

TRACKER

by **Union Software**

Gameplay Guide

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Introduction

It wasn't long after the first microcomputers started rolling off the production lines that programmers began writing strategy games for them.

Strategic simulations were split into two major categories: traditional board games (such as Chess, Checkers, Go, Tic-Tac-Toe), and war games which were simply computerised versions of those battle games involving model soldiers and artillery

The players usually started by deciding how large the two armies were going to be, and what weaponry they had at their disposal. The soldiers and artillery were then positioned around a crude map, and the game began in earnest...

The war games became slightly more sophisticated, with the option of the computer taking the role of your adversary, but they have never been a truly great challenge to a skilled tactician.

Tracker will change all that.

When Tracker was in the design stage, all the old 'rules' relevant to war gaming were thrown away, and the following design brief was detailed:

- * A computer controlled artificially intelligent enemy using the latest A.I. strategy techniques.
- * An exciting real-time three dimensional combat mode.
- * The facility to save the game and continue with the scenario at another time.
- * A massive playing area capable of supporting a high number of enemy units.

This play guide will explain the objectives of the game, and how to achieve them. Since Tracker employs sophisticated artificial intelligence in response to your movements, you will find every game requires different strategy.

Following this play guide is a short novel, "Centrepont" by Mike Anderiesz, which describes the historical events leading up to the Tracker mission. It is strongly suggested that you read the novella first if you wish to fully understand the background to the mission and the rest of this play guide.

Loading Instructions

If you are going to use a joystick to play Tracker, then plug the joystick into Control Port 2 before loading the game.

Commodore 128 users

Tracker only runs in 64 mode on a Commodore 128. To enter 64 mode, either hold down the Commodore key when you turn on the machine, or enter GO 64 from 128 mode, and answer Y.

Cassette

Insert the cassette in the tape player, and press SHIFT together with the **RUN/STOP** key, **then press the PLAY** button on the tape player.

Diskette

Insert the disk in **the** drive, type **LOAD "TRACKER",8,1** then press **RETURN**

Loading Advice

If you're having any problems loading Tracker into your Commodore, try the following:-

Cassette .

1. Try the other side of the cassette.
2. Load another program from cassette that you know works, to check that everything is connected properly.
3. Clean and de-magnetise the recorder (following the manufacturer's instructions).
4. Try another tape player if possible.

Diskette

1. Try again from the very beginning, including removing all disks and turning the computer completely off and back on again.
2. Is the disk the right way up ?
3. Load a program from another disk to check that everything is connected correctly.
4. Have you added any non-standard or peculiar hardware to the computer?
5. Clean the drive (following the manufacturer's instructions).

Guarantee (What to do if the program doesn't work!)

If you have no success in getting the program to run correctly, return it to Rainbird (or Firebird Licencees in the United States) **without the packaging and** we'll replace it (if you're returning a diskette, make sure that it's safely packed!). Please include a short letter telling us exactly what the problem is, and what equipment your computer system comprises. Postage will be compensated.

Software Returns Department
Rainbird Software
Wellington House
Upper St. Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9DL

Firebird Licencees Inc.
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Remy
New Jersey
07446

The Mission

Fear and panic have been overwhelming the inhabitants of the planet Calibos, since a seemingly sinister force took control of the 12th Generation computer system and its Cycloid Patrol Craft. Now they roam the vast network of trackways surrounding the Pleasure Complex known as Centrepoint. The Cycloids wiped out an exploration team lead by Deestra, son of legendary fighter pilot Chandos in the process.

Chandos decided to mount an attack on the enemy controlling Centrepoint, and hastily assembled a band of notorious star pilots and space bandits, collectively known as the Tactical Remote Assault Corps (or Trackers).

The Trackers had been practising on a purpose-built trackway beneath the enormous Astrodome, preparing and refining their bulky Skimmer craft to make them more manoeuvrable within the trackway confines, and improving the firepower of their dual-pulse lasers.

The Skimmers were loaded onto a Caliban Military Transport Craft (referred to as the mothership), and the Trackers set off for Zeugma IV and the unknown enemy controlling the Cycloids within Centrepoint.

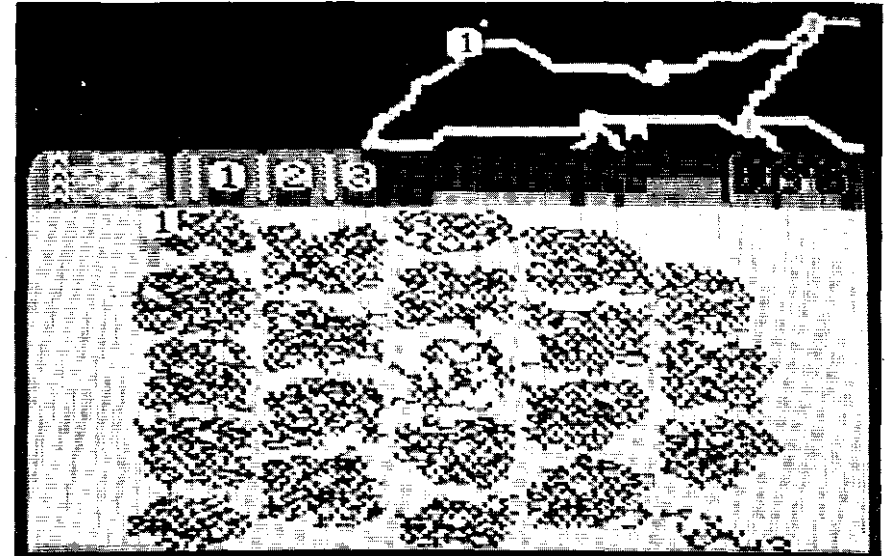
The mothership is now in geostationary orbit directly above the Centrepoint complex, and the Tracker squad are ready to be teleported down to the planet surface to battle with the renegade Cycloids...

The objective of this mission is to destroy the Centrepoint computer using the ion bombs fitted to the Skimmers. You start with three Skimmers at different places in the trackways. Thanks to advanced structural cloning, you have an infinite number of Skimmers at your disposal, and may place them on the trackway in the same place as another Skimmer already there. You may teleport down up to eight craft at a time.

You may view all the Skimmers and Cycloids from above, using the zoom cameras built into the mothership, or you can switch to a view from the cockpit of each of the individual Skimmers in three dimensions, thanks to the on-board cameras being used by Network Two.

Good luck, Tracker squad, and may your hulls "ever be eaten through by a Javan star pilot.

The Playing Area



The Centrepoint trackway complex consists of twenty-two interconnected sectors, split into three main rings:- Central, Inner and Outer.

Your ultimate goal is to reach the Central ring (the "Centrepoint"), but this will involve a complicated and contrived progression through the other rings, all of which are being patrolled by Cycloid units.

The northwest, southeast and southwest corners of the trackways are 'safe zones' and you initially teleport one Skimmer into each of these safe sectors.

Each sector consists of a large number of tracks, connected to each other by 'nodes'. Owing to an electrical field problem, the Skimmers (and Cycloids) are unable to turn around in the trackways, and can therefore only change direction once they reach a node.

There are approximately 100 nodes per sector, one of which is a Communication Centre (an area where vital equipment forming the communications network of the Centrepoint is positioned).

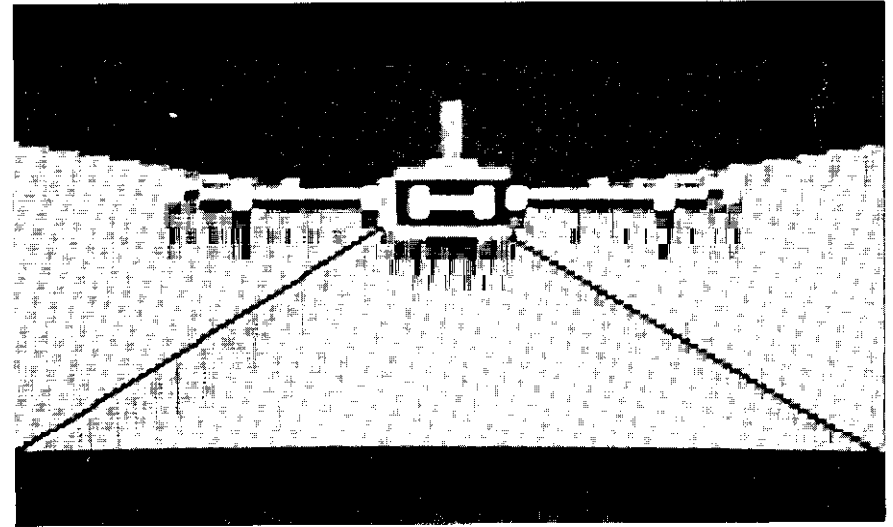
Communication Centres can be destroyed in two ways. The first is by dropping a" Ion Bomb in the node, and the second is detailed below...

Each sector is linked to an adjacent sector via Communication Links - these are switching areas for Communication Centres, and are directly controlled by them

Since the Communication Centres rely upon the Links for their operational existence, destroying all Links in a sector will also result in the destruction of the Communication Centre.

To destroy a Communication Link, simply pass through the link. The plasma jet exhaust of the Skimmer will fatally damage the Centrepont computer's data transmission equipment.

The Cycloids



The trackways of Zeugma IV are patrolled by the Cycloids - robot policing vehicles designed for use on Calibos, but deemed too irrational and unsafe by the Caliban government.

With the advent of 12th generation computers capable of simultaneously controlling the movement of a number of robot vehicles, it was decided that the Cycloids should be despatched to Zeugma IV in an attempt to keep the Centrepont Complex free of criminal activity.

The Cycloids were modified for their strange new surroundings, and equipped with powerful pulse lasers and an advanced plasma jet drive (developed by the universally renowned Draziv Industries Corporation on the planet Novenia).

