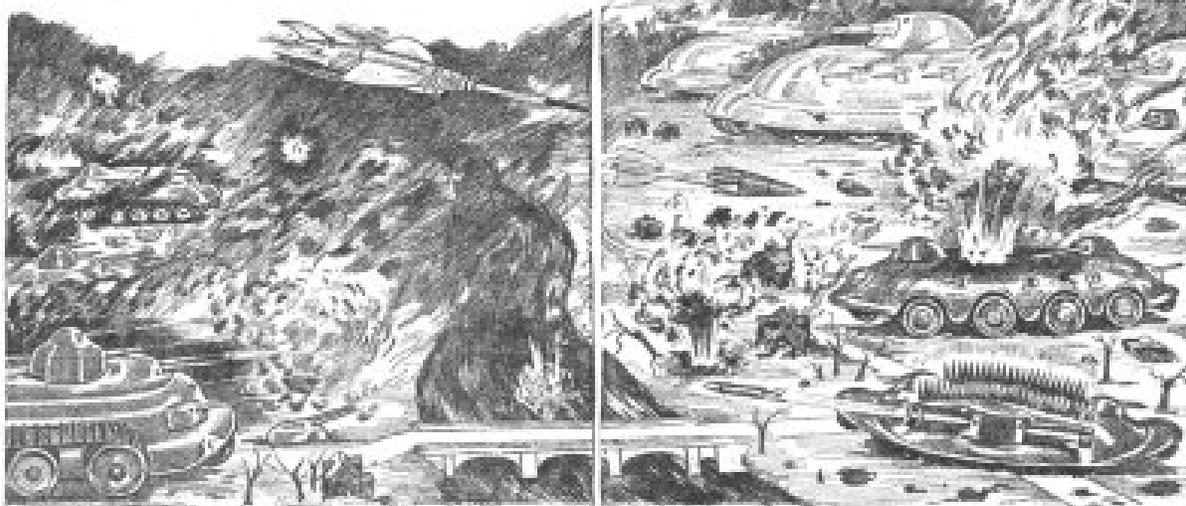


# The War of the Giants

By Fletcher Pratt



(Illustration by Woodbury)

Smoke, dirt, flame—the sound of a million anvils as the fleets swept about each other in a great circle.



FLETCHER PRATT

rolling up a map. “It’s dangerous, of course, but as Napoleon said, ‘You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs’.”

“To be sure, to be sure,” said the fussy little man in a uniform covered with gold braid and strips of ribbon, who had just advanced the plan. “We must expect losses. We must expect quite severe losses, in fact It would not surprise me if the first division of battleship tanks were wiped out. But we will certainly succeed in eliminating the robot guns on the reverse slope of the heights and perhaps some of the railroad artillery also. I think it is worth it, rightly worth it. If we succeed any number of plans will suggest themselves, and with our present superiority in battleships we can well afford the loss.”

“The first division, eh?” said the brown-faced general, fluttering over some papers. “Let’s see, that includes *Vengeance*, *Glory*, *Thunderbolt* and *Caesar*, with cruiser and whippet tanks attached. The old

“W  
ELL, all right,” said the brown-faced general,

*Thunderbolt.* Why I commanded her once!”

“Yes, yes,” said the fussy little man. “Will you be good enough to give the orders, sir? Operation CZ-4 is the index number.”

The other rang a bell.

“It isn’t the heat that gets you, or the noise,” said the man with the scarred chin, licking the end of a cigarette reflectively before applying it to his lips. “It’s the rotten smell. Petrol, hot oil and sweat—yes, and leather.... And that isn’t all. You have to keep your mask on when they start, and those new makes smell like rubber and medicine.”

He lit the cigarette and blew a snort of smoke through his nostrils. “Last time I was that sick when I got out I couldn’t even take a nip of whiskey.”

“Mmmm,” murmured the short man with the bald forehead. “And I get seasick every time I go rowing on the lake.”

