

Infectious Diversion

By Geoff Harries

'Old guard dismiss!' bellowed Sergeant Broughton, saluting, and with a crash of feet the ten soldiers in front of me made a half turn to the right, paused and broke away. I returned Broughton's salute, nodded to Lt. Closter who was duty officer in charge of the new guard and made for the Mess. The Changing of the Guard at the "King's Own" Maintenance Unit at Shelford Barracks, just outside Cambridge, was less formal than its namesake at Buckingham Palace, but the principle was the same.

Back in my room I hung up my uniform, changed into civvies and climbed into my third-hand Mini Cooper to drive to the little village of Lidgate, about 15 miles east of Cambridge. Driving along narrow lanes between hedgerows in the golden evening sunlight, I snapped on the radio to catch the news.

The trouble in Malawi had flared up again and rumour had it that a detachment from the "King's Own" was going to be the UK's contribution to UN Peaceforce. My battalion was next in line.

I was about to change the station when there was a flash about the "Mars Bug". Some time ago a meteorite had been found in Arizona. An asteroid was supposed to have knocked it off Mars 300 million years ago. Biologists had sliced open the meteorite and found the fossil of a cell. So life had existed on Mars! They had managed to synthesize and grow its DNA using the fossil as a template and the media had named it the "Mars Bug".

The flash revealed that this bug had somehow escaped confinement and infected two of the lab workers. In Cambridge, Mass. USA, not Cambridge, England, thank God.

Entering Lidgate around 8pm, I drove past the tan stone tithe barn and parked outside "The Queen". I had fallen in with a group from the University who met here regularly.

First met was Frank Thompson, at twenty-eight, two years older than me, a computer scientist working for IBM. He had come round to give our Mess a talk on Artificial Intelligence and I had struck up a friendship with him as he played tennis, though not very well. No complaint meant; I wasn't very good at computers either. Frank had then introduced me to this group of undergraduate and graduate students who wanting to get away from the usual student haunts, had discovered a genuine old Victorian pub out in the countryside, which brewed its own beer and was not overrun with tourists.

Stooping to enter I saw it was a quiet evening with just a few regulars propped against the bar, a farmer and his daughter playing darts and two old men playing shove ha'penny on a slate. I glanced around the blackened oil paintings of colonial wars and crossed Zulu assegais.

'Evening Hugh,' greeted Fred the barman and nodded to a side door. I raised my hand to him, entered the carpeted saloon bar and looked around. Empty except for three people sitting in one corner and deep in conversation. Frank and John. My heart jumped when opposite them I could see the small dark head of the delightful Sarah who I had met here last week. She had taken me at first for a graduate student but when she found I was in the Army, had visibly recoiled. I'm used to it now. No one seems to react neutrally when they hear of my profession. To the older people I'm a Defender of the Homeland, but to those my age, especially the girls, I'm just a Hired Gun.

I collected a pint at the bar and sauntered over. Just by looking at their intent faces I could see they were into another philosophical discussion, one that would probably be way over my head. My contribution and the reason I was tolerated was because I could beat them all at squash or tennis and could invite them, two at a time, into our Mess's tennis club.

I glanced at my watch. We were supposed to be bowling downstairs in half an hour. No one paid me any attention as I stood by the table.

'How can you know so much about the brain?' Sarah was saying in her high Home Counties accent. 'I just don't believe it. How can the human brain ever understand itself?' About twenty-one, slim and with her dark colouring rather French looking, she was an undergraduate reading philosophy. There was a seat free next to her, but she had her handbag on it.

'Look,' said Frank, his thin face sharp in exasperation. 'Okay, so we don't know exactly how the brain works but we can guess what it's got to have inside it to do what it does.' She looked at him skeptically.

'An example,' said Frank. He held up his wrist. 'I don't know exactly what's in this watch but I'm sure it must contain a stable oscillator, a counter and some sort of power source.'

