

Green Troops

by William King, 1959–

Published: 1988
in »Dream Science Fiction«

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Chapter 1

The Drop.

Travis shivered as he watched the helicopter take off. The Black Hawk hovered low over the jungle canopy. The downwash from its rotors caused branches to sway. He upped the magnification of his eye and saw Kyle, the mercenary gunner, wave from the open door. He did not wave back.

It was early evening. The temperature was bearable. He clicked down the magnification and scanned the clearing wearily. The four Greens were picking up their equipment packs and checking their weapons. They all looked alike in their fatigues and kevlar body armour.

Bill-boy started at the sound of a screeching bird and wheeled, bringing up his captured AK-47. Travis caught the glitter of sunlight on his necklace of human teeth.

„Careful, boy, it’s only a parakeet,“ he shouted. Bill-boy grinned back at him. It was a nasty grin, white teeth against green skin.

„Sure thing, sarge. it’s good to be back.“

Bill-boy was one of the bad ones. All the Greens were programmed to kill but Bill-boy loved it. He took a feral joy in slaughter. Travis had seen him take a flamethrower into a peasant village. It had not been pretty.

„Bill-boy getting easy to spook, sarge. Been here too long. Too many tours.“ This came from Carlo, who smiled easily as he said it. Carlo was good-humoured. Travis had done three tours with him. The scientists could say that all the Greens were alike but he knew better. Carlo and Bill-boy were as different as night and day. They all developed a personality after a few tours even if they all looked alike. At least, the ones who lived did.

Chad had finished loading his gear, hefting a rocket launcher as if it were made of cardboard. He stood playing with a long knife. He was quiet and reliable. Travis wasn’t so sure about Stef, the new boy, straight from the vats. His face held no lines. Whose bright idea was it to send a new boy along on a deep penetration mission? Sometimes the stupidity of the higher command was breath taking.

„Everybody got everything?“ Travis asked. The Greens nodded. „Good. Let’s hit the trail. Bill-boy, take point.“

As his team left the clearing by the southward path Travis paused to take one last look around. The chopper was gone, back to the Contras’ hidden camp in what had been Honduras when national boundaries had meant something in Central America. It had taken with it any promise of safety.

Travis shivered again. He had a bad feeling about this one.

Chapter 2

Sniper.

The darkness was an ally not an obstacle. The team moved through it like ghosts. The Greens could see in the dark like cats. Their senses were razor keen. Travis had to rely on the infra-red sighting capability of his eyes.

Once Travis heard the scream of a large cat, a jaguar. For a second the whole patrol froze. He looked at Carlo, whose face was a mask of tension.

He smiled, Carlo smiled back. He waved Carlo on past, went back to talk to Stef who was standing frozen. Travis couldn't decide whether it was fear or anger. Some new Greens went berserk, a flaw that the bio-tech contractors hadn't yet identified the cause of.

For a brief moment it was unnaturally silent. Travis felt a crawling between his shoulder blades. He scanned the jungle, caught a faint hint of movement in a nearby tree. Reacting on instinct he shouted „get down” and flew himself flat.

Too late. The night was lit by the brief intense flash of automatic fire.

The muted staccato belching of an autosniper filled his ears. He cursed his luck. The humidity usually caused malfunctions in their sensitive robotics; the shadowy jungle usually interfered with the pattern recognition of their sighting programs. It was unfortunate that they had encountered a working one.

„Take it out,” he ordered the Greens. He levelled his M-16 and sent a burst of fire to where he could perceive the heat signature of the killer robot. He missed it as it scuttled along the branches. A blaze of explosive bullets came flying back at him. One burst against the kevlar skin of his arm and sent his rifle flying. His arm shorted out, bionics malfunctioning temporarily.

Travis kept himself absolutely still. Most autosnipers tracked movement easily. If he didn't move it might not spot him. There was a brief lull.

He could feel sweat running down his back. He could feel a sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach. He could see the robot's turret head, swivelling towards him. He tensed himself to reach for his gun. The Greens opened fire.

The tree limb on which the sniper perched could not take the hail of rifle fire directed at it and collapsed under the robot's weight. Briefly Travis felt power come back into his damaged arm and he rolled over to where his rifle lay. There was an intense flash of light and the sound of an explosion. He bit back a scream.