The man with the scarred chin looked at him sharply, “You better not be seasick. The old man’s nuts on you late draft men that lay down. What were you in before?”

“Aviation. I was on motor repair. I got a wife and three kids, so they gave me selected duty. I’m a motor man.”

“Well, I’m married too....” the man with the scarred chin thought for a moment. “You must be on the right forward motor. Last man on that job was killed quick as a wink. Shell from one of those robot guns came through the casemate and burst right under the motor. Drove one of those levers clean through him. There’s the place.”

He half-turned and waved in the general direction of the tank that stood like some questing monster in metal, snout lifted to sniff the air, a few yards away. Half way down the hundred-foot flank of the beast workmen were busy painting a new and shining steel plate that had been welded in just below a projecting broadside gun.

Above their heads two more guns projected from shielded casemates, while

higher still a big gun in a turret atop threw a long shadow across their work. But if the man with the scarred chin expected his companion to exhibit any sigh of nervousness at the remarks of his predecessor’s passing, he was disappointed. The small man merely gazed with a languid lack of curiosity.

“You selected duty men!” said the man with the scarred chin in a tone of contempt. “Why, that don’t mean a thing any more, with all the women. What’s your woman in?”

“Artillery,” replied the short man. “At least, she was the last I heard. They don’t pass artillery letters till they’re three months old. Gives away positions. Two of the kids are in the factories—one’s thirteen and the other fifteen. The other one, that’s my little girl, she’s in the National Schools. They put her there when my wife was drafted.”

“Mine’s an officer,” said the other with a touch of pride, “Captain, Don’t know where she is, though. Last I heard she way in charge of a company in one of those black battalions in the south. I should worry. I got a girl in the repair here, and I’m going to apply for a divorce and marry her.”

The short man grunted. After a moment he spoke again. “Me. I don’t want no divorce. The old lady and me, we get along. I had a nice home though. Lucky we were all away with the wife’s folks when the war came. That airplane gas attack killed everyone in our section and when we got back to the house everything was corroded to pieces by that damn gas. Curtains fell apart when—”

THEY were interrupted by the ringing of a bell like that of a glorified alarm clock from a structure that might have been a pigpen in bad repair. The man with the scarred chin tossed away the end of his cigarette.

“Come on,” he said, “that’s for dinner.” Within the disreputable building a flight of stone steps led down to an astonishing concrete-lined catacomb, dimly

fit, and showing long irregular marks of damp, like the outlines of old maps, along the wall. A hundred or more men were in the main room, talking in a repressed manner and clattering tin plates as they filed past a wicket where an orderly was distributing portions of stew, bread and coffee. Once served, they filed to tables made of boards placed across trestles and ate silently and with speed.

A whistle interrupted them before the meal was finished, striking the sound of dishes to a momentary silence. An under-officer stood at the head of the room with a list of names from which he read. The short man heard his called.

“You’re the new motor man from the aviation?” the officer inquired when he had joined the group that gathered outside. “I have your papers. Why weren’t you in the combat sections before? Defective eyesight-.... Oh, children. They all say that. Ever run a tank engine?”

“No sir,” admitted the short man.

“Well, here, I’ll show you.” He led the way to the metal monster, unlocked a door at the stern and pointed the small man down a narrow, machine-lined passage. “Mind your head.”

“Here’s your post,” he added a moment later, pointing to a steel chair, slightly above and behind a big motor from which a wilderness of levers projected. “Throttle here. Brake here, Signals on this board. Red is full speed and black is reverse. The names are on them, but they use flashes when anything goes wrong. This lever is to throw your engines in for the ammunition hoist of the turret. This type of tank has the eight-inch gun in the turret on top instead of in the center below. The ammunition hoist is electric, but it’s apt to go out if we get hard hit. Then they have to use a mechanical hoist connected with your engine. Watch your signal for that and never mind what the boys in the casemates are doing or the man at the other engine. That’s all.

Look it over. Duty in fifteen minutes. We’re joining up with the main fleet then.”

