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# Laser Cell Phones

by

Ryder Miller

He was always mad that he needed one. In fact this was an inherited genetic problem with his father being angry that he needed one also. His father never got one, but he died of cancer anyway. Brian Futargh eventually got one so he could stay in contact with the rest of the human race.

They could cause cancer when they came out, they both thought. They could mess with one's brain. One might get a tumor from one or a growth on one's ear or eye. There were all sorts of things to worry about out there, but the manufacturers said they did not pose a health problem; that there was no conclusive proof. People were getting cancer for all sorts of other reasons. There were all sorts of things out there that could cause a problem. They argued that there were all these strange things going out through the air now. One just needed to stick a receiver out their window to get something, Futargh thought. Some of the broadcast signals had gone beyond the distance of the solar system. The cell phones were not doing anything very different than TV or Radio. Imagine if one could just tune into the air waves like a radio. Maybe they could someday control a bunch of people who had antennas built into their heads. They could just stick their heads out of the window and see what they found in the radio

waves. In the future one might just need to stick their head out the window to get the news.

For their time these cell phones were amazing devices. Some were initially reminded of Star Trek which showcased the idea on television forty years earlier in the late 1960s. That was one hundred years ago now. Futargh was happy those folks from Star Trek remained icons. Especially Spock. They became commonplace to use like the Internet two generations later. Nobody predicted all these things generations earlier. They suddenly showed up and changed the world. All contemporary literature would have them now. They would be cultural baggage that had changed things. They would be something that was frequently used, but not necessarily something that was thought about too much. Some might have forgotten to put them in stories, but there was not a lot of close examination about how they would change things. There were not a lot of people who wrote about new brain tumors or eye problems, but some doctors noticed the effects of these things and would talk about it. Like Tobacco Companies, they had deniers and apologists. They also had tough lawyers. They had become part of the historical technological juggernaut.

Futargh, though, was worried that he

might have inherited a genetic weakness that made it easier for him to get cancer. His mother had also caught cancer. His father worried about it, then caught it, and then died also. Now he was out here in space on his way to the Red Planet. Who would have imagined what the cell phones had turned into? They were more a tool now than they had ever been. It was impossible to live a full life if one did not own one. Anyone going to Mars had to have one. They were no longer a status symbol; they were necessary and a survival tool.

There were so many new apps over the years, even some cell phones that could be used like a Light Saber. There was a beam of energy that could be pointed out of it and two duelers could sword fight with them like the light sabers in Star Wars. They were now called Laser Cells. They were more of tool than a weapon, but it was reasoned that it was possible that someone would need to be able to defend themselves on Mars. It had become like some of the most successful science fiction from a century ago, ie. bringing the sword fight into the future. Edgar Rice Burroughs did it on Mars. The ship they were taking was named after him. They were also in DUNE (where they banished nuclear weapons), and more memorably in the Star Wars franchise. Sword fighting reminded one of a purer and more clean time where people could find conquest and defend themselves based on their personal merit. Anyone could shoot a gun, especially if one was not ready for it, but real men and women would want to duke it out with their fists or with a sword instead of shoot guns. It was purer in a way.

One was not supposed to use them in the

space-ship, though. There were too many gadgets, cords, and wires that could be damaged. The Laser Cells could actually punch a whole out into the exterior of the ship. That could result in the death of the entire crew. This app was turned off until they landed on The Red Planet.

Once they reached Mars, the Laser Cells could do some great things. They could be a great tool on Mars allowing the explorers to cut things up to look inside, especially big stones and boulders. The astro-geologists loved them. The hot laser could boil sections of the rocks they found, and with the more advanced versions, they could also alert the scientist to the composition of the rocks. The gas from the burnings give signatures of the chemical components of the rocks. Something heated could be studied for answers to questions they have not determined yet. Heated rocks might give off chemical traces that could reveal interesting things about the geology of Mars. One might find evidence of a water source on the planet. They also could be a means to protect oneself if the explorers were not alone on Mars. They could provide the warmth of a fire. With them one could light things on fire.

A man could even light his Laser Cell and swing it around while imagining that he was a science fiction swashbuckler of old. Such play might be therapeutic and provide exercise, but was likely to be frowned upon now.

The planet was probably barren with nothing to worry about, like the space probes had detected so far. The early settlers had not discovered anything of the dangerous extraterrestrial sort, but they

might not have told everyone everything. Maybe there was something below the surface of the planet, but that was likely to just be extremophiles if anything. It was likely not multicellular, but even microbes could cause a problem. H.G. Wells pointed this out in *The War of the Worlds* now almost two hundred years old. Such a discovery however would be amazing. Who knew what we could learn from life on another planet, even if it was just a microbe. The scientists thought the search for extraterrestrial life was the most pressing question concerning Mars and they had stopped the early plans to terraform the planet until a thorough search had been done. Now, however, there were a bunch of folks on the way that did not always get along with each other all the time.