'And so we know the brain must have an association memory, for instance,' said John. 'We', I thought sardonically. I had been here two weeks ago when John had first learnt that from Frank. But everyone wants to be a teacher when there's a pretty girl sitting at the table. John was in his mid-forties, thinning hair and rather podgy. A classics scholar and the nearest thing I knew to a university don.

'"Associative memory",' corrected Frank irritably. 'The brain's memory is quite different from that in our computers. Almost all the memories in our brain are hooked together.' He looked round then picked up Sarah's wine glass. 'I think of this and start letting my mind drift. I find that in my mind the concept of "wine" has been filed under: a girl I met in Paris last year ... a show I saw on TV where a man makes music by rubbing his finger around the rims of wine glasses... a visit I took to a wine-making factory where a man spent all his life rotating bottles ..er.. a German film I saw where the officers drink a toast and throw their glasses into the fireplace and ..lemme think.. wine-tasters who take a sip then spit it out.' He shrugged. 'Et cetera, et cetera.'

I put my beer glass on the table and made to sit next to Sarah, affecting surprise at seeing her handbag. I picked it up and looked for somewhere to put it.

'It's mine,' she said, taking it from me and placing it on her lap.

'Hallo,' I said brightly. 'My name's Hugh. You're Sarah aren't you? We met last week.' She was wearing some faint perfume. Her dark eyes flicked over me coolly and returned to the discussion.

'And that's why we like to think in metaphors and analogies,' said John.

Frank looked at him in surprise.

'Hey, that's right, John. How come you thought of that?'

'It's the reason we like to classify things,' continued John. 'We're always saying things like "he's one of those types who ...", or using metaphors like ...' He paused, hand out.

'"In the evening of his life",' supplied Sarah.

'Thank you,' he said, smiling at her.

'Think of clock,' I said. There was a sudden break in the conversation and Frank looked at his wristwatch.

'Right,' he said 'we're on in fifteen minutes. Hi, Hugh.' He looked round. 'Where's Michael?'

`He phoned me to say he'd be late,' replied John. They all emptied their glasses and we filed down the stairs to the bowling alley.

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An hour later we returned upstairs to the now crowded bar and sat down. A figure appeared by our table. It was Michael. Michael was a professor of biology and a lot older and much more serious than my eccentric friends. He was actually old enough to have done National Service in the Army and it had not imbibed him with any love of the military. In fact he was an ecology/peace campaigner and his bushy gray-haired head and wild gestures were often to be seen on student demonstrations. I didn't like him, I thought he was a pompous old fart and really did it to get in with the young students, especially the girls. The dislike was mutual.

His eyes slid over us and stopped on Sarah. John introduced him as Dr. Michael Grolier.

`I'm delighted to meet you,' he said smiling down at her. `My friends call me Mike,' he added. His eyes moved to me. `And soldier boy is here with us again, I see.'

`Hallo, Mike,' I replied neutrally.

He sat down and after some chit-chat John asked Michael if he had anything up to date on the "Mars Bug" and was it true it had escaped?

`Michael's specialty is "Infection",' explained John to Sarah. Michael looked as though he wanted to say something but finally answered that he had only heard the radio flash like everyone else.

Once the drinks had been sorted out, the conversation drifted back to the subject of the brain and analogies, with John telling us how when he was younger he had become fascinated with chess.

`I was so entranced with it that I was seeing it everywhere. I used to watch soccer matches where the pitch became a chess board with players covering each other and a goal being the equivalent of a pawn making queen.'

I sat there thinking as the talk continued. It was a good analogy and it provoked me to put my oar in, something I hadn't so far dared to do.

`I was just thinking,' I began hesitantly. In the sudden silence all four faces turned towards me in surprise.

`Yes?' said Frank, encouragingly.

`Well, I was just thinking that with us, we often have to er ... contend with the problems of defending a fixed perimeter.'

There was an uncomprehending silence and Frank and John exchanged glances. John cleared his throat.

`Problems? What sort of problems?' he asked.