The small man bent to examine the motor, fingering its parts with practised hands, and occasionally wagging one of the levers in a speculative manner to test its action; then looked about him. His motor lay in a kind of narrow shell well cut off on the right by a steel wall. At the left was the cat-walk down which he had come, leading forward to another steel wall with a door in it—the control station of the tank. Astride the catwalk and between him and the control station the supports of the big turret came down, like the stout metallic legs of a titanic spider. Across the catwalk to the left was another motor, its seat unoccupied.

A prolonged series of hoots announced that the rest of the crew were being called to their quarters, and a moment later the surface of the catwalk rang with the impact of feet. A door beyond his seat was opened and four men crawled through it, one after another. Through the orifice he caught a glimpse of the gray mounting and paralleled recoil mechanism of a gun with a row of shells in racks around the casemate behind it. The last of the four gunners turned to face him as he passed through the hole and he saw it was the man with the scarred chin. “Here we go,” he called in encouragement. “This old tank, she’s a lucky ship. I been in her ever since the general used to command here.” The casemate door banged. An officer came down the catwalk, dived into the control station and emerged with an armful of packages which he dealt out to the crew. The little man unfolded his to discover a complicated vestment—helmet, gas-mask and bullet-proof shirt, all in one, made of cross-braced strip steel. Each bore the red hand shaking a thunderbolt that was the emblem of the ship.

He struggled into the thing as a small bell rang sharply in his ear and the indicator before him jerked to “Slow”. He threw in the throttle, cocked his head to catch the sound of

the motor, and felt the big landship bump across the uneven ground as they gathered way. Feet tramped on a floor above his head.

### Into Battle

THE whole structure shifted and heaved with a motion not unlike that of a ship in a steady swell. He felt a curious qualm. Wonder if I'm going to be seasick? He asked himself and banished the idea as the bell rang again and the indicator turned red before him...

They halted in what, when they got out of the tank, proved to be a high, narrow valley, shut in by open pine forest. There was a cloistered air about the place that made the ribbon of camouflage above them seem grossly inappropriate. The little man pulled off his metal shirt, and observing that the others had merely snapped open the face part that held the gas mask put it on again in confusion.

All around them were gathered the ungainly rhomboids of more tanks; three other battleships, each with its heavy turret gun atop and its row of three to five broadside guns. A few whippets scurried about like insects and up ahead, where the valley split in two to round a projecting shoulder of mountain, some cruiser tanks could be seen—long and narrow with two of three guns apiece.

The man with the scarred chin gave a glance around and a low whistle. "Must be going to be a battle," he said, "Well, I'm glad we're in a lucky ship."

His companion looked around. "Where's the infantry?" he asked innocently.

"Infantry? Ha, ha. They haven't had infantry for the last two years. You wait; you'll see why. Too much gas and things. Look."

He pointed up the valley where three more tanks of battleship size were coming to join the group. One of them looked not unlike a metal porcupine with spikes of wire jutting in every direction; the others unarmed save for

a couple of machine guns had conical openings that seemed to run far back into their interiors.

"What are they?" asked the little man.

"The fuzzy one is a radio machine. Sends sound waves to jam up the enemy's robot guns and radio waves to jam their torpedoes. The others are gas—shoot big gas rockets; corrosive mostly, to kill off artillery and tanks."

"Hey, Jake!" called a gunner from one of the whippets with a blue hammer on his armor, "been up to the city?"

"Naw. No leave no more. The city's all done for anyhow. They keep throwing gas in."

"But I get letters from my girl in the National Schools," objected the little man.

"All right, all right," said the other. "But do you know where the National Schools are now? They're out in the country, along with everything else. You ain't seen any newspapers but army newspapers lately have you? Because there ain't any." The conversation was interrupted by another series of hoots and the irregular eddies of men in the valley separated into orderly streams which delivered themselves into the tanks again. An officer came down the catwalk of the *Thunderbolt* distributing the composition gloves which were the protection against corrosive gases likely to seep even into the air-tight interior of the tank. A fan somewhere began a screeching buzz—the air purifier that insured a gas-free supply of air for the motors of the tank. A moment or two more and the indicators moved to "Slow" again.

