



ORIGINS OF THE JACK COMMER SERIES

**THE UR
JACK COMMER**

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The UR Jack Commer

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For my wife Nancy, who told me that everything in my life is for my art

For my friend Sabin Russell, and our mutual spurring of our early writing

For my high school teacher Cathy Green, who championed my writing and who caught the revealing psychic error in “The Legacy of Jack Commer”

Introduction

After publishing seven Jack Commer novels I felt a need to pull together Jack's entire history starting from my first fifth-grade story about him. It electrified my nine-year-old self. Although I'd already written numerous science fiction stories, "Voyage to Venus" was the first time I'd finished one and said to myself: *Wow, this is cool, this is where I belong, this is what I want to be doing!* That story began my writing path. I also debuted here as an entertainer; when I read my SF stories to the class, even the class bullies were spellbound.

What follows are early and later experiments that never made it to the published Jack Commer, Supreme Commander series. Included also is high school's "The Legacy of Jack Commer," which was probably the real spark of this book. It took me quite some time to hunt down my ancient box of high school essays to find this class assignment that had reverberated over the years. I'd never forgotten it, but upon discovery it wasn't quite how I'd remembered it.

I've left intact the misspellings and strange punctuation of the first stories, though I'd already corrected the 1964 *Trip to Mars* when I published it as a picture book in 2017. I didn't start properly italicizing spaceship names until the twenty-first century, but I did that now for all the stories, as it eliminates some confusion.

I'm struck by how close in time the four fifth-grade stories about Jack are: September 1962 to March 1963. Maybe there's another little picture book to make from those four stories! I'd also assumed that one of the fifth-grade Jack stories was an imaginary one where he died in the end, but that turned out to be another expedition to Jupiter in which a hapless astronaut steps into the Red Spot and dissolves, narrating his death in the first person. But ever-surviving Jack Commer managed to dodge that fate.

We get kid consciousness, in increasing maturity, through the first few stories, up through the abandoned eighth-grade draft of *The Martian Marauders*. Then "The Martian Holes" showcases my wild, sloppy, but somehow still amusing post-college writing style. The interviews with Jack in "Zorexians" develop a new adult flavor; in addition to finally admitting that he's way in over his head with the sexy, unattainable Jackie Vespertine, Jack also muses on his long acquaintance with me and critiques my writing procedures.

We conclude with an aborted 1987 attempt to rewrite the eighth-grade version of *The Martian Marauders*. There were numerous difficulties integrating child and adult consciousness which I didn't resolve until years later, when I resurrected much of this first dropped chapter and revised the book into a fast-paced adult novel, then wrote a cycle of Jack novels.

Contents

[Voyage to Venus, September 1962](#)

[A Voyage to Jupiter, January 1963](#)

[The First Expedition of Saturn, February 1963](#)

[Voyage to Venusian Death, March 1963](#)

[Trip to Mars, Spring 1964](#)

[The Martian Marauders, October 1965-March 1966](#)

[The Legacy of Jack Commer, September 1968](#)

[The Martian Holes, June 1974](#)

[Zorexians, October 1981 - January 1982](#)

[Plot 5, November 1982](#)

[The Martian Marauders, Aborted Draft 2, Chapter 1, January 1987](#)

Voyage to Venus (2033)

September 19, 1962

In my grammar school stories, I assigned dates to each, plotting out a Heinlein-esque Future History, arranging the stories by date into what I later called The Blue Notebook. Four of The Blue Notebook's thirty-four stories featured Jack Commer.

Nine astronauts were walking to a USSF meeting. I, Jack Commer, was one of them. When we got in the building, we heard a man talking. He said the next space flight would be to Venus. Then he said that four brave men would go. After electing I found myself one of those four.

Among me were Jim Coner, Pat Walker, and Henry James.

It was Oct 19, 2033 and flight day. Inside an X-45 mounted on top of a Titan V booster, was my fellow astronauts and me.

Then 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1- "Lift off!" We were on our way.

It took us 3 days to get to Venus. When we got there, we cracked up the rocket. We knew that we would not get back to Earth but still we could report our finds. So we got to work. Suddenly there was a rumbling sound. We turned, saw smoke, and there before us, stood a huge Tyrannosaurus Rex! Jim, Pat and I ran. But James stood there paralyzed. I rushed to his aid, but failed. With a cry of horror, James was lifted in the air by the sharp teeth of the monster. After he went away, I noticed that he came from a large cave. We decided to have breakfast and then explore the cave. For breakfast we had toast. Afterwards I noticed that the heat from our stove was low. Later we decided to report our finds to central control. They said they would send another rocket to get us.