Travis looked over at the smouldering remains of the robot. From the bushes Chad gave him a thumbs up sign. Travis could perceive the cherry glow of the micro-rocket launcher on his shoulder with his IR vision.

„Everybody OK?” he asked. Nodded affirmatives from the vets, a shaky smile from Stef. „Good.”

He moved to inspect the remains of the robot. It carried the logo of a Brazilian armaments corporation. Probably black market. Suddenly he heard the sound of running feet. Bill-boy burst from the undergrowth.

„Enemy patrol, sarge. Think they're annoyed you woke them up. Were camped up ahead.” He looked at the auto-sniper. Travis knew they were thinking the same thing.

„Perimeter guard,” he said. „Come on, we'd better get out of here.”

Snatching up their gear they loped off into the night. Travis could almost feel the Sandinista platoon bearing down on them.

Chapter 3

Camping out.

Probing fingers of light, flecked with dust, touched the undergrowth where the sun broke through the green canopy overhead. Something small scuttled over his face and he brushed it away. It was too small to register on the pressure pads of his artificial fingers.

He sat up. Half of the Greens lay sprawled where they had thrown themselves. They were all tired from eluding the patrol the previous evening.

Travis checked his arm. From his belt he took out a set of tools. He made some field repairs. The arm wasn't badly damaged. He soon had it working.

Bill-boy, who was sentry, looked at him and winked. Travis got up and rummaged in his pack. Time for his pills.

First he took Bio-lok(TM) for his arm, a drug to suppress his immune system's natural urge to reject the complex neural linkages that enabled him to control an arm of teflon, kevlar and fibre-optic nerves. Next a neurotransmitter enhancer which enabled the protein based computer at the top of his spine to take orders from his brain and transmit them to his limbs. Finally some vitamin tablets. Just to keep him fit and healthy. The first two were the chains the CIA used to bind him, keep him coming back.

Without the drugs he would be a cripple.

His preparations had disturbed the Greens who came awake instantly and quietly around him. It astonished him that they could do that. Go from being completely at rest to combat readiness in a moment. Still it was only part of the design that made them into what the Pentagon believed was the soldier of the future.

He reviewed the facts; grown by accelerated cell division in culture vats, educated by neural induction helmet. They had stomach bacteria modified to enable them to digest cellulose, live off the land. They could eat wood if necessary. They had sub-dermal pigmentation sacs which gave them natural camouflage.

They were stronger, faster and cheaper to mass produce than comparable human soldiers. At least such was the hope. These were the field trials, he was the observer.

The Greens had clustered around something, watching with alert fascination. He strolled over to look. On the ground a raiding party of ants were locked in combat with a large beetle several times their size.

The beetle was massively armoured with huge jaws but it was doomed; the ants swarmed over it spraying formic acid.

Travis watched the reactions of the Greens closely. Bill-boy smiled and nodded happily, Carlo shook his head and walked away. Chad's face might have been carved from stone for all the expression it carried. Stef looked puzzled.

„Watch them,” Saunders, the CIA man, had said back in the Camp. „Anything unusual, no matter how trivial, report it.“

The ants had finished the beetle. Bill-boy stood up and looked around pleased. Then he brought his foot down and ground the ants under his heel.

He smiled.

„Let’s eat,“ he said. Travis stared at him. A prototype, he reminded himself. He’s just a prototype. A small, mocking voice inside his own head said just like you were. His feelings of unease increased.

Chapter 4

Ambush.

The Sandinista never knew what hit them. They had been following the trail, straggling along in a line, three men on point. Travis had let them go ahead until the main body of troops were over the anti-personnel mines which he had seeded the trail with.

Travis detonated the mines himself because they were a weapon he hated, had done ever since Beirut.

Men were torn apart by the small explosives. The rest were shocked and disorganised. They fell to a hail of fire from the American assault rifles.

Some of those at the back escaped the mines and dived for cover, firing a fusillade of shots into where they thought the enemy were. They hit their own men for the most part. Travis and the Greens quickly flanked them and chopped them down.

