescue zone was growing. Scott, who had been in contact with the aliens longer than the others, felt a cold knot of fear tightening in his stomach but could not explain why.



CHAPTER THREE

Virgil Tracy felt uncomfortable in his heavy polar gear as he sat at the controls of IR's powerful digging machine - the Mole.

"Okay guys. Here we go" said Virgil to Brains and Gordon who sat in the passenger seats behind him.

Within minutes the Mole had left the warmth of the pod and was trundling towards the UFO crash site on its caterpillar tracked trolley. Not far behind them came Alan in the master Recovery Vehicle - with the two remote control units following him.

Scott watched the procession of rescue vehicles from Abbot's campsite where he had set up his mobile control unit. The blizzard still raged and he soon lost sight and sound of them even though the crash site was only 100 yards away.

Scott had fully advised and briefed his father on the latest events and now Jeff sat behind his desk on Tracy Island feeling more helpless than he had ever done before in his life.

"This is the spot" said Virgil as he applied the brakes and brought the Mole to a halt.

From outside the digging machine one piece of ice looked very much like another but from the map reference given by the aliens this was it. Brains studied the Mole's metal detector but it registered nothing. The ultrasound scanner did pick something up though, about four hundred and fifty feet below the surface - and the heat sensors confirmed this but it certainly was not metallic. It appeared to be disc shaped and some thirty feet in diameter.

"It must be organic" gasped Brains "It's a-a living space ship."

"Magnetic clamps won't be much good then," said Gordon.

"We'll have to l-loop the hawsers around it" advised Brains.

"That will take some fancy tunnelling," said Gordon.

"Yeah, that's right Brains" said Virgil "We've got to get close enough to feed the hawsers around it without damaging the hull in any way."

"I suppose the aliens go crazy if we hurt their pet and destroy the world," said Gordon.

Nobody laughed.

"We've got no choice but to h-h-help them boys" said Brains "Who knows w-what they'll do if we refuse."

Brains calculated the drilling angles and speeds to tunnel down to the buried UFO and programmed the data into the Mole's computer guidance system.

"Here we go again" called Virgil as he fired up the Mole's own motors and operated the hydraulic ramp on the trolley that lifted the digging machine into the air so that its nose pointed towards the ice.

The cahelium drill bit began to rotate and rockets fired pushing the Mole downwards. Within a few minutes the Mole had disappeared below the frozen surface - cutting its way ever closer towards the alien space craft and it's trapped crew.

The feelings of unease became almost debilitating as they drew closer. Thank God for automatic guidance systems thought Virgil trying to remain calm.

"Override the guidance system Virgil" called Brains - his usual stammer gone in the heat of the moment "The space ship seems to be pulsing ...like a heartbeat. I'll calculate another angle to compensate."

The rest of the tunnelling operation went without hitch and an hour later Virgil was reversing the Mole up onto its trolley having created a series of three holes down to the UFO.

"Great work guys" called Scott over his mobile control link "Now Alan, move the Recovery Vehicles in. Let's get some hawsers around that baby and pull it out of there. I want to get this job over and done with and go home."

"That is what we wish to do also Scott Tracy" said 'Abbot' having heard this conversation.

Positioning hawsers around the UFO proved easier said than done. Alan lined up the Recovery Vehicles, one in front of each of the three tunnels that led down to the space craft. He then fired two ultra-high tensile calcium hawsers down into each tunnel. The large cables snaked away into the darkness - their magnetic plates bouncing off the UFO's organic hull when they struck.

The psychic shock that hit all of the IR team when this happened was crippling - but luckily only lasted a few seconds.

"Please tell your brother to be careful" said 'Abbot' standing next to Scott at the mobile control unit "You dare not injure our craft".

"What happens when we begin to pull that thing out?" questioned Scott - beginning to doubt his tactics now.

"We will attempt to keep it calm - as long as it does not feel threatened you should be quite safe" said 'Abbot' ominously.

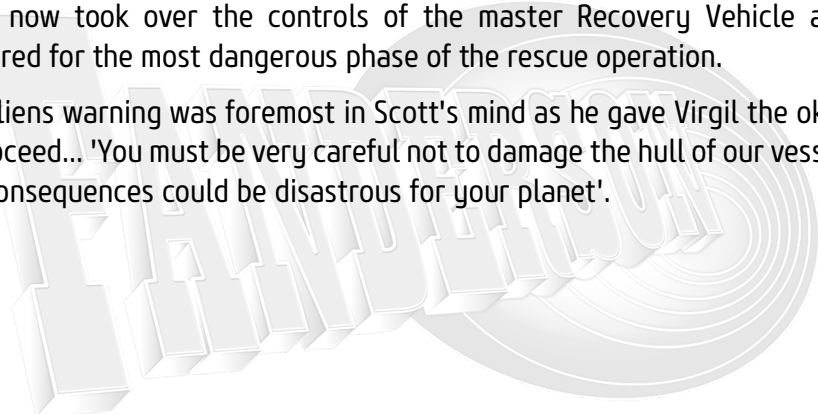
It now took Virgil, Alan and Gordon almost four hours to dig a series of narrow tunnels beneath the UFO just wide enough to crawl through - dragging the hawsers along behind them as they worked. Without IR's advanced equipment and the slight warmth emanating from the craft itself they would never have achieved this.

