The Last Flight of the Sarah Mae

Andrew Burt

A Note from the Author

Hi – I hope you enjoy this DRM-free ebook of "The Last Flight of the Sarah Mae." I hear from a lot of readers that they dislike DRM and high prices for ebooks; and that they understand authors deserve to get paid, so they would gladly pay for ebooks they download if they were DRM-free and if there were an easy way to pay the author a fair price. So this is an experiment to see if that's true.

I've released this ebook for reading on a "pay what you feel it was worth" model. Think of it like tipping in a restaurant. If you loved your service you might tip 20-25%, right? Maybe 15-20% for average service and 10-15% for poor service. But you wouldn't stiff the server, would you? And you certainly wouldn't walk out without paying for the food. Authors need to pay the bills too. Our income from writing is how we do that. It's important for society that authors get rewarded for their work, or we'll all be poorer for having less quantity and quality of literature.

So I'm asking you to pay for reading this story, based on how much you feel it's worth – but at least something. My recommended payment structure would be $2.99 (or more) if you loved it, $1.99 if you thought it was average, and $0.99 if you weren't feeling it. (The variable pricing survey mentioned below showed people willing to pay around $3 for a short story, but whatever you think is good with me!) Even small amounts are important to authors so please don't think the amounts are too small to be worth the effort.

I've tried to make payment as easy as possible with links here and at the end of the book; just click them and they will take you to your choice of payment, credit cards via Paypal or Amazon Payments, or a check by email or postal mail.

The idea and suggested pricing for this "pay how you liked it" concept came from the results of an ebook pricing survey (at http://critters.org/surv if you'd like to take the survey, see the results, or comment on this idea – I welcome your feedback). Stephen King tried voluntary payments and reportedly 75% of people paid. If that holds true with this experiment I suspect you'll see a lot more of this, and less DRM. Of course if people don't pay then it will only prove to those who love DRM how necessary it actually is – so as someone who hates DRM myself, I'm hoping this experiment is a success.

Thanks, and happy reading!

— Andrew Burt
www.aburt.com

The Last Flight of the Sarah Mae

They haunted his dreams. Like pharaohs in their pyramids, his crewmates from the planetary bomber *Sarah Mae* still floated in their sleepsacks where his mistakes had killed them. Walsh McKeeg remembered the raid on Gamma Pericles as if yesterday, not forty years past. They had to get out: The fighters kept the orbital platforms busy, but the ground-based quantum pulses were shredding them. He hurriedly entered coordinates for the sublight thrusters so when the hyperdrive kicked in they'd be heading directly toward their base on Ukon Point. Another pulse hit home. His head stung. The air in the cabin screamed as it escaped. Woozy, he slapped a quicksteel patch on the hole. But, no time to weld it—coordinates, he must enter the coordinates. "Go!" he shouted to his commander, Major Franks; and they whisked out of orbit for a dead-man's jump back to base.

The stars looked wrong. That was his first memory of realizing they'd landed near Wejyn's Star instead of home. Just slightly off course before the jump—but close only counts with horseshoes and hand gremlins, as they say. He remembered Salim saying the jump had fried the hyperdrive, and in their need to repair it they'd entered orbit around a rock of a planet as lifeless as it was blood red.

It wasn't until Walsh's failed salvage attempts five and fifteen years ago now that he'd learned their fate. He should have died with them on the *Sarah Mae*, he often brooded. But this time, with the old girl's orbit decaying like his health, there

could be no next try. This time, by God, he was going to bring the *Sarah Mae* home.

Walsh realized he'd slipped into a daydream during his daily reading of the Communion service from the Book of Common Prayer. He let the reminiscence linger, part of his self-imposed absolution: Major Franks had just shoved him into the lifepod. "You'll die from that head wound before we can get repaired, son," he'd said. "Search/Rescue will pick you up, God willing." The cryo-shell encircled him close like a coffin, room enough for one, barely two in an emergency. "I didn't mean to steer us here, please, don't send me to die," he was protesting...

The knock at his cubicle door in the oxy-hut jarred him back to the present. "Need to talk," Jeddy Rubin's voice said beyond the door.

Walsh shook his head to clear the cobwebs and laid the prayer book's datapad face down on his chest. He was in the present; the *Sarah Mae* was almost ready to go. In a couple months he could attend the crew's Solar cremations. Their peace would be his, and he could finally retire from these damned utilitarian oxy-huts and the motley collection of dear, wonderful death-traps he called spaceships. He could sell Jeddy the business and get to know his wife of forty years. He felt good. "Yeah," he called out.

Jeddy entered and tossed a pencil-thin part on the bunk's taut, tight-cornered blanket. "O'Shea injector's busted," he said solemnly.

Walsh's stomach flopped as if the oxy-hut's gravspin had hiccupped again. "How bad?" he asked.