In the confusion a young boy armed with a bayonet leapt on Travis from the undergrowth. Travis desperately deflected the blade with a sweep of his arm. He saw the look of horror on the boy’s face when his knife bounced drawing no blood. Travis stood there looking at him, trying in that moment to forget the brief flash of human contact as their eyes met and bring his gun round. The boy drew his rifle back for a second swing.

The boy went down. Chad’s long knife protruded between his shoulder blades. Chad showed him a wolf grin then turned to pursue the fleeing humans. Travis felt himself suddenly overcome with a berserk fury part guilt, part tear, part joy, charged into the jungle searching for prey.

Afterwards they surveyed the scene of the carnage. Twelve dead, many injured. The Greens took no prisoners. Travis and his men had an assortment of cuts and bruises. Only Carlo had taken a wound, a glancing shot along his temple. His head was swathed in a turban of bandages under his helmet.

Flies hovered over the bodies. A terrible stench filled the air. Travis and the four Greens stood in silence contemplating their handiwork. Travis was part appalled and part elated, his usual reaction to surviving a combat.

He could not tell what the Greens were thinking from the expression on their faces.

The patrol were wearing a motley assortment of uniforms. They had carried disparate weapons. Travis lifted a rifle from the hands of a dead girl.

She was no more than twelve. It was a Brazilian copy of a Soviet assault rifle. It had digital sights. Travis checked them. They were faulty. He crushed them with his armoured fist.

He hated this war. He decided that this was his last mission. No matter what the cost, once this was over, he was getting out.

Chapter 5

Another Night Move.

The moon was full. The jungle floor was transformed by a wash of silver light. The Greens looked like goblins of the forest; their bodies wattled by pigment in disruptive patterns. They looked evil, lacking their usual androgynous beauty. Travis kept his eye on them as they moved.

The jungle was full of night-time noise. The air was warm and humid.

Travis called a brief halt. The joint where his arm met flesh was itching.

He took out a tube of fungicidal cream and sat down on the stump of a collapsed tree. Sweat sometimes pooled in the joints and could lead to a nasty rash. He applied the cream.

He was startled to feel a touch on his shoulder. He looked up to see Stef standing there. His approach had been so quiet that Travis had not heard him. He began to understand why Stef had been sent along. He was a new type even more heavily modified from basic human stock.

Travis looked at him and didn't stop applying the cream. There was silence for a while.

„Sarge, do you get scared?” Stef asked.

Travis nodded.

„I've been scared since I came here, Sarge. Since before the autosniper and the ambush.“

„Everybody's scared at first, Stef. It's a natural reaction.“

„Bill-boy says we're not supposed to be scared, Sarge. We're created different, better.“

Travis smiled nastily. „Bill-boy would know, wouldn't he? Being scared is being smart, son. Shows you're aware of what can happen to you. You can't allow the fear to control you. You've gotta control it.“

Travis had gotten so used to the creeping terror of being in the jungle that he almost didn't notice it. It formed part of his normal awareness, only erupting in moments of extreme stress.

„Why are we here, Sarge?” You're here to die, you poor dumb son of a bitch, thought Travis. You're here to be tested to destruction so the Pentagon can decide whether to go ahead and batch produce green soldiers.

„We're gonna blow up a power station,” Travis said eventually.

„No, why are we here in Nicaragua? The US isn't even at war with the Sandinistas. Bill-boy says nobody back home even knows we're here.”

Good for Bill-Boy, thought Travis, keeping his ears open to camp gossip.

And what was that about the folk back home? What have they been teaching you? This jungle is your home, kid. No way are you ever going back to the States. You're being created so that the folk back home won't have to send their sons and daughters overseas to be killed. They'll send you instead.

„Sarge, why are we here?”

„We're helping to stop to spread of communism.”

Stef nodded. Communism was the gospel of evil to the Greens. It was the way they had been programmed. Why hadn't Stef remembered? Was this some pitiful attempt at independent thought by the new boy?

Why don't I tell you the truth, he thought. That this war is a convenient place to test new weapons. Weapons like you and me. All of Central America, from Belize to Panama, has gone to hell. The area, unstable for too long, is a cockpit of warring factions, destroyed economies and refugee populations. We fit right into the madness.