It was dark when they halted under the shadows of another forest. The gauges showed no gas in the atmosphere; the crews stretched themselves luxuriously, with open masks, drifting off to sleep without a word, and being awakened an hour or two later when a convoy of provision machines brought them fresh rations instead of the pocket tabloid food they had expected to use. The small man ate his

with heavy-lidded eyes, went to sleep immediately and did not wake again until he felt himself shaken and woke to see a non-commissioned officer pointing him toward the tank.

It was in the false dawn; Lights and luminous panels in the machine showed most of the crew busy about some small concern, resolutely occupying themselves to relieve the tension of the moment before a battle. The wood was filled with subdued whisperings, and rocked gently to the sound of distant, oft-repeated thunder—far-away artillery, the small man guessed, though he had not heard it before.

There was a momentary pause, the bell rang and the signal moved. Going into action, he thought, and breathed a silent prayer that this tank was indeed the “lucky ship” his acquaintance had proclaimed it.

FAR above them, out of sight in the purple-black of the dawn sky, an airplane circled, and its radio sprang into lively clicking as the row of dots emerged from the wood and started like slugs across the low slope that led down to a river....

The tanks were lumbering in orderly ranks across the rolling slope that had once been a grain field of some kind, for a few ears of feral corn could be seen among the weeds that encumbered the irregular edges of old shell pits.

The day grew paler; the river swung silvery across the landscape. There was not a gun, not a man, not a trench in sight—only the iron monsters moving slowly along with the whippets nosing here and there among them and the cruisers along the flanks. Within his ship, the small man could hear nothing but the smooth sound of his motor.

Suddenly there was a startling high scream followed by a quick, virile crash, and a fountain of earth and vegetation rose smokily into the air two hundred yards behind the

tanks, at the edge of the wood they were leaving. As if released by that signal, clouds of intense black smoke poured from them and from the whippets, settling along the ground in tattered ribbons in the still air. There was another crash of sound and a tree tottered majestically downward at the edge of the wood. The smoke cloud hid everything but the whippets at its edges; the *Thunderbolt* rocked with sound as the turret gun on her roof went off suddenly, aimed at a target eight miles away.

A cloud of airplanes soared like wintering geese across the sky, and from away beyond the river, another cloud rose to meet them. The smoke surrounding the tanks was shot with vivid flame as a shell burst right among them, the fragments of its casing ringing against their walls. Then more and more shells, many of them adding a curious white smoke to mingle with the black effluvium of the land-ships.

The whippets clustered and then spread at the edge of the water, waiting for the larger ships to force a passage. Shells were falling more thickly now, occasionally hitting. The small man felt a great heave as his ship passed over the remains of a whippet, blown to disordered fragments by a direct bit; and still there was no sign of an enemy save where the airplanes were locked in their battle far above.

There was a sudden grinding crash in one of the casemates of the *Thunderbolt* behind where the small man sat above his motor. He jerked his head round to see the door bulged sharply inward, with wisps of smoke eddying through the cracks. When he looked again there was a red stain on the steel. He felt sick. An officer came down the catwalk, clinging to projections as the craft relined, looking like a deep-sea diver in his helmet. He did not even glance at the bulged-out door and its bloody stain. A curious pale mist—the noxious mist of mingled poisonous

gases, filled the interior of the ship.

The water churned to foam as the battleship and cruiser tanks began to cross the river, wallowing clumsily, and attended by whippets that dashed through the shallows like terriers. Behind the crest of hills that lay two miles back from the opposite bank the robot batteries of the enemy were working feverishly, served from underground by sweating gunners, men and women, who piled shells on the elevators which carried them to the guns. From them, mechanical arms reached out to stuff the ammunition into their maws; the breech blocks snapped shut, animated by a spirit of their own; and the big guns, making automatic corrections for range and deflection by means of disc-shaped mechanical ears, concealed in rubbish heaps, under trees, everywhere—some of them even in the very ground the tanks were crossing—fired themselves at the moment when the range was correct. Further back, heavier guns on railroad trucks had begun to fire slowly under airplane observation.