"Tomas O'Shea himself couldn't kludge this one," he said, in reference to the inventor of the injected sublight drive. "Back to square one. No thrusters, no propulsion, no navigation."

Walsh pressed his lips tight in instant anguish and studied the shiny injector as if looking for a flaw he could fix. He could imagine the jagged, fracturing stress lines Jeddy would have seen in the holo-magnetometer. Like all of his six hand-picked crew, Jeddy knew his stuff. Walsh fought back the guilt, recriminating himself for overlooking it six months ago when they'd stripped all the systems to determine what needed replacement or refitting. "Solar wind, or all the thruster restart

attempts?" he choked out. Not that it mattered: No hair-gel would jerry-rig it now like during the war.

"Both, I expect," Jeddy ventured. "Could retool it back at Ukon Point, or pick up a new one. Either way, got to take the Jumper out." Walsh had been slightly embarrassed, but never regretted that he could only afford a Puddle-Jumper for his salvage operations—until now. They were roomy enough to carry parts, but painfully slow, requiring a month's time to get far away from a star to make a safe jump, and another month back in after one. Wejyn's six-year solar storm cycle wouldn't wait.

"Or?" Walsh hoped there was an "or." He couldn't take the pain of leaving Major Franks and Salim and Gulchrist, helpless to save them by his own error again. Walsh knew navigation like Magellan, and he knew the economics of salvage to make Adam Smith proud, but he was only self-taught on mechanics and as nearly useless here as a second appendix. His crew, they were the experts. There had to be an "or."

"Guys and I talked it over. Lavonna says she can fit the Jumper's injector for the *Sarah Mae*. Everything else'll be ready in a few days." Jeddy ran his hands through his already ruffled hair. "We think it'll work."

Walsh snorted. If it failed, the *Sarah Mae* would be a little fireball over Wejyn III. Of course they *wanted* it to work, then they'd all be rich enough to retire—though they were salvage animals and just as likely to stick with him until he retired and passed the operation on to one of them. But he had to remember that they had no personal stake in this, no wound to heal from a war that ended before they'd been born. "What about the Jumper? Can't leave it behind."

Jeddy held up his finger. "Knew you'd say that. We start the Jumper first, do a burn to sling it around the sun, yank the O'Shea, toss it back on a pallet. Start the *Sarah Mae*. She catches up, we hitch the two together, and the *Sarah Mae* pulls the Jumper back."

Walsh's stomach flopped. "And if there's no *Sarah Mae* to pull with? No injector means no burn, means no navigation. All of civilization is back toward Ukon, so you'd have to wait until Wejyn III is aligned right if you wanted to coast to the jump

point, and the storms won't wait for that." The hyperdrive was a great invention, but only far enough outside a gravity well so the local system was perpendicular to your trajectory, and only if momentum was already carrying you toward the gravity well you wanted to reach. He couldn't expect Jeddy to know Shill's second law of hypermotion, that space-time velocity equals the gravitational constant times mass of destination object times engine running time over the square of distance and the tangent of the angle between the destination and the direction of motion. Put another way: Get slightly off, and you met whatever star lay dead ahead. That's what landed the *Sarah Mae* here in the first place. *Tilting at windmills* Major Franks had liked to call it.

Jeddy sucked air though his teeth. "Dicey. But doable. Those stranded in the *Sarah Mae* use lifepods. All three pods are 100%. For the Jumper, we come around the sun aimed so we slingshot around that gas giant if the *Mae* doesn't pick us up. Alignment'll be right in a couple weeks. We fine tune with the orbital boosters."

Walsh scowled, feeling patronized. "I know what a U-turn is," he mumbled, momentarily thinking back to the war when folks would sling around even more than two bodies in a pinch; then he concentrated on Jeddy's proposal. Granted, the Jumper had the boosters, a nicety lacking on a B-22—those weren't intended to dance around in orbit long. You steered with the main sublights—period. Walsh drummed his fingers on the datapad.

Jeddy took the pause as disapproval. "I know it's a risk, but we're all willing," he continued. "We know how much it means to you. W-Walsh." He stammered on the name. Usually he called him "boss" or "skipper"; never by his name.

Walsh looked at him sternly. He'd lost friends and subordinates all through the war; he'd even ordered men to their death after his rescue and promotion. But he'd never forgiven himself for The Accident, and he'd be damned if he lost more friends to that same stupid mistake and his own hubris. "To hell with what I want. Everyone is *completely* behind this? 100%?"

Jeddy nodded.

"Ok then!" Walsh said, slapping the datapad. They wouldn't have to scuttle the project after all. "But Lavonna shows *me* how to do the injector, and I'll take the *Sarah Mae* out. Alone." Considering that bomber was as likely to explode as not from the foreign part, he wouldn't let anyone else risk their lives.

"But—"

"No buts, Jeddy. Clear?"

