

Larger Than Life

Earth or Mars, survival dependent on heart of many



Three of the astronauts were reluctant to accept what would become the next, historically gruesome reality. Dan's innovative Mars suit had malfunctioned, exposing Dan to the Red Planet's low barometric pressure and extreme elements. The world would wait another 22 minutes before learning of the events unfolding 146 million miles away.

Dan felt his body vibrating as his heart pounded fiercely against his chest. He could not hear the sound of his heart beating, however, muted as it was by the rushing Martian air.

Dan looked to the diagnostics screen built into his helmet. He read the atmospheric pressure at 9/1000 Bars, atmospheric temperature at 10 degrees Centigrade (C), suit pressure at 900/1000 Bars, and suit temperature at 15 degrees C. Without hesitation, Dan set his suit to release more pressurized oxygen.

Meanwhile, the other astronauts were making their way towards Dan in an attempt to help him. They knew he was in trouble and hoped to save him by enclosing him in an emergency bag and getting him back to the spacecraft.

Fine, oxidizing Mars dust particles worked their way into Dan's suit and floated around inside his helmet. He held his breath; his eyes began to sting and he closed them tightly. Quickly, he switched his high tech suit to 'voice activation' mode; it spoke in a penetrating tone, "Suit pressure 800/1000 Bars; suit temperature 13 degrees C." He heard a comrade say: "Dan, we have you enclosed in the emergency space wrap."

Now Dan faced one of the hardest decisions he had ever had to make in his entire life. He knew that he could not risk the harsh, oxidizing effects of the Mars dust in his lungs, and he could not hold his breath any longer before blacking out.

Finally, Dan exhaled in force, and did the unthinkable. He snapped off his helmet, so the

dust would be sucked from his suit by the lower pressured space in the emergency bag. His lungs inflated to their peak, painfully pushing against his chest. The suit spoke again, "Suit pressure 400/1000 Bars; suit temperature 3 degrees C."

Dan's ears began to ring loudly and then piercingly, followed by a long, eerie silence. He exhaled deeply and started hyperventilating. "Come on boy; get a grip!" he told himself.

Slowly, in stages, Dan managed to calm himself and control his breathing. He opened his bloodshot eyes to see his comrades gazing anxiously at him through the transparent wrap.

By this time, the bag had ballooned to almost maximum volume, too big to fit through the spacecraft entrance. The other astronauts were at a loss as to what to do next.

To keep the red dust floating above him, Dan increased the oxygen pressure in the bag. The added pressure caused the bag to split; the space wrap deflated, cocooning the man inside. There was no way Dan could get his helmet back on.

The pressure around Dan plummeted to 120/1000 Bars. He began to convulse and blood bubbled from his nose; within 10 seconds, Dan lost consciousness. He came to thirty seconds later; his arteries had swelled to bursting and his face felt like it was on fire. There was no saving Dan at this point, and he knew it.

Dan thought about his great grandfather, a true hero; he was a man who did not deserve the death he suffered, a man who refused to die in vain. Dan decided that his final moment would be his greatest as he spoke the last of the greater wisdom of his great grandfather.

Dan did his best to raise his hand and form the "V" of peace with his two forefingers. "Tell my family I love them," he said. "Love is the greatest accomplishment, for love is the very reason we choose to live."

Dan's image and his final words were captured by special audiovisual systems built into the astronauts' high tech Mars suits, and transmitted to Earth via super satellite.

Within minutes, Dan Arnold would become the greatest space hero known to mankind; his earthly body committed forever to alien outer space.

The world would watch in utter shock and disbelief. A man sent to a dead planet, void of any resources, was no better than a man sent to his own execution. There would be many questions to be answered in the coming years.

Eventually, Dan Arnold would become immortalized in bronzed statues unveiled in every prestigious locale on the Earth. "Who was Dan's great grandfather?" people would ask. "What was his story?" "What was the very source of his pro-

found wisdom?"

And now, the rest of the story ...

The time is January, 2006, almost a century before Dan Arnold would become the first man to walk on Mars. The place is Edmonton, Alberta, a Canadian city known for its fiercely cold and inhospitable winters. A man by the name of John Arnold walks the streets on the south side of town, an amateur astronomer and writer without a home.