Three days later the rocket came, and we boarded for home.

The End

An Imaginary story that will never happen

Gore

A Voyage to Jupiter (2037)

January 2, 1963

Note the discrepancy between the title's date and the date in the story. "Gore" was a sort of series title used by me and my friend Sabin Russell in our childhood stories. This particular story even had a footnote.

A building rested on a small hill. Inside are the men who will launch 4 men to Jupiter. The 4 men are I, Jack Commer, my brothers Joe and Jim and John Harrison, Jr.

It was Jan. 14, 2035.--flight day--we were all waiting to go. Finally it was time to go. Our rocket blasted off and landed on Jupiter in 5 days--a week.* In the morning we hiked 10 miles. Everything was covered in snow.

Suddenly we heard a crunching sound. We turned and saw footsteps, appearing in the snow. It was one of Jupiter's Ivisible giants! Then John floated in the air. The giant had caught him!

With a sizzling sound John was melted in to a blob with the giant's death-ray gun.

Then Jim was sizzed. I was horried. He was he melted and so was Joe. Then I was captured and was lead to a cave. Then I took out my portable death-ray I killed the giant, got into the ship and headed for Earth.

The End
by Mickey Smith

* (the calendar has been chagned.)

Gore

The First Expedition of Saturn (2040)

February 11, 1963

I, Jack Commer, in the year 2040, was heading for N.A.S.A. in my solar-powered air car when the engine conked out. So I went over to *Merzt: You Rent A Solar-Powered Air Car*. After picking one up, I went to N.A.S.A. headquarters. I was a little late but nobody minded. You see, this was the day Jim Petersen, Harry Johnston, and I were to voyage to Saturn.

At 10:00 P.M. the final countdown started. 10--9--8--7--6--5--4--3--2--1--Lift Off! At 10:30 P.M. our rocket separated from the pull of Earth's gravity. Then I turned on the television and we saw a big crowd still on Cape Canavril. We reported our position. But then the screen went black we couldn't get a "hello" from any tracking station on Earth

We reached Saturn in 10 days. We got out of the rocket and saw strange flowers, rivers that flow uphill, and a bubbling pool with a shower of a compound of acid and mercury. Petersen wanted to take samples, but I wouldn't allow him because the acid would burn his space suit away.

Then we saw it. On a cliff, a half mile away we saw a village. The natives looked like cavemen, and would not grow more than 5 feet high. Then one alein saw us. He angrily picked up a bowl of powder and spinkled it on us!

See chapter II
Gore

The powder paralyzed us. Before we knew it, we were tied to the stake.

But when we were first prisoners, I had grabbed a bottleful of the acid compound.

Now I raised my hand and threw some of it on the aleins. Their skin was eaten away by the acid. We used what was left of it to burn away the ropes. Then we got in the spaceship and took off. When we got to Earth we had a big party. We were proud of our victory.

The End
by Mickey Smith

Voyage to Venusian Death (2030)

March 28, 1963

I, Jack Commer, was blasting off from Earth in my one-man atomic-powered spaceship when I heard a faint sound on the radio. I walked over to a shelf over where I usually slept and turned the sound on the radio up. Then I could hear the message. It was from the Venusian space-pirates!

One man was saying that in 2 hours a nuclear attack would be launched on Earth.

Being a member of the Space Club, I had already bounded over to my bench and warned Earth of the attack. After I hung up I realized I shouldn't spend all my time lolling around. I decided to look for the space pirates.

No sooner than I had done this than the space pirates ship buzzed me and let fly with a belt of space bullets. Luckily my rocket had protective covering that could shed bullets.

Suddenly the space pirate's ship veered to the left and zoomed out ahead of me. For awhile it seemed I would never catch up.

But then something happened. The ship's engines conked out. I shot a missile that would cause the Venusians death and I would not have to arrest them.

The ship turned over and fell to the Earth. I watched the Space Pirates of Venus crash to their death.

The End
by Mickey Smith

Trip to Mars

Spring 1964

I later rendered this ambitious sixth-grade attempt at a novel into a published picture book, retaining the exact wording as below.

I. The “New Jersey” Project

It was a clear day even though this day was the most disastrous date in the earth’s history. A terrible nuclear war had just ended a month before: on October 8, 2033.