"Clear, skipper."

"Then get movin'!"

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With the O'Shea installed after a marathon holocomm session with Lavonna—though slightly scratched, so he'd have to baby it on the burns—Walsh had little to do during the few days until the Jumper rounded the sun. He tidied up. He read. He napped a lot. He prayed.

As the prayer book's datapad floated from his sleepy grasp, his mind wandered as he dreamt again. Walsh heard someone calling his name.

"Lt. McKeeg," the debriefing officer, Col. Garcia, was asking, "is it your statement that you neglected to inform your superior that your quicksteel hull patch was only temporary, and that you feel you abandoned your post out of fear?"

He had. He meant to tell them to torch the quicksteel or the patch wouldn't hold, but his head was swimming. He hadn't realized the quantum pulse had not only punctured the hull but boiled part of his brain. Everybody was injured. He had no right to expect special treatment. And even if part of him knew, he didn't want to be cast off in a lifepod perchance to be picked up—or not. Surely his odds were better staying with the crew. He'd been so afraid of dying, and so apologetic that he'd steered them here and not Ukon, he'd forgotten to tell them about the patch.

But Major Franks had insisted he go, and Search/Rescue had picked up his "ice cube" months later. Warmed and healed, he learned the others had never returned. Shouldn't they send a mission to get them? They might be alive; at least they deserved a proper burial.

"Sorry, Lieutenant," the chaplain had explained. "It's been

a long time. The Planetary Defense Force wouldn't even want the ship, what with the war almost won, and the damage like you said... They knew the risk, and you did your best. S/R will keep an eye out for lifepods."

They wouldn't even allow him the blame—instead, decorating him for injury in action.

He'd tried letting it go, returning to his father's ranch back on Earth; he married Peta. But knowing he had her while Major Franks' widow had nothing ate at him like an ulcer. He hadn't been a spiritual man before, but Peta urged him to try the Church. He prayed for absolution. Instead it reaffirmed his despair and added another mantle to the burden: Peta's God only asked that he do his best, and all would be welcome Judgment Day. But he hadn't done his best. They haunted his dreams, his imagination revealing the hole in the hull where his patch had failed. He'd drifted apart from Peta, unable to feel fulfilled envisioning the undecaying corpses still at their stations. After less than a year he rejoined the service, seeing her only on rare leaves. He learned what he could about salvage, cleaning up the mess from the war. Shortly before he'd retired he'd even talked his base commander into retrieving the *Sarah Mae* as a training exercise. On that mission he'd found that they'd died in their sleepsacks rather than at their stations, but the hole in the hull was the hellish stab wound he'd pictured. He wept as he traced its blackened, wart-mottled outline with his gloved hand, half hoping a jagged edge might tear the suit and rejoin him with his companions.

Walsh awoke with a start. The round maws of the unused lifepods stared at him recriminatingly.

"McKeeg, come in! Are you there!" Jeddy's hologram shifted nervously as if he were looking about.

"*Sarah Mae* to Jumper," Walsh said as he flicked on the transmitter for his own image. "I'm here. Sorry, dozed off. Been pretty dull since you went quiet behind the sun. I've just—"

"We've got a problem here, Walsh."

Walsh stiffened. "Report," he demanded, lapsing into his command tone, unused since he'd retired as a full Colonel fifteen years before. The memory of how he always tried to emulate Major Franks' way of being tough-but-kind flooded

back. Walsh rubbed his eyes to concentrate.

"The burn took us past a flare on the far side. Lavonna's hurt bad, the radiation..."

Walsh hung his head. Without the O'Shea, they would have had no maneuverability, no choice but to ride through it. They were lucky to be alive. Coming here had been a mistake, he thought. He should have known when the first salvage attempt failed when the hot box imploded, forcing him to leave the irradiated ship and the corpses behind; and certainly after the second time when they couldn't afford to bring a freezer unit for the bodies—or the new distributor they found necessary. He simply should have died with the rest, then he wouldn't be hurting these innocent fools now. But done was done.

"...and fused the outer hull. We've got one hatch, but no boosters or lifepods," Jeddy was saying. "Main problem is—we're off course. So not only no U-turn, but there's no known star system charted ahead of us along any tangent to our course."

"Damnation." It was all Walsh could muster.

"I, uh, I sure hope you can get the *Sarah Mae* going," Jeddy said quietly.

"Me too, Jeddy. Me too," Walsh said as he hurriedly brought the systems on-line for a quick start. He didn't need to rush, but a leisurely ignition seemed foolish with a crewman down and disaster striking at every turn. Walsh couldn't stand the sight of the reddish rock below him any longer, he had to get out now. Besides, they'd tested and retested each system alone, in diagnostic mode; all perfect. There was no telling if the ancient components would still speak to each other—the stress caused by one action might shut down another system. For that matter, the whole thing could still explode brilliantly. Fast-tracked or not, operation would be the real test—particularly the first burn.