John has just arrived in Edmonton and has been walking around for a few hours now; he finds the weather unbelievably cold. With the wind chill factor, the temperature feels like -42 degrees C. The heavy wind blows at a fierce 64 kilometres per hour against his bowed head and body, pushing him back a step for every few steps he limps forward.

John is exhausted and numb with the cold. He trudges on a little further, looking for a place to warm up. Finally, he takes refuge in the outer lobby of an apartment building.

"My God," he murmurs as he collapses against the wall and slides to the floor.

A few minutes later, a well-dressed woman opens the door and prompts two children to follow quickly. "Come on now, get inside. It is freezing out here. You will catch your death!" She cannot help but notice John lying there on the floor.

"Can I help you?" asks the woman.

"Just warming up. Everything is closed," responds John.

The lady rolls her eyes as she sighs; her lips tightening, she says sternly: "Look, you need to go to a shelter or something, okay? There are children living in this building. We have had problems before."

"All right," John says softly. He gathers his strength and manages to get up, despite his wobbling knees that ache with arthritis aggravated by low humidity. The woman stands by, carefully watching, perhaps wanting to help, but very leery about touching him.

Once John is outside, he makes his way to a church down the street. The church back home often provided him with shelter from the cold. This church, however, is locked up tightly as are the next two churches he passes; it is another hour before John finds one with an open door.

Unable to wrap his numbed fingers around the intricately carved, brass door handle, John curls his wrist around it and pulls the door open. The motion causes him to lose his balance and fall to his knees in front of the open door, his wrist still caught in the handle. Nursing a wrenched arm, John crawls onto the floor mat inside. A liquor bottle, a parting gift from his family, slips out of his coat and slides across the floor.

John just lays there, too tired and too numb from the cold to move any further from the doorway. He feels his fingers and toes begin to tingle, rather uncomfortably, as the warmth creeps into his body; then the torture begins without warning.

Like a wild, lightning storm, the most excruciating pain jolts through his fingers; a fiery, burning sensation attacks his face, ears, hands, and feet, working its way up his legs and arms.

A caretaker walks into the church. In virtual agony, John uses his eyes to plead with the man: "Hand me my whiskey, please? I could really use a shot."

The caretaker walks up to John and helps him to his feet. "Look, we're having a funeral service tonight. Go get some help. Okay, buddy? Here's your bottle."

Once again, John finds himself outside, back in the cold. He holds the bottle between his thighs and presses his palm down on the cap to unscrew it. Grabbing the bottleneck in his teeth, he tips the bottle up and lets the liquor pour down his throat.

John is thankful he has the whiskey; surely alcohol will warm him and diminish his pain. John feels a chill creep up his spine, cutting

him right to the bone. The cold, dry air continually sucks the moisture out of his body and he is constantly thirsty. He runs a bone-dry tongue around his cracked and bleeding lips.

John makes his way across the street, to a side alley, and falls down at the edge of a snow bank. He turns his head and eats as much snow as he can, trying to re-hydrate himself.

John's mind begins to wander in a dream-like state. The cold is not so bad right now. He shakes himself to clear his head and stop his nodding off there in the snow.

In his heart, John realizes that the end is near for him. He also knows that he wants to make the most of this moment. Perhaps people might listen to him if the message becomes his last words, he thinks to himself.

John props himself up and leans over so that a notepad and stubby pencil fall from his pocket. He clenches the pencil tightly in his teeth and, pressing point to paper, he painstakingly scrawls some words.

Big John Arnold froze to death, right there, in that very snow bank at the corner of Whyte Avenue and 104th Street, his notebook and message at his side. An hour later, two police constables walk by and find John's body already beginning to freeze to the ground.

John makes the news that day, but not in the way he had intended. Local television and radio stations report on a 65-year-old man found dead near the corner of Whyte Avenue and 104 Street. Police do not suspect foul play and the man's name has not been released pending notification of next of kin ... now, on to the sports reports.

The words on the page lying next to John's frozen body read, simply: "Tell my family I love them. Love is the greatest accomplishment, for love is the very reason we choose to live."

- Darryl Learie

Love is the greatest accomplishment, for love is the very reason we choose to live."