We were always working out these things at Staff College, and I thought it was quite complicated but I supposed it all seemed trivial to these people.

`Well,' I began diffidently. I couldn't back out now. `You know. You only have limited resources, er .. a limited number of men to defend the line and you have to stand down ... that is, you have to keep most of them in reserve in a central position so they can move quickly to a threatened sector.' The pause lengthened.

`What's all this got to do with the price of fish?' asked Sarah finally. Michael snickered. I looked at her blankly.

`It's a non sequitur,' she snapped. All right, maybe I was a peasant but I knew what that meant.

`I thought we were talking about analogies,' I said coldly. The fact that Michael's specialty was "infection" must have nudged my brain. `Defending a

position against enemy troops must be like defending the body against bacteria.' I gestured towards Michael. Frank burst into laughter.

`Hugh, I'm sure you're right! You must think slower and give us time to catch up. That's called "insight",' he said to John.

John waved his hand dismissively.

`Perhaps, but a better example would be ...'

`Go on Hugh. Give us the military viewpoint,' interrupted Frank. I put my hand up to my breast, but I was not in uniform and had no notepad.

`You want paper and pencil,' said Frank. `Sarah has everything in that bag of hers.' Sarah rummaged in it and pulled out a piece of pink notepaper and a ball-point. She handed them over without comment.

I thanked her and drew a square. A familiar analogy would be easier to explain.

`Here is a castle you are trying to defend.' I drew a smaller square inside it, near the middle. `And this is the Keep, your headquarters and where most of the garrison live.' I drew four small arrows, just inside the bigger square, all pointing outwards - north, south, east and west. `The defenders post four of their garrison on sentry duty. Each sentry has a whistle to blow when the enemy attack.'

`And here, ...' I drew a big thick arrow at the top of the paper, `is the enemy, waiting to attack.'

I had their attention now.

`The tactic of the enemy is to quickly concentrate all their force on to one point, one rampart, to overwhelm the defenders and break-in.'

`"The first blow is half the battle",' quoted John.

`Goldsmith wasn't it?' asked Sarah. `"'She stoops to Conquer"'.' John opened his mouth to answer but I ploughed on.

`Okay. So let's say the enemy attack the north wall.' I drew a thick arrow opposite the single sentry guarding it. `This sentry sees the attackers, sounds his whistle and is probably blown away in the first rush. But the defenders have heard him and now know where the attack is coming from. So the Guard, say ten men who are ready at a moment's notice, run out from the Keep with their swords, pikes and so on, to try to delay the attackers. They're outnumbered and some of them are taken out too, but if things go right they delay the attack until the heavies arrive and someone can warm up the boiling oil. Hopefully the attack is contained.'

`"Blown away", "taken out",' said Sarah.

`They're euphemisms for "killed",' said Michael.

`"Sacrificing themselves" to protect the hundreds of refugees sheltering here under UN protection,' I said tapping the courtyard of the castle with the ball-point and thinking of a recent action in Uganda.

`How's that for an analogy?' said Frank, looking at Michael.

Michael shrugged uninterestedly.

`There are obviously some superficial points of comparison..., ' he began when his pocket phone beeped.

Unable to hide the pleased look on his face, he pulled it out, poked at a button and put it up to his ear.

`Michael Grolier,' he said, rolling up his eyes at Sarah in amused resignation. A instant later he stiffened, his eyes widened and he put a finger in his other ear.

`Yes, I do indeed. September in San Diego wasn't it? I thought it was the best paper at the conference. I ...' He listened. `There was something on the news about it... Of course.... No, naturally we have it under negative pressure.... Well, thank you for the warning. And the infection vector?'

Impassive he listened for a while then thumbed a button on his phone and put it away. With a distracted look he rose from our table and went to the telephone at the bar. We watched him flip open a notebook and reading out of it punch in some numbers. Soon he was talking agitatedly. After a few minutes he put the phone down and returned to the table and looked round for his briefcase.