"I'm compressing the fuel now. Will burn in ten," Walsh relayed to the stranded crew. "Irradiater primed." He swam to the next console; a B-22 wasn't meant to be operated by a single crewman, though it'd been done often enough during the war. "Funnel torch is hot. Dam open. Injector firing. Burn in three... two... one..."

Nothing happened.

Walsh furiously eyed each display. All green. Wait, he'd seen this before, he thought. Something Major Franks had said.

Suddenly the *Sarah Mae* lurched as if she were a bumper car smacked by another; then coasted. The smell of ozone permeated the room. Walsh clenched his teeth. What had Franks said? The ship lurched again. He dared not shut the sequence down, or he'd have to manually vent the compressed fuel, a job that took two people in a pinch. He still had time to think, at least another few minutes before the fusing chamber cracked.

"Walsh?" Jeddy's voice asked nervously.

"Not now, she's balking." He flicked off the audio so he could think. Jeddy's holo worked its mouth and waved its arms.

He imagined how it had felt, forty years before, when the Major had been floating in this very spot. He could see the Major, calmly poking at the control and barking orders; he could smell the ozone as if it were then. He could see the planet beneath them, firing up at them in retribution for the industries and armies and cities they'd just obliterated. Franks had told Salim to do something—yes, that was it, the vacuum cover over the injector had been loose! Room oxygen was mixing with the injector's flow.

Walsh pushed off back to the engine room and thumped the cover, his efforts meeting with a quick sucking noise as the chamber evacuated. There was a slight jolt, then the familiar feel of the ship as she smoothly accelerated. Giddy with excitement—the *Sarah Mae* was going home!—he scrambled back to the cockpit. "She's moving, Jeddy! All signs are green."

"How's the O'Shea doing? You pre-warmed it, right?" Jeddy asked.

Damn! In his rush and grogginess he'd forgotten. His eyes shot to the injection flow display. He sighed—it read just slightly below normal. "Looking good, looking good. I'll be meeting you in about, oh, six hours."

The *Sarah Mae* glided though space, lumbering gracefully like a ballet-dancing hippopotamus.

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Walsh pressed his lips together hard as the end of the burn approached. "Jeddy, I've been watching the injector flow, and it's dropped off. Below green. Bottom line, if we shut down, we can't restart." And they'd all drift together toward a cold death. Yet they had to shut down when the *Sarah Mae* matched position and velocity with the Jumper, or they couldn't hitch. Once again Walsh had killed his team, only this time they were alive to wait for it and he was conscious of it beforehand to feel their agony.

Jeddy's hologram smoothed its hair as he talked to someone off-stage. "Lavonna agrees; nobody's seen an injector in the red survive a restart." He sighed. "No sense in us all staying out here, then. Skipper—Walsh—I know I'm speaking for all of us. You head back while you have power. We knew the risks, and we accept the consequences. We gave it our best shot. It's been an honor knowing you, Walsh." The hologram winked out as Jeddy cut the link, apparently unwilling to debate. Walsh couldn't re-raise him. He pounded his fist on the console. He should die, not them.

As the two ships approached, Walsh brought the *Sarah Mae* alongside the Jumper and slightly forward. He adjusted the thrust so he would cross her path at a certain speed, then cut the engine. A quick test just to be sure—but it wouldn't restart. He was committed.

He tried to raise the Jumper again, but they staunchly refused his call. He'd expected this, though, so he clipped a datapad onto the mattress of each of the lifepods. They'd have to hear his message this way. Nothing special, just goodbye and how he too felt honored to work with them. His apologies and love to Peta. And how he had to correct his own mistakes.

Just as the bomber crossed the Jumper's path, with three fingers Walsh simultaneously jettisoned the three lifepods. He'd plotted their course correctly: The *Sarah Mae* floated off just a tad faster from the push of the lifepods, while the pods themselves hung motionless before the Jumper.

Walsh didn't stay around to watch his crew evacuate the Jumper in their suits and enter the pods. The six of them would be cramped two to a pod, but they'd be frozen soon enough and home before they knew it. With six of them plus him, but only

six berths, each of them would almost certainly volunteer to stay behind. He couldn't stand the anguish of such an offer.

With a final act of propulsion, he activated the hyperdrive. It would latch onto whatever star mass lay ahead large enough to pull him in; this close to the gravity well of Wejyn's Star, it was as likely as not to pull him in itself. If not and he made it God-knew-where, without thrusters, that star's gravity would only add to the *Sarah Mae*'s fatal momentum.

An instant later a fiery young stallion of a blue sun winked into view, dead ahead. Walsh relaxed into the sleepsack he'd lived in during the war, and propped up a datapad. He was ready for judgment day.

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Thanks so much!

— Andrew