Nor did all the shells fall among the tanks. For the porcupine-like machine the small man had seen the night before had improved the dark hours by digging itself well underground and now from a dozen or more sources was releasing waves of sound that brought a good half of the shells from the robot batteries crashing uselessly down in the woods.

But now a new element entered the battle as some few airplanes broke free from the combat above the clouds and swooped like swallows on the mass of black smoke that hid the attacking tanks. Down after them swung pursuit planes; up from the round rose slender, interweaving bands of smoke as the anti-aircraft guns of the whippets went into a frenzy of action against them. Here and there one burst into flame or fell with the peculiar dizzy motion of a machine out of control, but the rest held on, releasing their missiles at the

bottom of the long parabola, then swung up and away.

### The War of the Giants

AS they made the turn, their missiles sought the tanks through the murk—fish-shaped torpedoes with long wings at their heads, carrying sound devices like those controlling the robot guns, and trailing behind them the pennons of smoke that indicated rocket propulsion. Nearly all fell fallow, blowing great pits in the ground, their sound control failing in the multiple uproar of the battle. But one struck a whippet and disorganized it into tattered ribbons of metal and another, its mechanical ears caught by the sound of a badly working motor on a cruiser tank, struck the landship squarely at the base of the turret. In a burst of intense flame the moving fort of steel folded together as though it had been cardboard, the turret pitching in on the ruins of the rest. When the fleet had passed only the forefront of the lank remained, leaning at an odd angle above the shattered remains from which bright flames still burned.

Right on the heels of the aerial attack a pillar of smoke between two hills announced the approach of an enemy tank fleet, rushing up to support the now close-pressed robot guns, and at almost the same time, a titanic discordant buzzing beat down all the other sounds of battle. Another, or perhaps two more, of the queer porcupine-tanks had followed the attackers in the rear and were adding their sound camouflage to the din. The robot guns swung to and fro, helpless in this torrent of sound, till the operators were fain to come out of their pits, cut loose the automatic controls and fire them by the old hand method.

Of all this the small man above his motor knew nothing. Locked in his gas helmet he heard only the irregular shock of bursting missiles around the tank, saw only the jerking indicator before him as more or less speed was

demanded. To the gunner with the scarred chin the battle was hardly more intelligible. The only thing his eyes could catch through the malleable glass that formed his window was the billowy smoke, shot with color here and there as a shell exploded. The odor of the helmet was fetid, the strain of merely waiting intense; again and again the turret gun above went off, firing at its far-away targets, but there came no call for the broadside artillery.

Then without warning, the smoke thinned and altogether ceased. He perceived they were just mounting a ridge; two or three whippets dashed past for the head of the line, and he noted that one of them had her wide torpedo-port open and that an aerial torpedo was pointing outward, ready for release. The bell for loading rang sharply, the *Thunderbolt* pivoted round like a ballet dancer, and through his peep-hole the gunner caught a glimpse of dim figures emerging from a low-hung cloud of smoke that moved toward them down a gentle slope a mile and a half away. The turret gun fired again, with a violence audible even in that torrent of sound, and the gunner just caught a glimpse of the trail of smoke that marked the passage of an aerial torpedo bound toward the enemy fleet. The *Thunderbolt* changed direction again. A shell pitched a column of dirt across his vision and a small voice cried—“Fire at will, concentrate on third tank,” and to his astonishment he was looking down the sights at a line of enemy cruisers. He went into a fury of action.