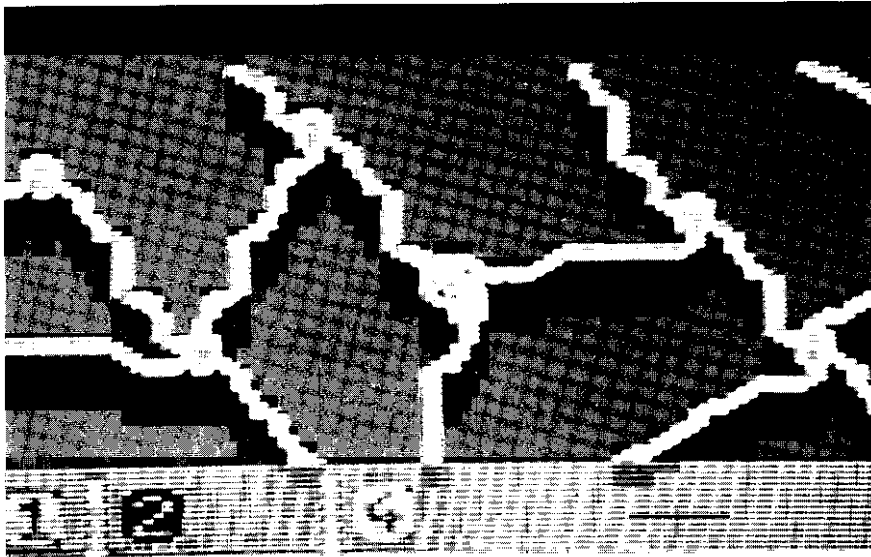
As the project neared completion, the Cycloids were sent out into the trackways under the control of the Centrepont computer, and now travel around the complex, searching for intruders.

The Centrepont computer has the ability to control the Cycloids in both movement and combat, and also to clone new units as they are required. Up to 32 Cycloids can be in action at any one time. As a result of this central control, Cycloid units will work together if necessary to trap and annihilate the enemy and this is why they are so dangerous.

The Screen Display

Tracker features a unique screen layout to display the various maps of the trackway complex, and the three-dimensional views transmitted by the Skimmers' onboard cameras.

Short-Range Scanner



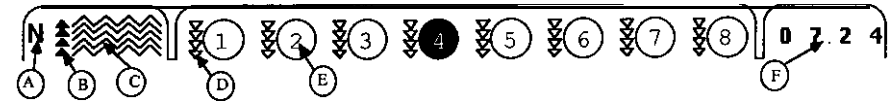
The top half of the screen always displays a close-up view centred on the Skimmer currently being controlled, and the trackways in the immediate area, and this view will automatically flip to the correct area if another Skimmer is selected.

Communication Links and Communication Centres are distinguishable from normal nodes by their pink centres (the same colour as the Cycloids).

A short pink line is visible at the node which the current Skimmer is travelling towards. This is the pointer which indicates which direction the Skimmer is to move when it exits the node.

Skimmers are displayed as their assigned unit number, and Cycloids are displayed as pink blobs.

Control Panel



The control panel separates the Short Range Scanner and the Camera Scanners (see below). It consists of the following instruments and indicators:-

A-Control Mode Indicator

This indicator will display one of three letters, depending on the mode used to control the Skimmers. They are...

- N -Normal control
- P -Autopilot
- M - Map scroll

B -Plasma Drive Status Display

This display will show that the Plasma drive in the currently selected Skimmer is functioning correctly. It will only show movement when the Skimmer itself is mobile.

C - Current Skimmer Damage Indicator

This indicator is displayed as four rows of sawtooth waves. Each Skimmer has a damage shield, and as damage increases as a result of hits from the Cycloids, or if the Skimmer collides with the trackway, the amount of active shield decreases, until the shield reaches zero and the Skimmer is destroyed.

D - Individual Skimmer Damage Indicators

These are situated to the left of each Skimmer's status display. They show the level of shield remaining for each unit.

E - Skimmer Status Displays

The currently active Skimmer unit is highlighted in black on grey, and all other

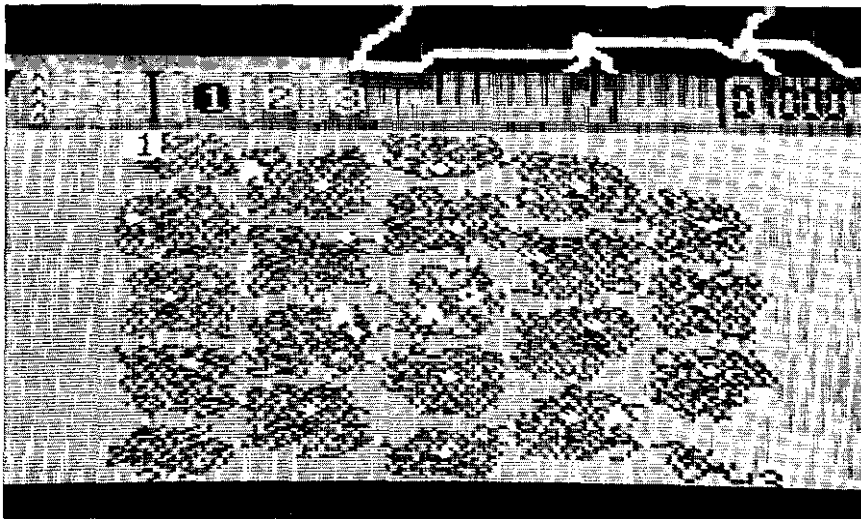
units are displayed *in grey* on black. If a Skimmer is under imminent attack from a Cycloid, the unit number on the Control Panel will flash yellow and grey as a warning sign. If an enemy unit is within two nodes of a Cycloid, the unit number will be displayed in pink.

F - Performance Rating

This numeric display is a direct feedback from the viewers of Network Two, who are televising your mission on their vidimonitors via a direct link-up. If you are successful the rating will increase but, if you lose Skimmers or fail to capture sectors, your rating will go down. If the rating reaches zero, the mission will be aborted by the Caliban government.

The bottom section of the screen serves two different purposes as a Long Range Scanner with a variable view of the whole trackway complex - and as a three-dimensional real-time view of the trackway from an individual Skimmer.

Long Range Scanner

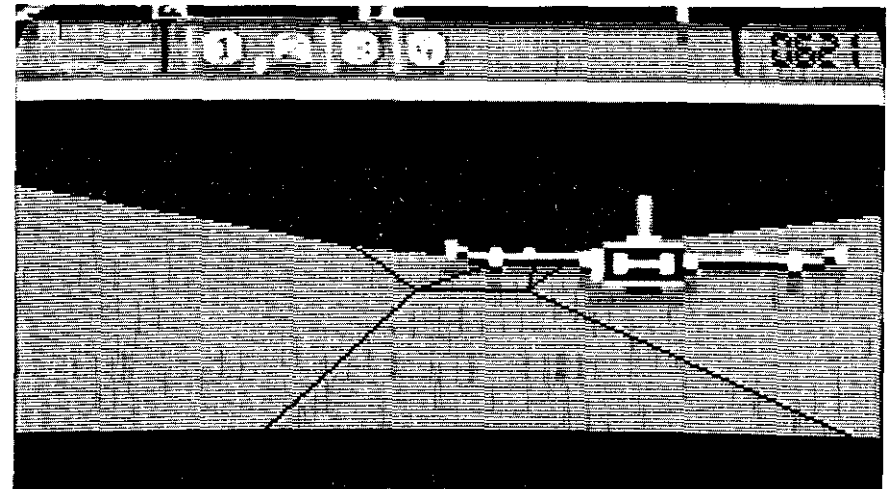


Using the Long Range Scanner, the mothership's cameras can display the trackway complex in x 1, x 2, x 4 and x 8 magnification sizes. The Communications Centres are notably visible from the mothership, since they are displayed as yellow crosses.

The Communication Links are displayed as small yellow points on the map. The Centrepoint itself is displayed as a yellow ring in the centre of the screen.

Skimmers and Cycloids are displayed on the screen in an identical way to the Short Range Scanner. Also visible on the scanner will be a yellow cross-hair cursor. This is used to set the destination point for Skimmers being controlled via auto-pilot,

Direct Combat Mode



In the three-dimensional 'Direct Combat Mode', you are given a view of the trackway from the currently active Skimmer. You must actually pilot the unit manually around the twists and turns of the trackway, and attack any Cycloids that you encounter using your pulse lasers. It is also in this mode that you can release Ion Bombs to neutralise Communication Centres.

Quick Key Guide

Directional keys

Direction	Key set A	Key set B
Left	Z	<
Right	X	>
Up	;	A
Down	/	Z
Fire / Select	SPACE	SPACE

Alternatively, a joystick (plugged into port B) may be used instead of these keys.