„Sarge, is it true that you were once a normo, like Saunders?“ Travis nodded.

„Did you really have your arm and eyes changed to make you more like us?“

Travis laughed bitterly. „Shut the hell up will you, Stef? You're making my head hurt with all these questions.“

Stef retreated diffidently away. Like kids, Travis thought. Like kids. He shook his head and tried not to think about his daughter.

Marianne was twelve now, living with her mother in Oregon. Lisa had left him four years ago, called into the hospital where he lay with an amputated leg and a face like a halloween mask to tell him she was leaving. She was crying as she told him she couldn't take it anymore. She took little Man with her. At the time it was just one more thing the world had taken from him. Like his arm and his sight.

When the army had asked him to volunteer for cyborgisation he had nodded numbly. They thought they were doing him a favour. He shook his head. I died when that mine ripped me apart in Beirut. It's just taken me a little while to know I was dead.

He laughed softly as he got up from the stump and gestured for the Greens to get moving. That was his answer. Keep moving. Never give up. Don't let the fear take over.

Man was twelve, same age as the girl soldier they had left unburied down the trail. He shook his head and tried not to think about it.

Chapter 6

The Power Station.

They lay on the rocks and looked down on a field of metal flowers. When the Soviets had started to build this power station it had been far from the frontline. The frontline had moved but the Russians had kept building.

This was what they had come to destroy. The dishes picked up power beamed down by the infra-red lasers of the Soviet solar power satellites. It was not to be allowed, quite literally soviet power in America's backyard.

Travis looked at it. The power station could return this area to stability, keep hospitals running, let civilisation return. For a brief second he entertained the fantasy of disobeying his orders. In the end it was not respect for regulations that decided him. It was the knowledge that the power station was doomed anyway.

It was too tempting a prize for the wandering bandit armies who picked at the bones of Central America. Sooner or later one of them would take it and, lacking the expertise to run it, would destroy it. Still it did have a certain beauty, as it glistened in the noon day sun. That night it would be smouldering wreckage.

Chapter 7

Raid.

Flowers of fire blossomed where the demo charges detonated. Thunder roared through the quiet night. Where the receivers had been were large craters.

In the distance from the east came the sound of helicopter gun ships.

Travis watched as Stef raced towards cover. He was the last to return from planting the explosives. He moved easily, in a half crouch, a slight smile was on his face. Suddenly he was cut down by a burst of bullets from out of the trees. His midriff exploded. His entrails were the same as any other man's.

At first Travis thought it was an autosniper, that they had missed one of the sentry devices. Then he heard the sounds of a firefight erupt too close. The bad feeling he had had when he watched the Sikorsky depart returned, intensified.

Carlo emerged from the trees bleeding from an arm wound. His blood was red. He stumbled over to where Travis lay. „They snuck up on us, Sarge,“ he said.

Travis was overwhelmed by a sense of unreality. „Impossible,“ he muttered.

Who could sneak up on greens?

A figure moved cautiously through the undergrowth. At first Travis thought it was Chad. He had the same green skin but the head was too large, the shoulders too muscular. As the figure's head scanned from side to side he made out a hammer and sickle tattoo on its forehead. It was joined by three other figures. They huddled close, exchanging words in Russian. He froze hoping they hadn't noticed him.

Cautiously he unclipped a grenade. One of the Soviets looked up. Travis held still. He could feel his heart hammering against his ribs. The fear he lived with constantly clawed at him. He wanted to run and scream. A noise attracted the enemies' attention.

The Russians had Greens too. This was important. The US was assumed to be five years ahead in bio-technology. Travis wondered briefly whether they had got them by independent research or industrial espionage. He decided it didn't matter. He lobbed the grenade.

One of the figures looked up just before impact, tried to throw himself flat as he shouted a warning. Travis let rip with his M-16. The Soviet Greens reeled and died. Gobbets of bloody flesh exploded across the clearing. They didn't scream. Not one of them screamed.

„Come on, Carlo,“ Travis shouted and headed towards the sound of gunfire.