Jack Commer, pilot of the world’s first nuclear powered spaceship, the *Typhoon I*, which had dropped the Xon bomb on Russia to end the war, was walking to a friend’s house when he heard an ominous rumbling from the background. It came closer. Suddenly a wide crack opened up in the ground and Commer fell into it. The crack closed up and Commer was trapped 18 feet beneath the earth’s surface.

He slowly drew his atom powered ray gun, aimed it, and fired up at the top of his underground prison. It made a hole in the ground and Commer, a bit dusty and dirty, climbed out. He then rushed to his friend’s house where he was met by his three brothers, John, Joe, and Jim Commer.

His friend, a scientist, was welcoming him when he noticed how dirty Jack was.

“What happened to you?” he said.

Quickly Jack told of what had happened.

“It’s just as I figured. You see, I have observed that the moon is sending radioactive rays making cracks in the earth. And that would mean--”

“That the moon would explode in a few days,” finished Jim.

“Yes,” the scientist answered. “I have already contacted the President about this. He is going to hold a United Nations meeting. You four and I are invited to attend.”

“Okay,” said Jack. “We’ll get a hotel here tonight and go to the meeting tomorrow.”

Later that day Jack, Joe, Jim, and John Commer met Mickey Michaels, Harri McNarri, James Reynolds, and Ken Garrison at their hotel.

“We’ll have to get up early,” Reynolds said. “The meeting is quite early.”

“Okay. Let’s get to sleep,” said Joe. And he did.

II. Time for Decision

Early the next morning, the Commers, Reynolds, Garrison, Michaels, and McNarri, and a guide got up, went to the U.N. building, and waited for the meeting to begin.

When it began, silence was all around the room. The meeting lasted for three hours. After it was over, a charter for the evacuation of the earth was drawn up. All members signed it, but the delegate from Arabia was not present. They would have to wait until tomorrow for the delegate to get in from Arabia.

The next day the delegate from Arabia was coming in by plane to New York. As he landed

at Kennedy International Airport, he was personally escorted by several guards into a motorcade to the U.N., where the charter was waiting to be signed. Everyone was there cheering for him.

Everyone but a lone figure standing on top of a building with a rifle in his hand.

III. Assassination

As the motorcade passed by the building the figure took aim, and “WHEEEEEEEEE!” A yellow beam came out from the gun and hit the Arabian delegate squarely in the chest. He fell out of the air car where a motorcycle almost hit him and veered to the side.

As guards gathered around the delegate, policemen swarmed up the side of the building to try and catch the assassin. But, not to be fooled, the assassin ran for the edge of the building, jumped off, and met his death in the street below.

Meanwhile, at a New York hospital, the doctors fought to save the delegate’s life. But they could not. In 20 minutes the delegate would die.

The precious charter was brought to the bedside of the dying delegate, who, in his final moments of life, signed the charter, and breathed his life away.

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Meanwhile at a U.S.S.F. meeting (not with the Commer and the others) top officials decided to make a two-day survey of the route to Mars. So, they chose Jack Commer, Jim, John, and Joe Commer and Ken Garrison, Mickey Michaels, James Reynolds, and Harri McNarri to do the job.

IV. Survey

“T-minus 20 minutes to lift-off,” a voice crackled over the intercom.

Jack and Joe Commer set themselves at the Control Room, Jim at the Navigation Room, John at the Radar Room, Ken Garrison at the Radio Room, Mickey Michaels and James Reynolds at the Weapon Turrets, and Harri McNarri at the Repair and Escape Facilities Room of the spaceship. *Typhoon I* was on the launching pad with T-minus 10 seconds to go.

“9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1-0-Ignition! Lift-off!”

The acceleration pushed the men into their cots. As it died off, Jim at the Navigation Room reported, “Jack, I have found that course A-7609 will take us to Mars fastest. Over.”

Then Jack said, “Set course A-7609 for Mars, $\frac{3}{4}$ speed ahead.”

The ship was on its way. As they neared Mars they gasped in awe at the beautiful canals running all over the planet Mars. After looking at this for a while, they made 4 orbits of Mars.

Just then John broke the silence. “Objects coming at us! Looks like meteors!”

V. Meteor Shower

“Get into your spacesuits!” ordered Jack as the meteors approached. “Michaels and Reynolds--try and blast them with your guns!”

“Roger.”