The following keys are active, regardless of whether normal, auto-pilot, or map mode are selected:

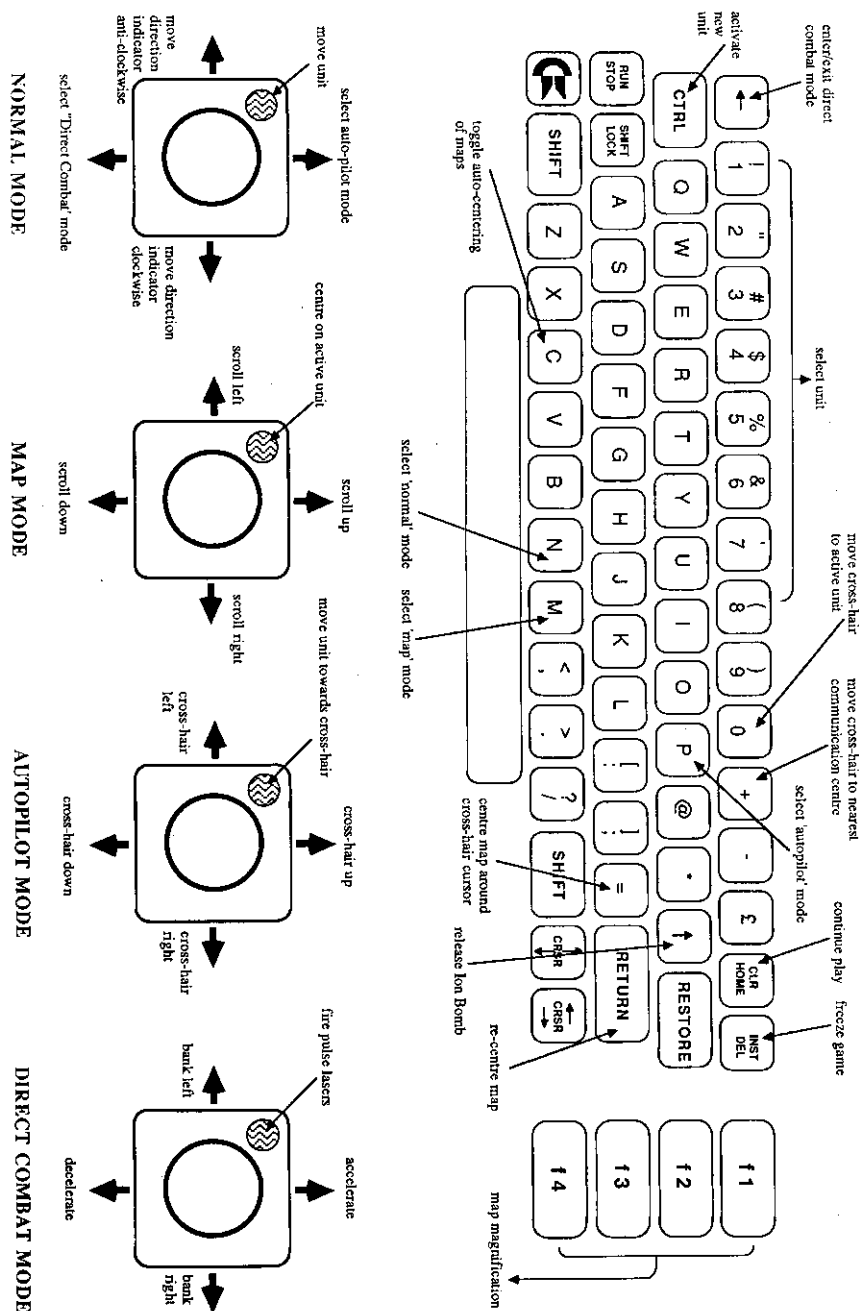
- C - Toggle auto-centring of Long Range Scanner
- 0 - Centres auto-pilot cross-hair on the currently active unit
- + - Centres on Communication Centre in cross-hair's current sector
- = - Centres map on cross-hair
- <RET> - Centres map on currently active unit
- 1 to 8 - Selects active unit (this also selects normal or auto-pilot mode as appropriate)
- <CTRL> - Teleport down new unit to reinforce currently active unit at node.
- <- - Select 'Direct Combat' mode
- <INST> - Freeze game
- <CLR> - Continue game

Control mode selection

- N - Select 'normal' Skimmer movement mode
- P - Select auto-pilot mode
- M - Select map mode

Commodore 64 keyboard and joystick controls

Tracker Reference Chart



Normal mode

Left&Right	Select next trackway to travel along.
Fire	Start stationary unit moving from its node.
UP	Select Auto-pilot mode.
DOW"	Select 'Direct Combat' (3D) mode.

Auto-pilot mode

Left/Right/Up/Down	Move cross-hair around the screen
Fire	Move unit towards cross-hair. If pressed when unit is moving under auto-pilot, and cross-hair is at unit's destination, normal mode is selected.

Map mode

Left/Right/Up/Down	Scroll map around screen.
Fire	Centre map on currently active unit.

Options when game is frozen

- f1 - Select directional key set A
- f3 - Select directional key set B

- R -Reset the game and start again
- S - Save current game position
- L - Load saved game position
- 1 to 4 - Change Short Range Scanner screen colours
- 5 - Select bright colours on long-range scanner, for monochrome tv's.

Direct Combat Mode

Left/Right	Bank left and right
UP	Accelerate
DOWN	Decelerate
Fire	Fire pulse lasers
^	Release Ion Bomb in node
<-	Return to Normal mode

Playing Tracker

Controlling the Skimmer

When the game starts, three Skimmers have been teleported to three unoccupied 'safe' sectors in the trackway complex. Unit 1 is selected as default.

When in 'normal mode' (selected by pressing N), moving the LEFT and RIGHT directional control keys (or by using the joystick) allows you to move the pink *direction* selector on the Short Range Scanner clockwise and anti-clockwise. Once the desired direction has been chosen, pressing FIRE will start the Skimmer moving towards the next node.

Skimmers (and Cycloids) cannot stop, or turn around, unless they arc in a node.

Once the Skimmer has started moving along the trackway, you may select another unit by pressing the appropriate unit number (1 to 8) and the Short Range Scanner will centre on the newly selected unit. The active unit is displayed in white on the Short and Long Range Scanners, and in black on the control panel. You may start the Skimmer moving in the manner described above, and then select another unit.

When a unit reaches a node, you may teleport reinforcement units down to join it by pressing <CTRL>, provided that the sector which the unit is situated in doesn't have a" active Communication Centrc. Up to eight units may be active in the trackways of Zeugma IV at any time.

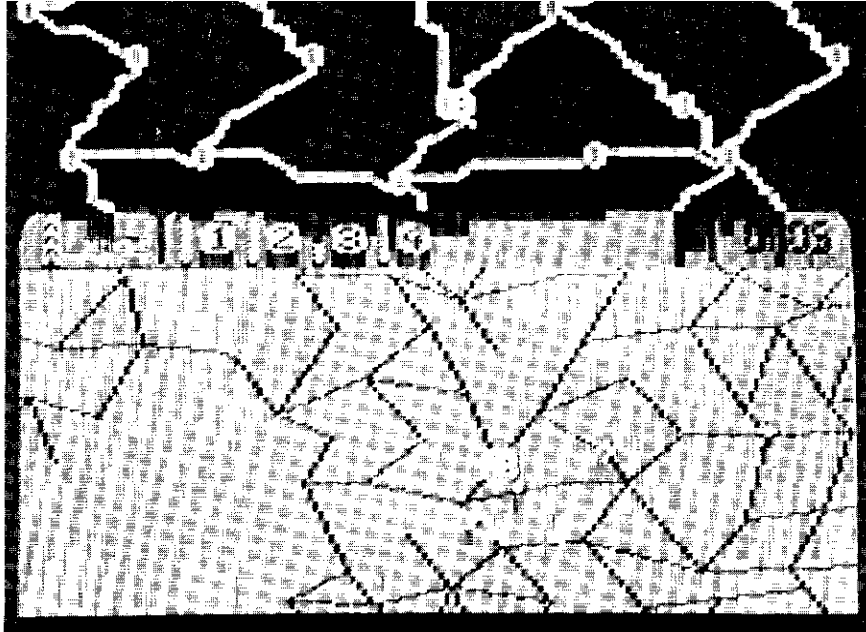
Auto-Pilot Control mode

Instead of moving each Skimmer around the trackways manually from "ode to "ode selecting a new direction each time a node is reached, it is possible to set a user-defined destination for a unit, and then set the unit on auto-pilot control.

To select auto-pilot mode, press P. You can *now* move the yellow cross-hair cursor around the screen using the four directional controls left/right/up/down.

You can centre the cross-hair around the currently selected unit by pressing 0, and move it to the nearest Communication Centre in the cross-hair's sector by pressing the + key.

When you have selected the destination for a unit, press FIRE and the currently selected unit will set off on its journey.

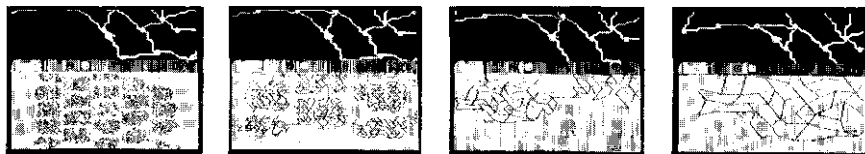


You may set as many units on auto-pilot as you like, but remember to watch their movement, as they are much more vulnerable to attack from enemy Cycloids when under automatic control. You may cancel the auto-pilot by selecting the unit, and pressing FIRE. The unit will then revert to 'normal' mode, and stop when it reaches the next node. You can select auto-pilot mode from 'normal' mode by pressing UP.

Long Range Scanner map control

The Long Range Scanner can be displayed in up to four magnification sizes. They are selected as follows:-

- f1 - x1 magnification (complete map)
- f3 - x2 magnification
- f5 - x4 magnification
- f7 - x8 magnification



The four sizes of magnification available by using the function keys.

If the complete map is not being displayed, you may control which part of the map is displayed, in a number of ways.

Pressing C will toggle the option that auto-centres the map around the currently selected unit, and pressing = will centre the map around the auto-pilot cross-hair

Pressing <RETURN> will centre the map around the currently selected unit.

By pressing M, you will enter Map mode. You can then scroll the map around manually by using the four directional controls. Pressing fire will centre the map on the currently selected unit.

Direct Combat Mode

By pressing the -> key, the Long Range Scanner will be replaced by a three-dimensional view from the cockpit of the currently selected Skimmer. You will either be in a node, or moving along an orange coloured trackway.



To accelerate forward, press UP, and to decelerate, press DOWN. Banking is achieved by pressing either LEFT or RIGHT. Try to avoid hitting the walls of the trackway, as this will inflict damage on your energy shields.