The alien craft continued to pulse rhythmically which almost led to Alan's death when one of the tunnels he was digging collapsed behind him due to the resulting vibration - luckily, he had just completed his work. There was a hollow of warm water beneath the UFO in which it floated just like a baby in the womb. The heat generated by the pulsing motion had created this - just another hazard for the tunnellers to avoid.

It was a nightmare for the three brothers but dogged determination and guts won in the end and the hawsers were looped around the space craft and magnetically welded together so as to spread the load evenly and avoid slippage.

Virgil now took over the controls of the master Recovery Vehicle and prepared for the most dangerous phase of the rescue operation.

The aliens warning was foremost in Scott's mind as he gave Virgil the okay to proceed... 'You must be very careful not to damage the hull of our vessel. The consequences could be disastrous for your planet'.



CHAPTER FOUR

The three Recovery Vehicles began to slowly move backwards - caterpillar tracks biting deeply into the ice. The hawsers grew taught.

Cold sweat began to drip from Virgil's forehead as he used all his skill to keep the two remote control vehicles pulling with equal force. The Recovery Vehicles came to a halt and Virgil increased the power. Inch by inch they started to reverse again - the alien space ship was moving!!

The organic nature of its hull allowed the hawsers to grip the UFO better than Brains had expected and its disc-like shape easily cut through the ice - if only they could keep it edge-on all the way to the surface.

Suddenly Virgil felt a blinding head ache hit him right between the eyes and he collapsed over the controls.

Scott could detect the Recovery Vehicles going out of sync from the mobile control unit.

"Virgil, what's happening?" he called frantically

Then he saw his brother slumped at the controls over the video link.

"Alan, Gordon" roared Scott changing to the Mole's frequency where his two brothers sat watching the action in relative warmth "Virgil has collapsed. Cut the power and get him out of there."

The two Tracy brothers had boarded the master Recovery Vehicle almost before Scott had finished speaking and cut the power to its motors which automatically brought the remote control units to a halt. Virgil was starting to come around but felt awful.

'Abbot' and the other possessed World Navy men walked slowly over towards the Recovery Vehicles from the campsite.

"You are lucky to be alive Virgil Tracy" said 'Abbot' after climbing up into the control cabin "Our vessel thought you were attacking it. It could easily have killed you. We will have to take control of your mind so that we can avail ourselves of your skills while shielding you from psychic attack."

"Now wait a minute" said Gordon protectively.

"It is the only way to free our craft" said 'Abbot'

An intense white light suddenly flooded the interior of the Recovery Vehicle. Virgil felt another presence in his head. He wanted to scream...he wanted to run...he could do absolutely nothing! He was suddenly a passenger in his own body with an alien in control of his movements ...capable of drawing on all his experience and memories.

Abbot was slumped on the cabin floor looking dazed - he was back in control of his own body again.

"Don't worry" he gasped "It won't hurt him. It - it kept me alive."

Abbot rose to his feet and watched as his alien benefactor took control of Virgil and request that everyone leave the Recovery Vehicle.

"They must free the Starfarer before it goes insane and destroys the world" gabbled Abbot drawing on the alien's memories that were still fresh in his mind as Alan and Gordon helped him walk over to the Mole. "The aliens are losing the battle to subdue their space craft ... it's telepathic mind is becoming more and more attuned to our violent human emotions. It was badly injured in the crash landing and now it's becoming mentally disturbed. You can feel it's animosity all around us...the dread, the fear it's radiating. It's like a feedback loop building in intensity...it's even distorting the flow of time..."

Abbot collapsed as he entered the Mole and found he could not get up from the cabin floor where he lay - sheer exhaustion had taken its toll.

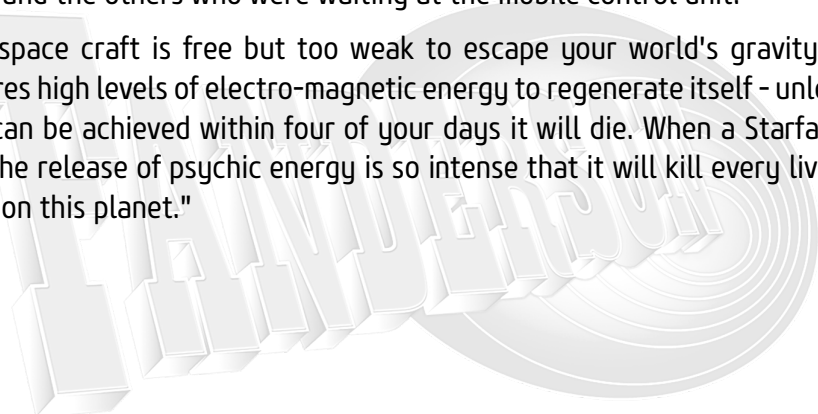
Alan and Gordon now watched the Recovery Vehicles commence the slow process of pulling the living space ship from the ice again. The alien inside Virgil operated the rescue craft with all the dexterity of the man himself.