He sprinted from tree to tree then threw himself on his stomach to worm his way round the edge of the clearing. He assumed Carlo was following.

Keep moving, he told himself, don't let the fear in your gut get control.

Bill-boy was pinned down by the bole of a giant tree. Three Soviets kept up suppression fire while two snuck forward.

Why are they here? Travis wondered. Protecting the power station? Same reason as us, field tests? Carlo arrived in his patch of cover. In the distance he heard the whoosh and explosion of Chad's rocket launcher, caught sight of the bright muzzle flash of the Russian guns.

He pointed to one of the Russians who were suppressing Bill-boy. Carlo nodded. They opened fire. Two of the Russians died. The other one started to turn, bringing his weapon to bear on the sergeant. He was cut in two by near simultaneous bursts from Carlo and Travis.

One of the two who had been attempting to reach Bill-boy lay still in the clearing. Bill-boy popped up and shot him, then ducked back into cover as bullets from the right of the clearing thudded into the wood around him.

The night was filled by the roar of automatic weapons and the noise of approaching helicopters. Travis looked at Carlo. At some point the Green had slapped a fleshtone bandage on his arm. „Let’s get gone,“ he said.

Bullets whined around him, impact knocked him over. Most had been glancing shots bouncing from his kevlar body armour. Carlo was not quite so lucky.

He lay nearby riddled with bullets.

Travis watched appalled as he began to move. „Get gone, Sarge, I’ll cover you.” Travis looked at his ruined face and shook his head. Travis heard footsteps and whirled. It was Bill-boy. His eyes held an insane glint.

„Got that last one, Sarge. Good fight.“

Travis turned back to Carlo. Soon he would be dead and his body would decompose rapidly as special designed micro-organisms did their work.

Can’t have the prototypes falling into enemy hands, he thought, not that it matters much now.

„Get gone, Sarge,“ croaked Carlo. Travis nodded. He looked towards Bill-boy who had just seemed to notice Carlo for the first time. The Green’s face was transformed by fury. With his necklace of human teeth he looked suddenly wild and barbaric. The look he gave Travis made Travis back away.

„Let’s go,“ Travis said. Bill-boy shook his head and spat at Travis’s feet. They stared at each other for a long tense moment. Travis heard a scream. It sounded like Chad. Bill-boy wheeled and ran off into the night.

Travis was torn by indecision. A part of him wanted to stay and fight, to die along with the Greens, to end the fear and disgust he constantly felt.

Another part of him urged him to flee headlong into the night. He stood transfixed. His mind held a seething mass of conflicting impulses and thoughts, a maelstrom of emotion that could easily become either panic or unreasoning berserk fury. His senses were preternaturally keen. He could hear movement in the undergrowth around him.

Get control, he told himself. Take a deep breath. Take another one.

Think. The information on Soviet greens was too important, he had to get it back. By an effort of will he forced himself to move. He had found a reason to do it. It wasn’t a good one but it would do. Tomorrow he could look for another. He wasn’t going to give up.

It was a long time before the sounds of gunfire faded behind him.

Chapter 8

Gunship.

The whir of helicopter rotors above him was almost deafening. He stared near mindlessly into the jungle canopy that rushed by below.

„Jesus, Travis, you look rough,” Kyle had said when they picked him up at the rendezvous point. Travis hadn’t answered. He had just clambered aboard the chopper.

„Where are the Greens?”

„Dead.” Greens don’t surrender and they can’t be taken prisoner, biological alterations had seen to that.

„Pity. They were good boys. Still, life is cheap.”

„Yes. That’s why there will be plenty more Greens. Life is cheap. Not like expensive bionics.”

Travis knew that the word of the Russian artificial soldiers would cause the Pentagon to begin full scale production of Greens. There would be more refinements. This batch had just been the start.

He remembered the look of fury and hatred on Bill-boy’s face before he turned to run to his death. It had been an accusing look. It had meant you and people like you are responsible for this. He knew that there would be more Bill-boys and Carlos and Chads and Stefs sent to their deaths. They would live only to die. The knowledge made him feel sick.

He stared down into the vast, tropical wilderness and thought of the men and other things he had lost in the jungle. At least he was getting out.