If you encounter a Cycloid in a trackway, you can shoot at it using your pulse lasers by pressing the FIRE key. You will be able to tell the whereabouts of Cycloids in

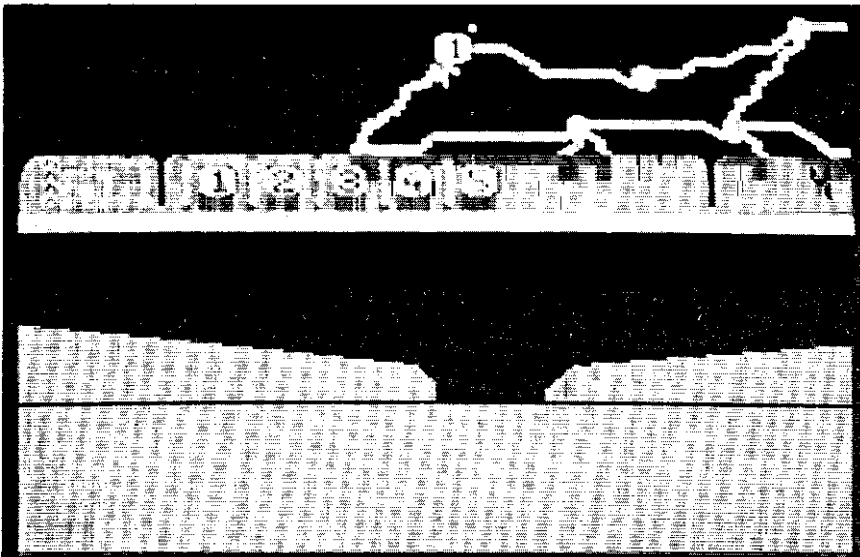
your proximity by checking the Short Range Scanner. Remember that the Cycloids will also attack you, and if you are fatally damaged, your screen will go blank, and you will have to select another unit (unless you have no units left, in which case the game will end).

When you come up to a node entrance, slow down, or you will enter the node too quickly and crash into one of the node's walls.

There are four types of node: normal (orange), Communication Links (yellow), Communication Centres (blue), and the Centrepont itself (grey), although it is believed that the Cycloids use specially assigned nodes as Reinforcement Points, but the colour of these are unknown.

To destroy a Communication Link, simply pass through the node, and the communications equipment will be destroyed. However, if a Cycloid passes through the Link, it will repair the damage and leave the Link fully operational.

To destroy a Communication Centre, or Centrepont, you must release an Ion Bomb in the node, by pressing the ^ key, and then getting out of the node within the five second time limit. If you don't escape in time, your Skimmer and any other Skimmers in the node will be destroyed. If a Cycloid enters the node while the bomb is counting down, the bomb will be instantly neutralised.



In a node, you must fly around and select an exit. The direction indicator on the Short range Scanner will help you in choosing the correct exit. Slowly accelerate out of the exit, steering clear of the walls, and you will enter the trackway.

Pause mode

The game can be paused by pressing the <INST/DEL> key and resumed by pressing the <CLR/HOME> key. *While the game is frozen*, the following *options are available*:-

Save current position

Pressing S will save your current game position (rather like the save game feature in most adventure games), so that you can resume play at a later time. Ensure that you have a blank cassette, or a formatted diskette ready to save the game.

The game is saved under the filename "TRACKER.POS"

Load saved position

This option allows you to reload a previously saved game position by pressing L. Once the game has loaded, it will continue automatically.

Restart game

This option allows you to abort the current game and start again,

Change colours

Pressing the numbers **1 to 4** allows you to choose the colour scheme for the Short Range Scanner and Control Panel.

Pressing 5 will change the colour of the Cycloids and direction indicator, so that they are visible to users of monochrome displays.

Directional Control keys

Pressing f1 selects key set A, and f3 selects key set B. See the Quick Key Guide for more details.

Strategy is the key...

The ultimate objective in Tracker is to destroy the Centrepont Communications Node and wipe out the enemy. The foolhardy player might decide to run straight for Centrepont and wipe it out. This is not advisable, as the Cycloids will attack you more viciously as you get closer to the centre.

The best method is to try to take out one sector at a time by destroying its Communication Centre. Once you have taken over a sector, you will be able to teleport down reinforcement Skimmers at any node in the sector (you cannot teleport down new units in a sector with a Communication Centre).

It is possible for you to completely isolate a sector, by taking out its Communication Centre, and all the Communication Centres in surrounding sectors. Once you have isolated a sector, the Cycloids will not be able to enter the sector at all. This is the only way to create a totally 'safe' sector where you can retreat if necessary.

Advanced Strategy

Because the Cycloids are controlled by an intelligent opponent who takes all aspects of your strategy into account, you may find the Cycloids doing some seemingly illogical things, such as ignoring a Skimmer which is getting close to the centre, whilst attacking 'harmless' Skimmers in the outer ring. Do not be lulled into a false sense of security by this strategy.

Some sectors and some nodes in particular contain reserve Cycloids (i.e. the enemy is more likely to create new units there). You will learn which nodes to avoid as your time playing experience increases - and possibly find a way of destroying these reinforcement nodes.

Thanks (or no thanks, depending upon how you look at it!) to the intelligence factor. Cycloids who do not have a chance of winning a combat situation may well flee for help. However, if there seems to be no alternative strategy, some Cycloids will not be above making suicide attacks on your Skimmers.

If you are moving several units in a convoy, then take care to protect the units at the front and back. A Cycloid that destroys these units may well wipe out all the others before you have a chance to retaliate.

When you reach the Centrepont sector, the enemy will do whatever is in their power to prevent you from destroying their 'life force' - i.e. the computer. Keep a cool head if you are going to attempt to destroy Centrepont...

CENTREPOINT

by Mike Anderiesz

PROLOGUE

It was about the time of the third Vortex that someone first suggested Centrepont.

Such a simple idea, really: take a useless, airless, mineral-less slag ball like Zeugma IV and turn it into the biggest money-spinner this side of the joy-drop. Why it had taken 3000 years to think up was anybody's guess. Zeugma had hung aimlessly in the night sky for centuries - not that beautiful, not that bright, too close to demolish, too far away to use as a docking-point. Like an unwanted blister, Zeugma had survived as long as democracy and gone through considerably fewer changes.

But in the near hysteria that surrounded the appearance of a new Vortex in the adjacent system (such occurrences were usually aeons apart) a proposal arrived at Planning Office from a little known architect named Deag. The proposal, entitled 'Zeugma - options for recreational Nucleus', in itself had little to recommend it. The expense, for one thing, was phenomenal, but its political implications *were* vast, and it was here that the proposal really scored with the government. Whizzing through Committee stages, the plan assumed the working title 'Centrepont' and its hapless author was paid off with a trifling sum for his work (good ideas on Calibos, as elsewhere in the galaxy, count for little).

Basically the plan was this: because gambling, excessive drinking, and female company in virtually any form except marital had been banned under the Morality Edict of 1263, Calibos had become a curiously restrained place. At first this was viciously resented by virtually everyone, but by a marvellous stroke of luck 1263 was also the year the first shipment of Qualine arrived. This substance, when refined and

suitably coloured became the infamous Joy Drop, a mild hallucinogen with a lemony flavour (also available with a sugar coating for children). Within months almost everyone had tried it, and most were popping back 40 a week. The most noticeable effects of this new fad (apart from a proliferation of simpering grins on the most unlikely faces) was the sudden decline in protests against the Morality Edict. All of a sudden 'real' pleasure was not so valuable a commodity.

In the Government's eyes, however, real pleasure had one major advantage over Joy Pills; it was exorbitantly expensive. Calibos continued to boast a large population of wealthy merchants and traders. In the past they had been happy to fritter away their fortunes betting on the Solar Run or drinking at one of the many Bordello clubs in the exclusive Satin Quarter. All these pursuits, of course, were heavily taxed. Without them the government found itself hard pressed for cash (free trade agreements with the Javans made Qualine untaxable) and quite unable to take any more from these most privileged and profitable of citizens.

In the light of this, research also showed that the rich (known as the Plutocrats) were less addicted to Qualine than the average 'ordinary' person. This led to the obvious question, what did they do with their money? The obvious answer, of course, was not very much. They simply got richer and richer, and more of a burden to everyone. Sulky Plutocrats, with nowhere to spend their money, became a political headache of no mean size. Centrepont was a means of correcting that oversight.

The use of Cycloids to control and apprehend criminals came later, almost as an after thought. By then most of Centrepont was complete and ready for population. No one seriously thought security would be a problem let alone a major obstacle. But then computers have a habit of complicating things.

CHAPTER 1 · "Like a new penny..."

Transmission Begins -

- (12.53) Beamed down to planet surface. Construction of Zeugma transportation bay seems to be complete. We notice a lack of overhead shielding which could result in atmospheric interference of beam-down. My other units are here now, although Telex has suffered damage to one Pulse laser.
- (12.57) The transformation is complete. Most of the barren rock surfaces and plateaus are dotted with distant structures, although the absence of lighting makes it hard to make out their exact shape or detail. Spreading out, like the cast of giant worms, are the Trackways - they connect all the visible structures together, although it would seem that without power they are more an obstacle than an aid to the traveller. Movement here, in Zeugma's heavy gravity, is hard at the best of times.
- (12.59) We must leave our Skimmers here until there is power in the Trackway. Centrepont looms out of the darkness about 800 metres behind us. We approach...
- (13.01) In the airlock we are scanned for weapons. Radar is deprived of his handgun. We enter...
- (13.02) Centrepont has been atmospherically controlled to be a pleasant environment. Personally I find it warm, and lacking in emotion. Metres of ducts and corridors in the same shade of silver - I doubt this part of the complex was ever intended for human habitation. Fortunately only the computer will have to cope with such aesthetics (Comms, however, seems to enjoy all the polish - "like a new penny" he says).
- (13.04) There is an audible hum in the distance which suggests that the construction unit is still operational. This is unnecessary as an initial count shows all

Cycloid units are already built and located around the city. I assume human error and will deactivate the unit when I reach it.