'The "Mars Bug",' said John. 'I heard a sample had been sent to the Cavendish Labs,' he continued. Michael's face darkened and he turned to him angrily.

'Who told you that?' he snapped. 'It's completely untrue. I must ask you not to spread foolish rumours.' He picked up his briefcase, turned and left the pub without a backward glance.

'The doctor doth protest too much, methinks,' said John

'Jeez, I hope no one has been infected there,' said Frank nervously. 'Our labs are next to the Cavendish.'

It was now 10:30pm and time for me to leave too. Unlike these intellectuals, I had to get up at 6:30 every morning.

I bid them all goodnight and left.

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As I drove back to the barracks, I must admit I felt disappointed and slightly resentful at how my wonderful analogy, my "insight", had been brushed aside. I thought again about all the elements of attack and defense.

Attack - beginning with espionage, probing attacks, stealthy approach, silencing of sentries, quick thrust to overwhelm the defense.

Defense - espionage, detection of enemy troop movements and intentions as soon as possible, defense reaction time, delay of break-in by immediately available troops, committal of reserves when the direction of the main enemy thrust known, containment of attack. Then counter-attack to retrieve lost ground.

I wondered if all these elements didn't have an equivalent when microbes tried to infect the body. I was sure they did. Nature, over millions of years of evolution had surely discovered them before us. I resolved to look up "Infection" in our library.

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The next day I was too busy to think of visiting the library. I had organized an "exercise" for my platoon and a lot of preparation was necessary.

And then in the middle of the exercise I received a phone call from a Roger Russell.

'We've not met,' he began, 'but I got your name from Frank Thompson of IBM. I'm a medical doctor and he said you had some interesting ideas on infection. I'm wondering if we could get together sometime. Sometime soon.'

I was surprised and flattered, but as I was at that moment standing by a tree in middle of a wood, watching squaddies enthusiastically firing off blank ammunition all round me, I was rather distracted. I agreed hastily and he said he would visit the barracks for lunch the next day.

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That evening I had a chance to look up "Infectious Diseases" in our library, and as usual when I open a medical book, I immediately wish I hadn't.

'Since human beings exist in a veritable sea of microbes, defense against microbial attack is important for the survival of the species. The skin, mucous membranes (interior of the nose, mouth, vagina, rectum), and intestines are colonized by large numbers of bacteria. These 'normal flora' are protective and form a barrier against invasion by producing metabolic products harmful to potential

invaders. They also 'starve' pathogenic invaders by utilization of essential metabolites.' A 'buffer zone', we would say.

I read on about antibodies, which have a 'strong chemical affinity for specific types of foreign biologic matter'. I learnt that if the front line was pierced, there were the 'slow moving phagocytic cells which can engulf and destroy pathogens - neutrophils which constitute pus, macrophages which kill organisms by engulfing them in a pouch and bathing them with hydrogen peroxide, superoxides and enzymes'. The 'armour' would arrive with chemical weapons.

There was pages and pages of it and the whole battlefield was very much more complicated than I could ever have imagined. There were microbes that would enter the body hidden inside a 'friendly' organism, using it as a Trojan Horse. There were even viruses that 'have a quiescent or latent period that can be measured in years'. Readers of spy thrillers would call them 'sleepers'.

We were under attack by viruses, bacteria, parasites and fungi and they all had different ingenious methods of attack. I refused to look at the beautiful coloured plates.

It all appeared remarkably similar to what I had been doing that afternoon with my troopers. I made some photocopies to show the hopefully admiring Sarah.

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Next morning there was another news flash on breakfast TV. The "Mars Bug" had claimed more victims in Massachusetts and the National Guard had been called out to seal off a whole section of the city. Jesus!

First thing that morning I was down for giving a talk/discussion to the troops who had been on the exercise yesterday. Helped by the two other umpires, I would discuss and comment on the tactics used by each side.

At 8:30 I was just about to enter the classroom when I received a call from the guard-room that I had two visitors, a Dr Russell and a Dr Goldstein. Damn. They were not supposed to arrive until 12am. I asked the MP sergeant to put them on the line.