It was a new wilderness out there and we were going to explore it and maybe someday settle there. After all the war at the early part of the century the public was happy that our DNA would not all be stuck on Earth by 2100. Precautions were taken so that it was not fried in space for the journey.

But not everybody agreed with each other on the spaceship. "Crazy," thought Futargh. It was like a suspense thriller between him and Randy Merkens now. One could say they had a failure to communicate. Tension could grow high and they sometimes could not even hear each other, even when they were yelling. Futargh usually got along well with the other members of the crew. There was Elsa Steinburgh who was charming, Jill Beemer who was accepting, and Jack Hardy who usually kept to himself also. None were married at home, but most had a few people they corresponded with on the Home

Planet.

One time while they were eating Merkens taunted Futargh. "Hey fatty. Save some food for the rest of us," said Merkens not quite jokingly. Futargh was actually thin.

Futargh was surprised by this man's willingness to start a fight.

The mission to the Red Planet was really about salesmanship. People were finally convinced that Peace was a "win-win" situation. It was hard to send people who represented the whole planet while everyone one was fighting. When things died down, a Mission idea was presented that most people agreed with. The public was not able to take a jump into an unknown without a plan. The mission designers sold the plan as an international plan with the possibility of putting people on another planet. After the public had examined the plan they agreed to an International Mission for the betterment of humankind. Fighting seemed out of place.

"Leave me alone," Futargh had said before the assembled.

"Well, leave us some food," Merkens replied.

"I was only eating till full," said Futargh.

"So does everybody else. There is a ration for everybody," said Merkens.

"There is food for us to share, and I waited until everybody had already eaten," said Futargh.

Merkens did not reply. Futargh was annoyed about how communication could sometime become a weapon.

"What is this really about?" Futargh followed.

Merkens did not say anything and walked away.

There were no new episodes after that for a few weeks. They would give each other dirty looks in the hallway, but usually they could manage some banter between them. The crew was undecided about whose side to take on the few occasions. Futargh was angry to be in a position where he needed to decide between being hungry and being annoyed. Most of the girls on the flight would not eat their full ration anyway and he was seeing to it, though in a fun way, that food would not be wasted. Most of the crew understood this. Futargh would try to forgive Merkens, but at times it sure did seem as if Merkens had gotten his goat.

The next confrontation was a bit worse.

"Don't you go hogging the food," said Merkens during a communal meal.

Futargh almost pulled out his Laser Cell but thought better of it.

"Don't talk to me that way," Futargh said instead.

"There is only so much food," said Merkens.

"The way you folks eat you will be wasting food for everybody," responded Futargh. He took his cell phone out of his pocket, but did not light up his phone.

Merkens also did so.

"Stop it, you two," said Elsa Steinburgh.

"Maybe we can solve this like men when we reach The Red Planet," said Futargh.

"You light up those things in here and you will risk endangering us all. You two will never see space flight again," said Jack Hardy.

"You better stop riding me," said Merkens.

"If you want to do that when you get to Mars that is okay, but not in here," said Jill

Beemer.

After that, Futargh and Merkens would scowl at each other every now and then, but they seemed to be on better terms. They would need to wait until the ship landed or could wind up in prison.

The planet was the color of dried blood. The cold might be relentless. They got some sun there, but that might not make a difference. The Red Planet's imaginative stories were usually about war or survival. Dark were the tidings for this planet with moons named after fear and panic. Astronomers had shown that there was once running liquid on the planet and probably seas. There were photographs from space probes that showed dried river systems. The planet did not have running rivers now. Water had been found at the poles of the planet, but some thought the planet might have once been wet and more habitable in the past. It was not determined yet if the remains of the riverine systems once carried water or some other liquid.

Ice on Mars meant that all the water necessary for the trip did not need to be carried on the space ship. One could also refill the ship with water for the trip back to Earth. One might find all the water necessary for a successful round trip to Mars. Maybe there would even be bathes and showers there because of the ice they could find. The ship could melt ice and heat water, but they would not have a lot of water again until they landed on the surface. The spaceship recycled the water they had. Water would be available certainly at the poles.

For now they would need to be careful with their small daily allowance of water. They also had to preserve their urine so the

water could be taken out of it when they were done with it. Even the dirty water that was used after the limited bathing and dish washing was recycled. They did have to get used to the taste of the water that had become less and less pleasant the longer they had been in space. Maybe they could get some clean ice from the surface of Mars. They could use their Laser Cells to heat up the water to a boiling point when they started fires there.

They could also battle like in the stories of Mars of old. When they got back to the planet the duelers, even the winner, would probably be put in jail. Maybe he would just decide not to head back. Mars might just become a prison for the rebels.