- (13.12) We have reached the computer and I begin activating it. Some of its communication vents are operational, I find this irregular as they should only be used for external transmission or reception of remote commands. Once again I assume human error. Once activated, the computer will map and co-ordinate our movements on the Trackway, although its basic defence functions will not be activated until we beam off the planet.
- (13.23) The construction unit is deactivated. Once fully operational, the computer will be able to turn this unit on again to rebuild or repair damaged units but only in a Red Alert situation. We proceed to the airlock...
- (13.25) Outside Centrepont I re-brief the other units. Our course of action is clear - to move Sector by Sector across the complex, checking the Trackway and powering up the individual Communication Centres. The computer will guide us in this process.
- (13.30) Radar, Comms and Telex begin their journey. I will accompany Optic as far as the inner circle before we separate.
- (13.34) There is something ominous about this place. I will be glad when we leave.

“That’s it...” muttered Stera. “He’s blown it now...” Turning to his friend he grinned nervously and spat a piece of gum across the room. Through the smoked glass screen the huddled figure of Chandos continued to show no sign of physical exertion or stress. His shoulders stayed firm, only the slightest movement of his head and hands indicating that he was fighting for his life. The Simulator bucked and heaved on its hydraulic stilts, forcing the pilot back in his seat under the

uneven pressure of artificial G-force.

“He’s too slow, that’s his trouble. He doesn’t react to danger any more. He just lets it slam into him. Who the hell goes into a meteor-storm at that speed?”

Stera’s friend nodded in agreement, carried along by his friend’s enthusiasm but not quite drawing the same conclusions. Of course he wanted Chandos to fail. Every pilot in the Academy wanted to win a few credits at the expense of the old boy. And yet Chandos didn’t look like someone about to lose his title.

In the middle of the Arena, strapped into the massive, domed machine, the gaunt figure glanced hurriedly around him. Meteors spun past him at all angles, some repelling his craft by their sheer size, and spinning it even further off course. Flying without one stabiliser meant that the computer’s accuracy in predicting trajectories and speeds was virtually useless. If the craft was rolling, then the computer-pilot needed constant manual correction and that called for more than just calm nerves. All he needed now was a patch of clear space to get the knack.

“Here they come!” shouted someone in the audience. “Chandos, here they come!”

Chandos didn’t have to look to know. Years of training in these contraptions had taught him a thing or two about how predictable the computer could be in certain situations. In fact, if you were anything like a decent pilot, being damaged was probably your best chance of beating the system. That was always hard for a young pilot to accept. Kids have too much to prove. They want to run for home with every shield intact, every weapon blazing, every heat-defector shining like new, and of course the Simulator wants them to try. That’s why he would always beat them. Real combat takes the ego out of you. Chandos had nothing to show off about. He had wrecked more prototypes while taking them out of dry-dock than he had in deep space. You looked like an idiot, of course But Chandos knew what he could do when he needed to. Put him up against

any other pilot in the world, and he would be the one who walked away from it.

Blazing out from behind the largest of the three meteors on his left came a Blarg Fighter - Mean little bastards with the biggest frontal torpedo you've ever seen. Legend had it that these guys patrolled the Tetral system, shooting at anything that moved, but no one was that interested in finding out for sure. The Simulator stored their shape, flight-pattern, and firepower and used the sheer sight of them to scare most pilots into flying straight into the nearest vortex. If you had the time to think about it you'd realise that to carry a torpedo that large the Blarg must be about as manoeuvrable as a can of sardines. Most pilots, however, never lived that long.

Stera started laughing.

"Holy Java," he said, "It's a Blarg. Why doesn't he just self destruct and get it done with?"

His friend began to feel a bit like celebrating. Short of a suicide dive into the enemy, there wasn't a lot Chandos could do. Once the Blarg ducked in behind him and locked his Syncomp onto the flight pattern he'd let fly the torpedo and that would be it. With firepower like that you didn't have to be accurate.

Chandos waited, concentrating on his damaged stabiliser. One of the Simulator's failings was that it didn't roll like a real craft. Try some evasive tactics in a Simulator and you'd end up stuck to the side like a lump of putty. It was best to sit still and let your enemy manoeuvre himself into a mistake. The Blarg dropped out of sight.

"That's it," thought Chandos. "He's locking on."

In the auditorium the slow chant of "Chandos" began to pick up speed. Every second he stayed alive his score crept up towards the magic million mark, only ever passed once before and then

in a far simpler machine. By now, however, the score wasn't important.

Keeping one hand on his controls Chandos switched off his flight computer. The craft bucked under the unexpected release of control and listed towards the damaged stabiliser. The Blarg became visible again out of his rear right screen, obviously thrown by the sudden loss of sync. Without the flight computer to calculate trajectories the meteors seemed that much more dangerous now, spinning agonisingly close at times. Chandos armed his torpedos and waited. Now the trick would be getting a clean shot in.

For minutes the two flew side by side; the one eagerly swerving to gain a slight pivotal advantage, the other concentrating on the meteors, calculating the one chance in a thousand that might yet snatch victory. Occasionally he had to open fire just to survive, sending a shower of meteor debris burning across his screens.

"He's finished," muttered Stera. "Watch his right."

When the collision came everyone in the auditorium who hadn't seen it coming leapt to their feet, and gasped in surprise. Chandos took the impact hard on his right stabiliser, feeling the power fail even as he wrestled to steady his craft. A rear screen went dead, both the emergency boosters flared off, one of the torpedo lights went out. Everything went painfully silent.

"Chandos..Chandos..Chandos.." murmured the crowd.

In a second it was all over. Childishly simple, really. The craft had lost so much velocity in the collision that the Blarg simply shot out into the firing line ahead of him. Chandos had locked on and fired before his stunned opponent knew there was a danger. When the flash of white fire died away, Chandos turned his thoughts to how he would control his craft through the rest

of the meteor belt and land safely.

“We might as well go home..” said Stera. “He could land it in his sleep...”

The applause was of course deafening.

In the wings Daios waited silently for his friend. In his day he too had been a pilot. He too had ridden the solar winds in the times before flight comps. and transporter bays. But he was never in the same league... never one of the greats.

“Well?” said Chandos allowing a sigh at last to escape him. “What news?”

Daios looked away “We’ve lost him.. I’m sorry..”

Chandos sighed again. “Not even a beacon?”

“Nothing. The planet is dead.”

Chandos turned and gazed into the auditorium where one of the pilots had flown into the back of his mother ship, to the evident delight of the crowd.

“There will, of course, be a rescue mission,” said Daios. Of course, there always was. Too slow, too expensive and invariably too late. In reality the heroics of Simulator search and retrieve tactics never amounted to anything. There was just a chance that someone on Zeugma IV, one of the other units perhaps, had survived, gone to Deestra’s aid maybe. But it didn’t look hopeful... someone had slipped up... someone would pay.

“Keep the lines open...” he muttered.

“I will,” said Daios.

The crowd began to chant again, awaiting the inevitable speech. This conclusion to the Simulator finals had become as predictable a part of the year as the old Solar Runs.. Then, as now, the same man picked up the prizes, the same few words spoken as the honours were received. Chandos climbed the

podium and waited for the crowd to fall silent.

“That was one hell of a fight...” he began, his voice unexpectedly strong and penetrating. “Probably the toughest yet.. One of these days those lads are going to wipe me out.. and that’ll be the end of me. I only know one way to play these contraptions, and that’s to win..” A ripple of applause spread out across the floor. “The last time I stood up here, I told you I was retiring... Well at the time I meant it. I really thought I ought to get into horticulture or something less demanding. Hell, I don’t need the money - I made all that years ago - and I don’t need the thrill. Don’t get me wrong, I think the Simulator’s a great idea. We were all finding real space travel a bit expensive, a bit dangerous, let’s face it, a bit unnecessary. After all, what the hell’s in space? We get all the aliens we need in cereal boxes these days.”

Chandos rubbed his hands against the coarse fabric of his uniform.

He shot a glance back at Daios, but his friend was not to be seen.

“No, it’s not that the Simulator’s wrong.. it’s just that when you’ve done as much real flying as I have, when you’ve actually been up there and touched the stuff that kids only see in arcades, then all this seems a bit trivial..”

“Let me tell you people something, Let me tell you what’s wrong about the way we do things down here. Now I’m not a politician, I’ve got no ambitions any more, but it just seems to take the danger out of life, if you’re going to replace the Solar Run with the Simulator, the Combat Squad with the Academy, then do the damn thing properly. Stop sending children to do men’s work, stop building machines that no one knows how to operate. Do it properly, or don’t do it at all, right? I mean, what the hell are we doing up on Zeugma IV? No one’s wanted it for 20,000 years, no one takes the responsibility for it now. But we’re out there all the same... You call that safe?”

Chandos wiped his upper lip. In the auditorium people were glancing nervously at each other, wondering where all this was leading. He felt mildly embarrassed... This was not the time, he thought, this was not the place.

“Anyway...” he said. “Thanks for the prize.”

It was days before Chandos shed a tear for his son.