A minute later Michaels said, “They’re about 100 feet away, sir. They’re too fast for us to shoot--I think that--”

BANG! BUMP! RIP! CRASH! TEAR! RIP!

“Everyone all right?”

“Yes.”

“What happened, McNarri?”

“Well, the meteors crashed into Michaels’ turret. He’s unconscious. I’ve got him down here. The turret is the thing we heard go BANG! That’s where the air is leaking out. I’m going up to repair it.”

Commer said, “I’ll be out, too.”

As the two men were repairing the damage another meteor was noticed coming their way.

“Get back in the ship!” Jack ordered. But it was too late. The meteor tore off the tail of the spaceship.

As McNarri finally got in, he said, “Boy that was a close one. Hey--where’s Jack?”

VI. Missing: One Captain

Yes, where was Jack? As the men of the ship, after repairing the *Typhoon I*, were looking for him, they wondered that, too.

Meanwhile, out in space, a lone figure clung to a meteor, trying to survive. Suddenly Mars’ gravity pulled the meteor down to Mars. The meteor began to burn up, and Jack let go. He, too, began to fall towards Mars.

He hit with a thud. He could not move. He had a broken leg.

As the men of the *Typhoon I* began to give up, they looked towards Mars and saw a flaming meteor fall down, and, most important, a tiny figure falling off it. This could be Jack.

They got into the ship and landed on Mars. When they got there they found Jack lying in the pinkish sand. They took him back to the ship and headed for Earth.

But this was the day to evacuate. They were late. Only *they* had the correct course. They sped on, full speed ahead.

VII. The Moon Explodes

Faster and faster they went. Finally they neared Earth and landed. Then the passenger compartment was fastened onto it and all the other 7,000,000 chartered spaceships, each carrying 100 people. As the people boarded the ship, a horrible sight took place. The moon exploded, showering fragments upon the earth.

Jack tried to start the ship but it took time to warm up. The shelter which housed the waiting people was being battered, but it was still safe.

VIII. High Tides

Finally *Typhoon I* rose into the air carrying its first load of 100 people to Mars. When it

came back the second time it was nearly knocked over by the rising water.

The people who were in the Depot were screaming with panic, and those who came out for the load had to walk 100 yards through 10 feet of water to the ship.

Jack said, "Get those people aboard ship!"

"We can't! They won't come aboard!" replied a man working below.

More water threatened the ship. As it took off the men saw the Depot blasted apart!

IX. Evacuation Begins

The ship turned around after setting the people down at Mars and came after the other people at the Depot.

"Get whoever's still alive down there and bring them up!" Jack called down to the men.

About 60 panic-stricken people were taken into the passenger compartment. As the ship took off all you could hear was "Help! Eek! Get out of here!"

Harri McNarri wondered if something was wrong. So he went down the ladder to the passenger compartment, opened the steel door and went in. A fire was burning in the first seat!

X. Sabotage!

Harri called down Jack and John Commer to come down. Both brought fire extinguishers to quench the fire. After it was put out a meeting was held in the Control Room.

"How did that fire start?" asked Jack.

"None of the passengers would have," mused Harri.

"It must have started when we were helping those passengers into the ship," said Joe.

"Or maybe someone slipped into the ship and is still in here and that's how the fire started," said Ken.

"That could be," said Jack. "Let's search the ship."

And so the search began with everyone looking in every compartment of the ship. Nothing was found. The men were just about ready to give up when a call came from the Control Room.

"Hey you guys. I just remembered. Weren't we supposed to pick up that chest containing plans for the new city on Mars?" asked Jack.

"By golly, you're right!" exclaimed Reynolds.

In mid-space the ship turned around to get the chest.

XI. Explosion

The ship landed after leaving the passenger area adrift in an orbit around Earth.

Jack ordered, "You stay here. I'll go get the chest."

A "brave" man* went out with Jack. "I told you to stay!" Jack yelled.

The man turned around and hit Jack in the nose. Jack retaliated but the man was swept away by the flood forever.

Jack went into the wrecked Depot and spotted the chest. It was stuck under a counter.

* Who, unknown, went into the *Typhoon I* when the passenger area was cut off.

After 10 minutes of prying Jack got the wet chest, a suitcase in reality.

As he came out he heard a rumble. A nuclear explosion occurred at the old West Atomic Power Plant!

He was flung to the ground by the terrible force of the explosion. It was thirty miles away but the shock could knock the spaceship over. He ran for the ship holding the suitcase in his hand. He stumbled once in the muddy water but finally made it.