'I know our appointment was for midday,' said Russell in a not very apologetic voice, 'but an emergency has come up and we would like to see you as soon as possible.'

'For the next two hours that is quite impossible as I am giving a lecture.'

'May I ask the subject of your lecture, Lieutenant Post? Is it secret?'

'It's a post-mortem on a tactical exercise I did yesterday with my platoon.'

And no, it's not secret.'

There was a pause and I could faintly hear him talking with someone else. His voice returned.

'Could we perhaps sit in on this lecture?' he asked. I told him to wait and called Captain Johnson who was second in command today as the CO had gone to London.

I explained that I had two visitors from the University who I had invited to the Mess for lunch. They had arrived early and had shown interest in sitting in on a chat I was giving to my platoon.

'Doctors, you say?' came his languid voice. 'Are you sure they're not from the Press?' I said I was fairly sure but could get the guardroom to check them out.

'Okay. Do that, old boy. Only if they have ID. We don't want any bloody newspaper types in here again.' I grinned to myself. A month ago a woman reporter had talked her way in and amongst other things had found Johnny off duty in the company of a female auxiliary, also off duty. They were both off duty in Johnny's

bed. Only a phone call from the CO to the editor had prevented publication of that item.

I called the guardroom back and told the MP sergeant that the two visitors could enter if they had ID. And would he personally escort them to Room 3P where I was giving my lecture.

By this time I could hear my audience was becoming restive. I entered the room and Sgt. Broughton called them to attention. I walked to the small podium and after telling them all to sit down pulled out my notes and began the talk.

The exercise had been very simple. My platoon of 30 men had been split up into two groups, Red, under Corporal Ross and Blue, under Corporal Tinker. Blue had had to defend Picker's Wood and Red had had to attack it. The object was to reach "Highwayman's Oak" in the middle of the wood, without being (virtually) shot. Myself, Sgt. Broughton and another sergeant on loan from 3 Platoon were umpires. I had spent most of the time standing by the sinisterly gnarled oak tree.

Red's attack had brilliantly succeeded, ten men rushing in to touch the oak, with hardly any opposition from Blue. Even I didn't know how Corporal Ross had managed it.

I pinned up the map of Picker's Wood and as I turned round the door opened and a red-capped MP sergeant saluted and led in two civilians, one dressed in a dark suit. The MP saluted again and left. Wordlessly the civilians sat down in the back row and everyone turned to look at them curiously.

I irritably called the class to order and the post-mortem began.

Red were sitting smirking on one side of the classroom; Blue were sitting scowling on the other.

I first called out Corporal Tinker of Blue, a large tough-looking North Irishman, and had him show where he had posted his sentries. With suppressed anger he snapped the magnetic markers onto the map. The defenders had been made to look real fools and I noticed Private Higgenbotham, his normally best friend, was sitting at the back of the classroom with a bruise on his cheek.

I looked at Tinker's defense plan. Five sentries carefully spaced out so as to be able to cover all approaches to the wood, except for the dried river-bed that was covered by the section machine gun. HQ with the rest of the defenders was in the clearing around the oak-tree. The sentries would signal the enemy approach by the blowing of whistles, two long, two short. A conventional textbook plan. I looked at it in slight surprise. It's how I would probably have done it myself.

'Right,' I said, refraining from comment. 'So what happened?'

Corporal Tinker looked at the map.

'Well, sir, after ten minutes I heard a whistle from Private Jones in East Sector. "Enemy in sight". I sent off three men to see if he needed any help, but they returned right away, reporting Private Jones had just seen Private Harris and two others show themselves a second and then disappear. Nothing happened for an hour, and I was about to go round to see if any of the dozy buggers had fallen asleep, when there was a whistle from Private Alden here in North Sector followed by a few shots.' He put his finger on the map.

Private Alden stood up.