CHAPTER 2 - “Something wrong down here”

- (13.41) The Trackway is fully powered and the Skimmers appear to function well. Top speed sometimes involves overshooting on curves, but a safety buffer returns the skimmer to a steady bearing. The computer continues to guide us individually so that all nodes can be checked, and all links restored.
- (13.44) Once on a section of Trackway, it is impossible to turn until reaching a node. We have always known this to be a weakness but I still feel that if the Track is congested there is a high risk of collision or jamming. Much depends on how reliable the computer's mapping facilities are.
- (13.46) Telex reports catching sight of something on the Trackway. No confirmation as yet, I hope he has left the Qualine back on the mothership.
- (14.01) Optic splits off to head for Sector 14.
- (14.04) I have visual with Sector 9 Communication Centre. It is currently in darkness.
- (14.09) Switching on the power-grid outside, the Centre is activated. It may not now be turned off until all Communication links that connect it with other sectors have been severed. I have 5 more sectors to check.
- (14.17) Telex repeats that there is something moving on the Trackway. Perhaps it is debris left by workmen. I instruct him to intercept.
- (14.19) I am stranded. This area of Trackway is a dead end and I must push my skimmer back by hand to the nearest node. The fact that this has happened, however, is disturbing.
- (14.20) I have lost seven minutes through this error. The computer refuses to acknowledge that the error is due to it. Perhaps I should have paid more attention to my own instrument map.
- (14.24) Comms reports a Cycloid blocking his section of

- Trackway. Requesting confirmation.
- (14.26) Comms confirms. The Cycloid is inactive, but should not be here at all as no instructions have been dispatched to relocate Cycloids anywhere but Communication centres. The unit may have broken down in transit.
 - (14.27) I instruct Optic to undertake manual repairs.
 - (14.28) Radar reports a mapping error.
 - (14.34) Telex has visual contact with his target. It is a Cycloid unit, it is mobile.
 - (14.36) Radar reports sighting a convoy movement of three Cycloids in sector 11.
 - (14.39) Comms reports his Cycloid is both active and armed.
 - (14.45) Radar is in pursuit of his convoy.
 - (14.47) Official Report - "There is something wrong down here."

Outside, in the warm twilight, nothing stirred, The odd police-droid flitted noisily overhead, buzzing in and out of shadows, searching for suspicious happenings. In general, however, it was as quiet and warm as evenings usually were. Knossos, the season of Sun and Rain was nearly here, perhaps a little more hospitable to the travel than Petu, season of Sun and Wind. All the same, travel was for the outer regions - the vast sandy plains that stretched between major cities. Here in the city, travel was restricted to transportation tubes. The average Calibon person resented too much exertion.

Hanging listlessly in the sky above the houses the dull shape of Zeugma IV suddenly attracted new interest. Its complexion pocked with strange, dark shapes, people took the time to watch it anxiously for signs of activity. It had been three days since the public first heard of Deestra's failure, and still the questions remained. Who had covered up, what had gone wrong, where

were the official records? In his day, Deestra had been as big as Stera, the one who would take over from Chandos when he retired. Every boy wanted to look, sound and fly like Deestra. Now those dreams lay in shreds.

Chandos stayed indoors. He made a point of never going out when Zeugma was full. Inside the far away hiss of the communication link made the house seem cold and uninspired. Chandos waited by the viewscreen with his head resting wearily on his arm.

"Hello Chandos."

An image flashed onto the screen, grinning blandly.

"Hello Regan."

"I must talk with you. I have an idea."

Chandos frowned. The last thing he needed now was one of Regan's ideas. That pill popping slug had caused him more problems than he could remember.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "Come over."

One of the dubious benefits of living in Craxton, Calibos' exclusive property belt, was that most of the government officials and senior civil servants were crammed into the same area. Thus it transpired that the very men Chandos spent his days avoiding, dropped in most evenings for a private audience.. It was at one of these audiences that Regan first suggested his fears about security on Zeugma IV, and ironically Chandos had agreed with him. In the weeks that followed those fears turned into paranoid visions of gang warfare, and carnage, with the helpless plutocrats being systematically butchered by all manner of petty criminals and felons. In a typically heavy handed style the solution was the Cycloids, robot defence units previously deemed too unstable to be released in populated areas, now let loose on the Trackways to hunt down and destroy criminals. Their movements were to be controlled and co-ordinated by one of the new 12th Generation computers, thus making the whole operation completely non-human and

relatively inexpensive. So started the plan that had cost Deestra his life.

The door swung open and there stood Regan; a big, cumbersome man with the kind of overbearing pomposity that told you how important he had been in the past, Regan looked as if he had kept count of his good ideas over the years and never run out of fingers once. Such was the stuff of which police officials were made the galaxy over.

"Hello... expecting visitors?" he grinned.

"Yes, but you'll do," said Chandos wryly, "Come in."

Regan sprawled unceremoniously across an armchair, his face relaxing into a yawn.

"Joy Pill?" he asked, extending a small container. Chandos shook his head. Regan popped a couple into his mouth.

"Great stuff," he exclaimed. "You know, they say the only way to get 750,000 on the Simulator is to pop half a dozen of these just before you reach the Asteroids. I can believe it... I can believe it."

Chandos wondered how long this would take.

"Anyway, what can I do for you, Regan?"

"Ah.. yes.. well just came about this Zeugma affair, damned embarrassing, I can tell you. Don't know who leaked the information, but we're going to have to reveal an official version soon... and that is not going to do anyone any good."

"What will you say?"

Regan fidgetted with a glass ornament.

"We were hoping to blame it on human error, you know, too much Qualine or something..."

"That's rubbish, and you know it!"

"Telex took the stuff, he had a reputation for it."

"Everyone takes the stuff.. Anyway, Telex has nothing to do with it. And if you try to pin this on Deestra I'll make you damn sorry you did."

"We need some time, that's all."

Chandos stood up.

"We've both seen the transcripts from Zeugma. The whole mission was badly planned from the start. We sent a poorly equipped team to take on a potentially hostile opponent. The skimmers weren't even properly armed, for God's sake."

"Look, Chandos.. Son or no son, Deestra incorrectly assessed the situation."

"If he'd been correctly briefed in the first place he might have acted differently - we all would have. I wouldn't have let him go for a start!"

Regan considered pulling rank, and then remembered where he was. At the end of the day there wasn't much he could do against a man like Chandos anyway.

"Say what you will. There's no way I'm going to tell people that we've got a whole planet down there under the control of a hostile computer system. Think of the money it will cost us if we have to abort the project now."

Chandos sat down again.

"Money's the least of your problems. We've already seen what this computer can do. Those Cycloid assembly lines can as easily be converted to make missiles, or ground lasers. Before you know it we'll have an armed outpost within striking distance of Calibos."

Regan popped another pill.

"You're exaggerating, of course. There's no evidence the computer's that smart."

"It was designed to be, and I'd say that wiping out five skimmers and then jamming probe communications was a pretty dangerous start. How much more proof do you need?"

Outside a siren had gone off - perhaps alerted to the unusually loud voices coming from the house. These police droids were a mite sensitive to noise. Regan flicked a switch on his belt and the sirens stopped.

"Anyway," he said. "We need a rescue mission, and this time there won't be any mistakes. They'll go in, deactivate the computer and get out. Either that or they'll blow every standing

structure on the planet.”

“Isn’t that a trifle excessive?”

“It’s better than another election. You’ll accept, of course?”

Chandos paused. He had waited days for this.. the chance to fight back, the chance to recapture some of his former pride. Yet now there was suddenly a moment of doubt... Twelve years away from real service can change make a lot of difference. Was he really still up to it?

“Chandos?” Regan looked at him intently.

“Give me twelve hours.”

“To make up your mind? We haven’t got that kind of...”

“To give you my list of requirements.. I’m not going down there as badly equipped as the last lot.”

Regan grinned, and popped another Joy Pill into his bland face.

“Now don’t go asking for no cruise-ships or military lasers. Those things cost money you know.”

Chandos stood up and opened the door.

“twelve hours,” he said.

The siren had started again. Regan walked out into the noise.

CHAPTER 3 - “There’s someone on the system”

(14.48) - General Transmission - From the various reports I am receiving there are obviously unauthorised movements of some sort taking place on the Trackway. As the computer has not been fully enabled I can only assume we are dealing with a human presence. It may be a saboteur, or merely someone left behind who does not understand the seriousness of his actions. Either way, his interference appears to have no logical purpose, and if he is an agent he displays no skill in utilising the considerable power at his command. Nonetheless, he must be apprehended, before he triggers a General Alert which would put all our units in danger. We must therefore return to Centrepont at once and regain control of the computer. Optic, Comms and Radar must return immediately by the quickest route, while Telex circumnavigates the sectors he has already been through in case they send out a Tracer-missile to intercept him. I will proceed, down-powering Communication centres by cutting them off from adjacent sectors. This may only be done by severing all communication links between centres. Normally this process would be both time consuming and hazardous as Cycloids can still strike from adjacent sectors with a functioning Communication centre as long as it is an alert situation. As this is not such an alert I should have plenty of time.

Request a thorough planet scan to locate other life-forms on the planet and their location.

(NB: Due to a clerical oversight this final request was not processed until 15.32. The results of the scan were transmitted back to the planet surface but they were never acknowledged.

They showed no life-forms on the planet.)

It doesn't take much to make a Javan angry - insult his flag, scrape his ship, outrun his hyper-drive, set fire to his wife, anything really. As far as humanoids go (and we're pushing a point here) the Javans are just about the most obnoxious people in the known universe. This and their considerable technical advancement made life in the early days of intergalactic trading a pretty hazardous experience.

Bounded in on two sides by asteroid belts of unusual density, the Caliban universe offered only one convenient route to the tempting Oridian and Tetran systems. This involved flying through Maplex 1, a corridor of unclaimed space between Calibos and the aforementioned Javan Empire. Unfortunately while everyone agreed on its neutrality, there was broad disagreement on its exact position. So when a cruiser was flying through the Maplex, it registered on Javan charts as being 210,000 metres inside their air-space. Oh yes, and another thing that makes a Javan angry is infringing his air-space.