For now, Futargh just missed the conveniences and beauty of home planet Earth. Mars, however, would be an interesting experience. Having been there would make him unique in a lot of different communities. People might idolize him and want to shake his hand.

The space ship was cramped though. There were a few windows that looked out into the void, and the only scenery was the stars in the distance and the occasional floating rock. It was wondrous in a way, the vast emptiness. One could dream about what would result from this “conquest” of space. The surface of Mars was likely to be more lovely. There would be an alien sunset. The mountains were likely to be picturesque. Futargh could not wait until he could be out there alone without any of the crew in sight. The Environmentalists of old might really be jealous of him when he attained this.

Futargh wanted to stretch out, but he

would have to wait to do that. He would also have to wait to kill Randy Merkens if he decided to. This man had undermined him. He probably would be better able to control his temper if he had more space to move around in. He laughed about the pun. He didn't need more land like the Nazis of old, though. He was from Norway, he protested for himself. He just was finding the space ship cramped. As it was, he was very restricted and frustrated. He had to go out of his way to stretch his legs and back. There was also only one television room. They took turns picking what would be on television, but each had different tastes. When Merkens picked a show he would usually walk out of the room to his bunk and read a book instead. He would have to find the time to be alone in the room to watch what he individually wanted. They did gather regularly for the news. He had passed the psychological profile necessary to be on this ship. The psychologists expected for people to have some aggression. They needed it to defend themselves. Anger could be a great motivator. It could help one through difficult situations. One could ignore things, like pain, while they were angry. He would have to control his anger with Merkens for the benefit of the expedition. He figured they quarreled only a few times.

Now he just needed to keep his cool and try to forgive.

If he got into a fight it might make them all look bad. Honor sometimes conflicted with free speech, it seemed. He had to remember that they did not all need to be friends. They did need to be colleagues though.

There would be some happy people waiting for them on Mars. This was not the first expedition and it was not likely to be the last. Most trips had met with success. Most people who took this trip had lived through it. They had created some amazing art on The Red Planet. Some of the views were bound to be spectacular. There were permanent settlers on Mars, but not that many of them. He forgot the exact number, but it was around fifty. Most of them were scientists. There were also a few administrators to help support the human team there. Most had come not thinking they would be able to make a return journey. They were there for the glory many of them. Some however just wanted to get off the planet Earth and might bring their problems with them. It was amazing who had shown up. All sort of people with all sorts of talents. It was also a successful political experiment where society started again and re-envisioned itself. Maybe there were other creatures there like the ethereal eldils that C.S. Lewis had written about who could fly through space? They had not been discovered yet. The ghosts were probably just imaginary. A Laser Cell would likely be a defense against something like them.

Brian Futargh was happy when they got to Mars. It had been months of anticipation. He was happy to be off of a space ship, especially one named after Edgar Rice Burroughs. He would be able to stamp his feet, walk, and jump into the frozen air. He could jump higher into the sky than he could on Earth here. He could also jump farther. Mars was smaller than the Earth and had less gravity. There were health concerns for the crew because of it, but it might be

wonderful for those with bad legs.

He liked being in empty and quiet places and The Red Planet had many of them. There were all sorts of mountains and valleys to explore and name. He figured that he would have his name on something at some point. He would be able to explore. There were also people on the planet that would take him to some of the scenic places they had found. He, however, wanted to go alone for some of these expeditions. He figured if there was a God he would be out here in one of his/her places.

He, however, was agnostic, but found wonder and inspiration in the wild. Those experiences could be spiritual. Those places also need to be protected. He doubted that they would ever be terraformed like imagined in science fiction. It would just be too much stuff necessary to bring to the planet. It would be so hard that there would always still have wild places even if life no longer existed on the surface of Mars.

"Do you still want to have the duel?" asked Merkens the day before the ship landed on the planet.

Futargh was surprised by how straight forward Merkens was.

"Yes I do, but we are colleagues here," said Futargh. "We need to keep to higher standard for the sake of the space agency."

"I know. The Red Planet should be big enough for both of us," said Merkens.

"We need to set a higher examples. Space can be a place where people can leave each other alone. Where people can get along," said Futargh.

"We don't have to be looking forward to seeing each other. We just don't need to embarrass the space community by trying to



kill each other," said Merkens.

"That would set a bad example," said Futargh.

"Let's shake on it," said Merkens.

Futargh reach out his hand first.

Merkens's hand joined him. It was not a hard hand shake, but it was not a phony limp one

either. Maybe they should have fist bumped Futargh thought, but that communicated less.

They would always be colleagues though. Futargh would use his Laser Cell for Astrogeology. Maybe he could find signs of life where the water once was.