'That's not true!' he protested and was about to say more, but I waved at him to sit down. Corporal Tinker continued:

'As before I sent out three men, but they had hardly gone when the whistle went again and then again from North Sector, followed by the sound of very heavy firing and grenades. I could hear Red had their MG there too and it sounded like the real thing this time. So I sent a messenger to tell Privates Smith and Leclerc to bring

in our MG and take it to reinforce North Sector. In the meantime I took six men with me and went there too.'

'And how many did you leave by the tree?' I asked.

'I left four men under Private Higginbotham, sir,' he replied. 'The messenger to the MG team was to stay at the gully and cover it.'

I looking at the piece of paper in my hand. The times and numbers were correct.

I had heard the fire-fight too. Red seemed to be trying to fire off all their ammunition at once. I had seen Private Higginbotham look undecided but obviously thinking he was missing all the fun, had taken two of his party and disappeared after Corporal Tinker. At that point almost the whole of Red under Corporal Ross had silently dashed into the clearing and after sitting on Private Harley, had symbolically captured the position by touching the tree and shouting out triumphantly when they saw me.

'It'd never have happened if the stupid HQ guard hadn't lost their heads,' said Corporal Tinker resentfully, looking across at Private Higginbotham.

Red were jeering now.

'Silence!' I roared. I looked across at Sgt. Broughton who had been umpire on North Sector.

He confirmed that Private Alden had not blown his whistle; it had sounded from behind the haystack on his right front. And no, he had not seen any Reds approaching it. He was obviously baffled as to how they had got there.

'Now you come out here, Corporal Ross and tell us your story.'

Corporal Ross was a small man with dark hair. I remembered once telling him to get it cut. He was not a very soldierly-looking individual, but there was no doubt about his popularity.

'You tell 'em, Rossy!' shouted someone.

'Well, sir,' he began with a strong Scots accent. 'I decided the best way to get in would be by the gully, but I knew they'd have the MG there. So I sent Privates Harris, Peters and York around to the right flank to show themselves, as though by accident, like, and retire as soon as the sentry had blown his whistle. They then came back to our HQ here where they took the MG and the rest of us gave them all our grenades and most of our ammo.'

'And then?'

'And then I sent them to double back to Mawbry and take the bus to Southern Coldfield. They were to approach North Sector keeping this haystack between them and the wood. As soon as they were in position they should blow a whistle two long, two short ...,'

'Like they'd heard Blue use on East Sector?' I asked.

'That's it, sir,' he said. He paused, giving me the impression he was waiting for me to catch up.

'Go on,' I snapped.

'And then they would fire all the ammo and let off all the grenades.'

'You mean not shooting at anyone?'

'That's right, sir. They were to stay hidden behind the haystack.'

'And I suppose the rest of you rushed up the gully when you heard the firing?'

'Almost, sir. I just gave them five minutes to get the MG out.'

Corporal's Tinker's force had been completely outgenerated.

`Just one thing, Corporal. The bus your men took,' (I wasn't sure if that was a legal move), `it only runs twice a week. How did you know it went by just at that time?'

`I looked it up, sir, when I knew where we were going to do the exercise.'

`And if we'd done the exercise somewhere else?' A stupid question I realised as soon as I'd asked it.

`I'd have had to think of something else, sir,' he replied with a faint smile. And looking at him I knew he would. Like Napoleon, I felt Corporal Ross would not stay a corporal for long.

The class was getting rowdy and so I called over Sgt. Broughton and told him to take them out for half an hour of football.

As they noisily filed out, they uncovered the two civilians I had forgotten. Heads down they were scribbling on a piece of paper. I walked over.

`Hugh Post,' I said, extending my hand.

`Roger Russell,' said the younger in a voice I recognized from his phone call, `and this is Dr Rupert Goldstein.'

Dr Russell was a short man about my age, in jeans and a sweater. He looked very much the sort of person I met at "The Queen".