Chances were, then, that when you flew freight to Calibos you would be attacked by any number of D.or E-type fighters. Stunningly fast ships, they homed in on you using ionic tracking and locked onto your flight path in a style copied from the Blargs. Seconds later they would let fly with a variety of molecular and conventional weapons and no doubt one of them would send you to an early pension. I say 'no doubt' because for all their advancement the Javans were also a force of legendary incompetence. The reasons for this are complex, and rooted deep in history, but warrant a brief explanation here:

Born invariably with some name like Malek, Rambo or Tharn, the average Javan can just about write his name at the age of 19. This done, he applies to enrol at pilot's college (the other favoured occupation being silage testing) and after a few attempts he is accepted and begins training. Eight weeks later

he emerges at the wheel of 'his first D-type fighter, and when he finally gets it out of the hanger (which takes anything between two and twenty-two attempts) he sets off to bag himself his first Caliban freight-pod. On that long trip to the Maplex he learns the basic rudiments of flying and some essential rules about his ship; what the controls are for, what happens if you explode a torpedo in the cargo bay, and how to survive sub-zero decompression (a rare emergency situation, usually brought about by exploding a torpedo in the cargo bay). What he lacks in skill, however, he makes up for in sheer aggression. Make a Javan angry (and we've covered this one in some depth already) and he'll practically eat his way through the hull to get at you. The average life-expectancy of a pilot, incidentally, was 21, the usual cause of death being terminal hull-poisoning.

Protecting the trade routes subsequently became a major occupation for anyone who fancied his skill as a pilot. Flying old service ships (Delta or Delta1 class) that resembled kettles with stabilisers, the pilot would sit with both hands around a strut-gun, waiting for the glint of hyper-drives to signal the approaching enemy. Then he'd fight for his life, steadying his controls with his knees while he concentrated on shooting out the fuel pods of whichever Rambo was closest. If he succeeded, the convoy got through and he could expect enough money to upgrade his ship for the next trip. These constant upgrades spawned the infamous 'custom craft' that became the trade-mark of the successful pilot. Eventually a proficient flyer or gunner could own a ship that technically rivalled its Javan opponent - but few pilots ever got that far. Most continued to fight their way up and down the Maplex. That was why they were the best.

So when Chandos started searching for his team, he steered well clear of the Academy concentrating on the old space-ports, breaker's yards and doss houses of the equatorial regions. Here a decent pilot could still scratch a living, ferrying tourists out to

the satellites for a glimpse of 'real' space. Show them your money and up would spring an unlikely host of characters, waving press cuttings of their exploits or photos of their ship. Some of the more eager would actually show you the little black boxes that housed the cloaking device that stood between them and immediate arrest. Push the button and out above some docking bay would pop the ship, glistening with artificial solar charge, waiting to be boarded. This was where the deal was made, and with the passenger safely on board the pilot wasted no time on jetting off into orbit knowing that every second he was without camouflage his chances of being arrested increased. These days it wasn't Javans who were the enemy, it was police. Interception meant immediate grounding and loss of licence, more than a pilot could afford to lose. This left him 3 options: a) Run, b) Fight, c) Fly above the enemy, crop-dust it with Qualine and hope the air-ducts were open. Needless to say most ran, the average pilot could barely afford to keep his ship airborne let alone armed. The only problem was explaining it all to the hapless tourist.

Some, however, chose a better way. Take Tigran, for instance, a fat, morose man who swore too much and lost at cards. His gimmick was to sit around making enemies, generally losing a fortune in the process. This picked him out as a dead cert for anyone who fancied making a quick killing at the poker table. Tigran would finally get in on a big game, win the pot and insult the biggest loser. To satisfy honour a duel would be fixed and some accomplice would place a hefty bet on the unlikely event of Tigran winning. Next morning the two would race off on speed-bikes in front of a large, derisive audience. Tigran would swear continuously as he wrestled to get his bike started while his opponent joked with friends as to how he would spend the money. Seconds later the opponent found himself missing an eye, burned out by a needle-ray fired from the steadiest hand in the business. Tigran would scoop up the money and flee to a new town - the same trick rarely worked twice.

Chandos ran into Tigran in a sauna near Chevar.

"Yo Chandos," he bellowed, shaking off a curtain of sweat as he stood. "How are you, you fetid old bilge bucket?"

Chandos grinned uncomfortably, wondering how many lasers Tigran was concealing under his massive, toga-like towel.

"Hello, Tigran," he said.

"Why, the last time I saw you you were running scared in the Solar Run."

Well, who wouldn't? If you saw the best weapons man in the fleet sneaking up on you, trying to shoot off your fuel pods, you'd run too. There was half the skill of the Solar Runs; knowing when to fight and knowing when to back off. Against Tigran it was best to back off.

"Those were the days, eh Chandos? None of this Simulator rubbish, just real men and real weapons. You don't see them out of museums these days...and that goes for us too, eh?"

"Do you run into many of the others, then?" Chandos sat down.

"Oh, now and then. Cynag got mined by the Pogo-droids, just about the only decent thing they ever did. Ramos still flies for the Tetrans, but you know what the pay's like up there. No, we're a dying breed - not like you Chandos, you're quite a celebrity, aren't you?"

"Just making ends meet, you know how it is.."

Tigran nodded vigorously, rubbing his head repeatedly in the towel. For a moment he paused, his eyes unexpectedly serious.

"Sorry to hear about Deestra - I flew with him once, you know. He was a great pilot."

The doors opened and in lunged a crowd of businessmen, arguing about import duties. Tigran eyed them nervously, one hand resting on his gun, until he was sure that he recognised none of them. In this game you could never take revenge lightly.

"Of course," he continued, "None of us believe that 'unfortunate accident' stuff, especially from a jerk like Regan. When are we going to hear what really happened, or would you rather Insight did your dirty work for you?"

"Let's just say that there's more to come," muttered Chandos unconvincingly.

Tigran grunted, visibly losing interest in the whole discussion.

"I've had it with official lies, even from you, Chandos." He stood up, suddenly feeling a resentment for the older and greater man. Chandos caught his hand, suddenly intense and serious.

"How would you like to know the truth?" he whispered.

Tigran shook his hand free.

"Hot enough?" he asked.

"Don't expect me to beg, Tigran. I didn't come here to talk old times like some octogenarian. I'm here looking for men, I thought there may still be some around here."

"Oh! Resorting to insult now are we. Why not talk money

first?"

Chandos pondered for a moment on the ridiculous sums a man like Tigran would ask for his services on a mission like this. Obviously Regan had given him his budget, and it didn't amount to much. All the same...

"Name your price," he said.

Three days later the T.R.A.C. Squad was complete.

CHAPTER 4

Of course, the Network was bound to find out.

Purveyor of all that was true and lively, most people could not recall a time when the Network had not been a major force in the life of Caliban society. For nineteen hours a day, programmes were piped into households across the system, filling in those irritating gaps between Joy Pills with a pleasing mixture of sport, news and re-runs of old movies. Like everything else there was nothing overtly sensational, nothing socially objectionable, nothing in the least controversial, 'safety first' was an age-old Network motto that showed no sign of becoming obsolete.

In a legendary PR operation 15 years before, the Network had split into two channels. This marked the introduction of vicious competition between the new contenders for exclusive rights and solus slots (times when only one channel was allowed to transmit) often involving sensational smear campaigns against individual personalities and programmes. This in turn sparked intense activity in the press, generally using it as an excuse to show how TV itself was as dangerous to the public consciousness as alcohol or gambling or any other prohibited luxury. Needless to say, nothing came of it.

Above and beyond this conflict, however, the two channels continued to answer to the same bosses, and toe the same company lines. In the interests of commercial security a television monopoly remained a necessity, there was simply too many problems out there that needed a single ruling body to combat. Was it true, for instance, that Qualine eventually eroded the optic nerve - and if so how would the Network survive the first generation of blind viewers? Such questions continued to hang ominously above everyone involved in television, although the average, partially stoned Caliban had little time to consider such niceties.

Getting back to the channels, however, the competition for ratings took a dramatic turn in the 70's, With Channel 1 winning the final Solar Run, and the Simulator finals, and recently exclusive rights to all Astro-Dome events, people at the top of Channel 2 began to fear for their survival. Sport had consistently been the one thing Calibans switched onto, and nothing else they tried made any impact on the increasing lead the opponent was gaining. Legend has it that more marriages collapsed during this 6-month period than at any other time (a remarkable fact when you consider that only 8% of marriages on Calibos last less than 60 years, and 5% of those are terminated by death) and when at last the dilemma ended most of the Network breathed a sigh of relief.

The answer was 'Insight'.

"Good evening, tonight on 'Insight' we examine the Zeugma mission; what went wrong, and why didn't the government tell us the truth? As always we have conclusive proof of a cover-up, substantiated by intelligence reports, sworn confessions from high-ranking officials, and exclusive extracts from the electronic diary transmitted from the planet surface before the pilots death. At the end of this programme we will demand only one thing, that the government stand down or explain themselves. Part of their explanation, no doubt will involve the crack assault team currently being trained for an attack on the planet - **a team** led by one of the greatest pilots of our time, Chandos."

The formula was simple; take a man, subject him to intense surveillance, investigation and finally interrogation, and televise his emotional breakdown. The methods may be questionable, but the results made devastating viewing - 37 suicides (12 on camera), 19 early retirements, 2 armed sieges, 4 mysterious disappearances - following a policy of pure callousness

'Insight's' favourite victims were sportsmen - no sooner had Channel 1 run a special on Nexos winning his eighth consecutive speed-bike title than Channel 2 found out he was a closet sadist, with a particular affinity for torturing rodents. Nexos never rode speed-bike again. Since the 'Insight' formula was discovered Channel 2 had climbed back into the top 3 ratings virtually every week- it was just the kind of audience-puller they needed.