“Let’s get out of here!” he yelled. “I saw an explosion over there.”

As they got up into an orbit around the Earth where they had left the passenger compartment, it was nowhere in sight!

XII. *Typhoon I* Into Space

Typhoon I cruised around Earth several times while looking for the lost compartment. Still, it could not be found.

Finally, on the second day of looking it was found drifting closer and closer to Earth. They saw, in horror, a sight which made them shudder. The compartment plunged to earth in a low spin, and hit the earth with a blinding explosion!

The spaceship cruised slowly around the impact area. It was a horrible sight. Sixty bodies lay near or around the burning wreckage of the ship.

The ship finally began to take off for Mars, when a glow of red light appeared on the impact area. The remains of the ship below were transformed into a radioactive bomb!

XIII. Radioactivity

The ship, *Typhoon I*, strained to get away from the force of this bomb. As the bomb exploded, it sent thousands of radioactive pieces of metal at the spaceship.

“Turn to the right 45°,” cried Commer over the intercom.

But before they could a piece of metal wrecked the engine, leaving it adrift in space!

XIV. Nuclear Explosions

As the ship and its crew lay adrift in space, nuclear explosions from the ground threatened it. Every explosion seemed to come nearer, and the ship rocked at every one.

Suddenly an explosion threw the ship out into space and for 11 hours each crew member was unconscious.

Joe Commer was the first to revive. “Okay you guys! Up!” He helped the men until they were conscious again.

Each crew member then realized there was no possible escape!

XV. Adrift in Space

The men worked hard in repairing the engine. If they got it to work, they would live. If they

did not get it to work, they would die.

The men knew that they had experienced harm in the past and gotten out of it. But this time they were not so sure. Finally on the third day of work they finished their work on the engine. As they were about to take off for Mars, McNarri noticed a thumping in the storage room.

XVI. Spies!

McNarri walked into the room and saw two men. "Spies!" he yelled. One ran towards the Control Room where he was captured by Jack and Joe.

The other grabbed a spacesuit and ran for the airlock. McNarri followed him, thinking, "That crazy fool! He hasn't buckled his space helmet down!"

As McNarri grabbed for him as both of them went out the airlock door, a terrible thing happened. The man's helmet came off, and fifteen pounds of pressure pushing out did not equal 0 pounds of pressure pushing in, and the man's head blew up!

At the same time McNarri came into the Control Room the other spy began to confess.

"My name is Hal Johns. My partner's was Jim Jacobs. We felt that the people of Earth should face death on Earth rather than go to Mars, so we tried to stop it."

"Was the assassin of the delegate from Arabia in on this?" asked Jack.

"Yes. Incidentally, his name is J. B. Anderson. Jacobs and I felt we shouldn't tell anyone before we sabotaged the spaceships. But the little fool went ahead and killed that delegate anyway."

"Why did you want to kill all of Earth's people when you would die yourself?" asked Harri.

"All three of us have a strange disease that you always die within three weeks. Anderson for the first to get it. When he jumped off that building, he didn't jump off. He fell off, because he was dead. He headed for the edge so he wouldn't expose us. I--"

And he died in the arms of Jack Commer.

XVII. The Journey

The ship started on its journey to Mars, and in comparatively little time was there.

"Who is approaching?" a voice asked over the radio.

"*Typhoon I*," Commer radioed back.

"*Typhoon I!* Where in the world, I mean Mars, have you been?"

"In a little trouble," Jack smiled over at Jim.

"I see. You are cleared for pad 91."

"Roger."

Within minutes the great silver ship *Typhoon I* had finally landed on Mars.

XVIII. Marsport, Mars

As the bus they were riding in stopped in front of the Marsport Hotel, thousands of people came to see the men.

After signing hundreds of autographs, the men sank wearily into their beds in hotel rooms

306 and 305.

Jack was staring out the window and then said, “Just think. In maybe 20 or 30 years Earth people might get a chance to go back to Earth. And, if it happens soon enough, we might be able to pilot them.”

“Jack! When will you ever learn to shut up?” said Joe. “I’ll never go through that again!”
Or would he? Only time will tell.

Conclusion

Even though these 8 men did comparatively nothing to build Mars as a colony for the homeless Earthlings, they made the sacrifices to stop trouble that “threatened” it, and helped to make it safe for Earthlings for centuries to come.

The End