`Thank you, young man,' said Dr Goldstein shaking my hand. He was about 60, his snowy white hair giving him a distinguished appearance. `A most convincing demonstration. I think you may well have helped us.' I looked at him in surprise, but before I could say anything he turned to his younger companion. `But now we must get back.' Dr Russell hesitated.

`Don't we owe Lt. Post an explanation?' Dr Goldstein looked uncertain.

`Ultimately, of course. But because of the secrecy, the risk of civil disorder ...?'

`As a member of the Armed Forces I am automatically subject to the Official Secrets Act,' I said.

`Yes, of course,' said Goldstein. `Very well. You can tell him the essentials. But I must call Grolier immediately.' He moved to a far corner of the room and pulled out his phone.

I looked interrogatively at Dr Russell. He glanced around, almost comically miming a person who had a complex tale to unfold and didn't know where to start. He twined his long fingers and took a deep breath.

`Dr Goldstein and I are members of a team studying extra-terrestrial biology and are in close contact with the group in America who have synthesized the DNA from that fossil,' he began. `You will have heard that it has escaped into the general population. It is not responding to standard anti-biotics.'

`Yes,' he continued, seeing the expression on my face, `it is very serious, not least because it is using a completely novel infection method.'

Infection! I began to have a very faint idea of what he was getting at.

`I have no time to tell you of all the ways in which the human body can be infected. The analogy to a military attack is exact. The microbes use many cunning methods to enter the defended territory. They then try to overwhelm the defenders and establish a beach-head which grows quicker than the reserves can arrive. There seems no end to nature's ingenuity. But one way of infection we have not found yet.' He pointed at the blackboard where the map of Picker's Wood was still pinned up. `We think that's how it's being done.' Something clicked.

`A diversionary attack!'

`Precisely. Somehow the microbe is making a feint attack, we think on the liver. When all the body's defenses have moved to stem the break-in, the real attack develops in the medulla oblongata, that is the bone marrow.'

Dr Goldstein had finished telephoning and stood in the doorway of the hut, waiting for Roger to join him. But Roger had one more thing to say.

`I wonder if you could come along and give a chalk talk to our group,' he said diffidently. `It would give them a new perspective.' I agreed of course and he handed me a visiting card with `Dr. Rupert Goldstein FRS' engraved on it. They thanked me again and left. I held the card, wondering if Michael Grolier would be at my talk.

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Football had finished and the platoon clumped back into Classroom 3P and slumped down into their seats. The timetable said I now had to give a talk on map reading and route planning. It involved calculations of how marching speed varied with load carried, types of terrain and weather conditions. It was not a popular subject.

I sighed and started in.

I had just finished explaining to the somnolent troopers for the third time how to find their position by taking bearings on conspicuous landmarks as satellite navigation was not always possible, when Private King said:

`Gosh, sir, I bet it was much worse when you were with Uniforce in Rwanda. That must have been really tough.'

I looked at his eager admiring face. He was a good lad; they were all good lads. Although I was only a few years older I supposed they looked up to me rather as a father figure, as a, what was the modern word? ... a "role model".

`Indeed it was,' I said, smiling reminiscently. The classroom faded as I gazed into the blue hazy distance of Burundi, the smell of woodsmoke from the village fires in my nostrils, and heard the crack of the AK47 rounds snapping overhead. The Tutsi tribesmen were preventing our advance.

`We would have had to ford the river Akanyaru under fire so the CO told me to take a party upstream with the mortar section. "See if you can locate those chaps," he said...`

`... and so Major Card, he's now with 2 Battalion, took command of ...'

`...and the next thing I knew was that ...'

In the far distance a bell was ringing. I abruptly returned to the present and looked at the wall clock in surprise. End of the lesson period.

Sergeant Broughton stood up, saluted and asked permission to dismiss the class. I nodded and grimly watched as the class filed out, grinning at each other.

Military technology and infection are not the only fields where diversionary tactics are to be found.

The End

Author's note. I'm just guessing that this sort of infection exists. Two microbes in unholy symbiosis.

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