"Basically the government line on the Zeugma mission, a supposedly routine line-testing operation, has been that a series of accidents, compounded by pilot inexperience had led to the loss of all personnel and equipment on the planet. No one has really believed this explanation, Deestra was far from the inexperienced and the operation itself was far from routine, but up to now no one has discovered a better explanation for the tragedy. Discovery of extracts from Deestra's electronic diary, however, has uncovered startling new evidence on the real cause of the disaster. Here is some of the material we picked up - the brackets refer to the time of transmission."

- (14.53) Proceeding towards inner circle sectors. I am increasingly concerned at the lack of communication from Optic, Telex and now Radar. Comms continues to encounter passive Cycloid resistance to his progress.
- (14.56) I have discovered Telex - We are now at RED ALERT.
- (14.57) Telex is nowhere to be seen, but his skimmer is completely destroyed. There is evidence of heavy Pulsar bombardment and signs of tissue fused to the framework. I must assume him dead. There is still no response from Optic or Radar.
- (14.59) RED ALERT - Central Computer still shows Radar, Optic and Telex to be moving on the Trackway. This can now only be regarded as erroneous. Are we being

deliberately misled, or is the computer malfunctioning? Whatever the answer, we are being treated as enemies and being systematically and ruthlessly hunted down. I have instructed Comms to disengage from Central computer, we will proceed towards Centrepont on instruments alone, shooting on sight. I hope our firepower is up to it?"

The presenter looked up, his eyes stoney and confident.

"Well," he said, "You heard the words as well as I did. They paint a very different picture to the one we all received from the government. The Zeugma mission was no accident, it was a massacre, originated either by a hostile force or a computer malfunctioning so badly as to pose a hazard to any life force on Zeugma.

"Last week we were leaked a top-secret report on illegal sub-communicative activity in the Maplex. Apparently two Freighters inexplicably lost control of their life-support functions while flying through Maplex 1. Within minutes their crews had been suffocated - the dossier links these events with heavy interference originating in the Javan system. We already know the Javans have been experimenting with remote re-programming techniques, and both cruisers relied on computers to control life-support and sensory functions. The dossier therefore concludes that the Javans had successfully destroyed these ships as a demonstration of these re-programming techniques. At the stage of writing, there was no technical explanation as to how this had been achieved. Since then we have also traced a long period of sub-communicative activity going on two days before our team touched down on Zeugma - this activity also originated in the Maplex. The frightening possibility therefore arises that Zeugma is now a totally controlled Javan base that has demonstrated its intention to threaten and destroy any Caliban force sent to investigate.. If this is true, and the Javans were

responsible for the Zeugma disaster, then we are technically already in a state of war.

In support of this, we have been monitoring the training of an assault-squad led by Chandos, who are planning to attack Zeugma within the next few days. Their orders are explicit - to destroy the central computer and re-possess the Centrepont complex. Code named the Trackers, the existence of this squad is being vigourously denied by the government but we have monitored their training sessions in the Astrodome over the past fortnight and can confirm both their existence and their mission. Chandos himself was unavailable for comment."

Needless to say, Chandos' next discussion with Regan was unprintable.

CHAPTER 5 - Causes for alarm

- (15.01) No contact with Comms - his last communication was pretty much the same as Optic's I guess he is dead like the others.
- (15.03) I'm defending myself at regular intervals. The Skimmer is holding up well.
- (15.06) I don't know how much of this is reaching you. I can no longer afford to boost my signals through Centrepont and so there must be considerable delay between transmission and reception of these messages. I have not received a proper response from you about my request for a scan of the planet, although I suppose it's a bit late for that now. If you are receiving these messages it is through the courtesy of the enemy, who have the power to disable me entirely if they wish. Obviously they not only want my destruction but they wish you to know about it as well.
- (15.09) I'm under attack again. Pressing forward to Sector 3.
- (15.10) Now being pursued by two Cycloids.
- (15.12) I have discovered Radar's unit. His body is flung clear but clearly dead. There will be time for grieving later.
- (15.13) Using a node as a bouncing-pad I have spun round and eliminated one of the units pursuing me. Rather than risk taking on the other I am pushing on into Central Zone.
- (15.20) As I go deeper into Central Zone the Cycloids appear to be thinning out. I cannot tell now how many are around me, or where they are massing.
- (15.23) Some of the central nodes appear to have cargo bays of some sort.
- (15.24) When I reach Centrepont I intend to blow the computer up. There should be sufficient explosive charge in the armament unit.
- (15.25) There is a loud alarm sounding. I do not know what this means.

- (15.27) The nodes containing cargo bays appear to be opening.
- (15.29) I am under attack again. Here goes...
- (15.31) Pulsars malfunctioning.. must try to stay ahead
- (15.34) I'm hit. Activating emergency beacons.
- (15.36) Rear motor damaged. Losing forward velocity.
- (15.36)(message unintelligible.)

In the next five days the T.R.A.C. Squad (Ramos, Tigran, Xelig, Chandos and Karn) learned to work together. Training twice-daily in the massive artificial Trackway that had been constructed beneath the Astrodome they attempted to wrestle the cumbersome Skimmers into some kind of useful performance. Day by day, however, it began to take shape.

After the dubious celebrity they had enjoyed on the 'Insight' programme, the cameras had been allowed into their training sessions ("in the interests of public awareness" as the government put it). This resulted in yet another pressure, an awareness of how imperfect these conditions were, how ridiculous they would look in the context of the truth being learned about Zeugma. Yet there was a certain excitement about seeing so unlikely a bunch of men prepare for this test of their fabled skill. It was like a good movie in the making, complete with snarls of "eat this sucker!" from Tigran every time he fired a Pulsar. They were a difficult enough bunch to control at the best of times, now with cameras tracking their every move it was virtually impossible to make them pull together as a team. Chandos, ever serious, showed no emotion, surveying every move from his seat high above the Trackway, snapping instructions to them as they trained. For him this was fast becoming a nightmare. It was as if only he realised how great a danger awaited them down on Zeugma. For their sakes he hoped the camera would be hit first when the shooting started.

Somehow he felt that seeing a man ripped apart by Pulsar fire was not appropriate peak-time viewing.

Later at night, when they sat down to analyse the details, they at last began to appreciate a thing or two about the complexity of the Trackway. Even with Daios feeding them map and movement information from the mother-ship, it would be a complex task to calculate the quickest route to the Communication Centres, and no one knew for certain whether the computer could jam their scanning devices or not. If the Cycloids could not be tracked as they moved on the Trackway, the task would be impossible. One thing was certain, no scans of the planet surface had been possible for days - whatever was going on down there, it was being awfully secretive about it.

Regan, on the other hand, was not in the least secretive. Having learned nothing from having his flimsy lies exposed on Network television, he proceeded to make further historic announcements.

- "There is nothing wrong on Zeugma." (Knossos 4)
- "There is a major crisis currently taking place on Zeugma IV." (Knossos 6)
- "There is no T.R.A.C. Squad." (Knossos 6)
- "Javans are idiots. Their speciality is blowing up mother ships, usually their own." (Knossos 7) - There is a certain amount of truth in this one.
- "The Javan involvement is something we are all concerned about." (Knossos 7)
- "The T.R.A.C. Squad will leave for Zeugma IV tomorrow - we wish them luck." (Knossos 8)

All Regan's announcements managed to do was convince the Network that there was a further cover-up. Top level negotiations succeeded in securing the rights to the mission itself. For the first time ever, a genuine assault mission would

appear on live Television (Channel 1, incidentally, took this news rather badly).

EPILOGUE

TO THE ATTENTION OF EMPEROR RAMBO VI

In the 21st Year of your magnificent rule, I, Tharn, humblest and most meagre slug in your fleet crave permission to make the following report:

Wonderful News, your Imperial Majesty!

1) Admiral Malek is not dead after all. He merely inhaled all the Qualine dust released by accident into the hanger and has been comatose for a fortnight. Reports of him being killed after single-handedly defeating 23 Caliban ships in deep space can now be assumed to be exaggerated.

2) After extensive juggling with the figures your Majesty's birthday can indeed be calculated to have fallen on a pre-equinoctial juncture, which in some cultures is called a 'Lavian Leap Year'. As this event only occurs once in 18 years we can now publicly announce your august age to be 27 instead of 486.

3) Our experiments with Sypos energy continue. If you remember this strange form of radiation was discovered by placing Firigian meat cutlets in a micro-wave oven. Somehow this energy totally erases computer memory banks, a fact we regrettably learned when the ship carrying the cutlets imploded without warning or explanation. Later we discovered that a Caliban ship in the Maplex at the same time was also destroyed. This led us to experiment further with the energy (always using ships with only manual control) with similar effects. More recently we bounced large quantities of this energy off the Caliban moon of Zeugma IV to see what effect it would have on an integrated computer-assembly as currently used in the Centrepont project. These results were fascinating: Centrepont

apparently uses a new 12th Generation computer, a model stolen in part from our own Delta 7 range. As your Majesty knows, if this computer loses internal memory or operating system it fabricates its own from preset electronic parameters. As the Centrepont computer was designed for policing purposes it redesigned its own structure to imitate a purpose-built defence sphere. As it now stands it is programmed purely to defend and destroy - something those ill-prepared and half-witted Calibans have discovered to their loss. In the light of this discovery we will continue to experiment with Sypos energy in the hope it may actually reveal some way to remotely re-program computers rather than merely erase their memories. It would appear an assault-squad led by Chandos, an aging but competent pilot, is on its way to Zeugma to sort out the problem. We will watch his progress with amusement.

May I also wish your Imperial Majesty joy and serenity on your august 27th birthday, which I understand falls next half-moon.

Yours in trepidation,

Tharn - Lowest fetcher of dung in the fleet.