Just over one hour later the UFO became visible...and only minutes later it was resting on the surface of the ice. Relief flooded over everyone - alien and human alike. The atmosphere that had pervaded the expedition campsite eased noticeably as the space craft realised it was free.

Even the blizzard had reduced in intensity.

'Virgil' climbed down from the master Recovery Vehicle and walked over to Scott and the others who were waiting at the mobile control unit.

"Our space craft is free but too weak to escape your world's gravity. It requires high levels of electro-magnetic energy to regenerate itself - unless that can be achieved within four of your days it will die. When a Starfarer dies the release of psychic energy is so intense that it will kill every living thing on this planet."



CHAPTER FIVE

"I think we c-can help the alien craft repair itself" said Brains half an hour later from the comfort of Thunderbird 2's laboratory.

"How Brains, how?" urged Scott

"There was a lot of secret research in the 1990s into the effects of b-bombarding the ionosphere with high frequency radio waves. It w-was known as HAARP which was an a-acronym for the High-frequency Active Auroral Research Programme".

"Get to the point Brains" snapped Scott.

"W-well I could convert Jodrell 6 into a HAARP projector and heat the ionosphere directly above this region. The EM radiation released should do the trick. I will be a-able to fine tune the HAARP beam to g-generate the most effective frequency. The aliens should be able to advise me on that."

"You're a genius Brains" said Scott "I'd better go and see how Virgil is while you get to work".

Virgil lay in one of TB2's bunks resting after being released by the alien who had now withdrawn its mind into the dying space craft along with all the others of its kind.

Abbot and his team were all fast asleep from the sheer exhaustion created by hosting the alien minds for the length of time they had. Alan and Gordon had tucked them all up in thermal sleeping bags after carrying their collapsed bodies into the equipment pod one by one.

Luckily IR's high powered mobile radio transmitter known as Jodrell 6 had been loaded into the pod, along with the Mole and the Recovery Vehicles, because of the communication problems experienced near the magnetic poles of the Earth

It took over three days for Brains to convert Jodrell 6 - he hardly slept or ate during that time. Scott had to return to Tracy Island in Thunderbird 1 for electronic equipment not available in TB2's lab which had slowed things down.

It was going to be a very close thing. The fate of the whole world rested in the hands of International Rescue - not to mention a number of aliens and their space ship.

With only four hours to go before the deadline that would see the destruction of the human race Brains was ready. He had insisted that no one else accompany him in Jodrell 6 and now sat in the transmitter truck's control cabin snugly wrapped up in his polar gear waiting for the Tracy brothers to get into their Thunderbird machines and fly to a safe distance.

Brains could not guarantee being able to focus the electro-magnetic radiation solely on the Starfarer ...and the effects of high frequency EM radiation on the human body would be unpredictable to say the least.

He watched as Virgil lowered Thunderbird 2 over the equipment pod and then fire the giant transporter's vertical take-off jets. Thunderbird 1 followed her sister ship into the air and they were soon out of sight in the perpetual blizzards of the Antarctic winter.

It's now or never thought Brains switching on the HAARP beam. The super powerful HF radio waves hit the ionosphere in a tightly focused discharge.

Nothing appeared to happen at first. Brains sat watching his detection equipment expectantly - still nothing. It was not going to work...

Why hadn't the aliens helped him ...why just sit in their ship waiting to die?

Suddenly tremendous auroral activity began to build up around the alien space craft. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed continuously.

He would never forget the spectacle of the next few hours. The atmosphere appeared to boil around the Starfarer. Brains could feel it's dread and its fear eroding away to be replaced by joy - such joy as he had never imagined possible.

The scientist watched as the living space ship began to rise into the air still absorbing all the energy unleashed by the HAARP beam as it ascended.

The Starfarer hovered one hundred feet in the air. It pulsed in all the colours of the spectrum as it grew until it was twice its original size. It appeared to stare at Brains - the scientist could not take his eyes off the unearthly display. He wanted to blink but could not move a muscle...

A blinding white light suddenly enveloped him for what seemed like an eternity.

"Thank you."

The words rang in his mind as the light vanished and the Starfarer was gone forever. Brains slowly turned off the HAARP beam and then the man who had saved the world fainted.

The End