Smoke, dirt, flame—the sound of a million anvils as the fleets, firing together, swept round each other in a great circle. Perhaps five minutes that were an eternity; then from the opposing fleet billowed clouds of smoke as, too late, they made the fatal discovery that they were opposing a battleship attack with mere cruisers. Too late—a mushroom growth of smoke and flame marked where one had been blown up; another was stopped where her fleet left her, with

flames of a peculiar orange hue pouring out of her turret. A third staggered out of line like an injured animal and moved oddly across the space between the two fleets, still firing steadily, but losing motion and life as it became the target of the concentrated fires.

But at that moment there came a huge uprush of dirt right ahead, of the *Thunderbolt*. Hammers pounded on her carapace; she lurched violently through a snowstorm of dirt and rocks, across the crater the shell had made. The gunner caught a glimpse of whippets emitting smoke again; of the enemy fleet, which should have been retreating, closing in instead. The robot guns, hand-trained now, were in action again, and at point-blank range.

NOTHING visible but smoke; a loud-speaker voice began suddenly to call off range and deflections, and the gunner with the scarred chin worked like a fiend, perspiring violently inside his coat of mail, setting his sights on the indicator that ran round the gun mouth according to the data shouted through the loud-speaker. A thinner streak of smoke; through it a cruiser visible, canted over on her side and burning vigorously. “230, deflection fifteen right—fire!” They bumped violently over something, whether tree, house, ruins of a tank or merely a lump in the ground the gunner could not tell. Then a stunning explosion which drowned the insistent voice for a moment; the *Thunderbolt* changed direction with such speed as to almost throw him from his seat, and through his window he saw the torn remains of a big tank, her forepart shot with flames, one of her side guns drooping like a melted candle, while two or three of her crew ran a step or two from the wreck and fell writhing to the ground. On a still-intact stern-plate a painted halo still showed.

“My God,” thought the gunner. “The *Glory’s* gone.” What did it mean? Defeat? and

he wondered would it would be like to be a prisoner, carried off to work their mines. Not so very different from—

The smoke rolled clear again, and he looked out on a different section of landscape. Right against them stood the slope of a hill: out of the tail of his eye he could see the wreckage of a big robot gun, and as the tank swung along, caught sight of another, pointed right at them, but riven by a direct hit in the fraction of a second before it could fire. The enemy's fleet must be done for! They were cleaning out the guns. A jet of steam ran round the inside of the casemate, clearing the gas. All over? Not quite, for the frightful uproar without did not seem to have decreased in the least, though there appeared to be no shells falling near the *Thunderbolt*. The gunner swung his window in its pivots, noted that the *Thunderbolt* was leading the line of tanks along the reverse slope of a hill, with the turret gun firing occasionally as the observers reported some new gun position visible. The battle was over for him, however. The turret gun would take care of the rest of that robot artillery before his gun ever got within range.

See there was one, now, tipped over on its side, the delicate mechanism smashed by a direct hit, the corpses of two or three gunners lying about. He could have laughed— And then, out of the shadow of the ruined gun, came one little whippet tank, with its torpedo

port wide open. The gunner with the scarred chin saw with perfect clarity that the torpedo was about to be launched directly at him, from a distance of not over three hundred yards— realized in a flash that it would blow the *Thunderbolt* into a thousand fragments, and ducked. He heard no more....

...In the rear, the track-laying machines were already preceding the railroad artillery-to positions along the river, now cleared by the victory.

\* \* \*

"I congratulate you," said the brown-faced general. "It was a much better result than I had hoped for. Of course, they were foolish in trying to stand off the attack with their position artillery and in supporting with nothing but a squadron of cruisers; but I think you were lucky, all the same."

The fussy little man could not forebear a smile of triumph. "Yes," he said, "on the whole I am satisfied with the result. The positions along the river will certainly force these people to try an attack sooner or later, and then we know what we can do.... And our losses were not so extraordinary, either. Two battleships and three cruisers."

"Yes, yes," said the brown-faced general. "I'm a little sorry about the old *Thunderbolt* though. Knew some of the men in her. Did I ever tell you I commanded her once?"