

Wayward Warriors - On the Wings of a Lerk

Contributed by Rhoads
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On the Wings of a Lerk

Reporter: Rhoads
Scientist(s): Rhoads, rob6264, Comprox, BlackWolf
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Experiment Conducted:

Contrary to popular belief, we here at the Underwriter's Lab do occasionally do some research that is actually intended to benefit the TSA in some way, shape or form. (It IS difficult to explain the expenditure of thousands of dollars in TSA funds on just chips and soda, although that actually does constitute the major portion of our expenses.) For instance, take the experiment I most recently did. While I was practicing my skills in Super Soldiers of Contra 26, so I could finally take my rightful place as Head Console Gamer of the lab, I was approached by the "esteemed" Dr. Ralph Jackson, the supervisor of my Lab team and the person whose footsteps you learned to fear the most. Dr. Jackson explained to me that, as a result of the recent shortage of nano-sludge in many of the facilities where the conflict against the Kharaa was taking place, many TSA commanders were hard-pressed to afford any of the expensive yet invaluable jetpacks, and he was interested to see if my team could come up with some low-cost alternative to jetpacks. I spent about 20 seconds laughing on the floor before Dr. Jackson informed me that he was not being facetious. This totally took me by surprise, as I never really thought of Dr. Jackson as a man with a particularly good sense of humor -- but just imagine how funny he could be, if he can make jokes like that one while being totally serious! Unfortunately, any speculation as to the true depth of Dr. Jackson's jocularity was not going to happen, as he quickly locked me and the other three members of my team inside the designated "Think Tank" room. Locking a whole bunch of bitter enemies in a tiny, ugly room -- so he has an appreciation for practical jokes as well! You'd never think it by looking at the guy.

I was about to explain my new appreciation for Dr. Jackson's personality to my three colleagues, when Comprox stated that we should probably get to work on this experiment, and we should begin by choosing a leader. I nominated myself, and told anyone who had an issue with me being a leader to raise their hand. Rob6264 and Comprox raised their hands almost immediately (I have trained them very well, they both raised their hands within .2 seconds of my making this request). BlackWolf, being new to the team, didn't initially realize what was happening, but he raised his hand a few seconds later, perhaps due to the angry look that Rob6264 gave him. Comprox was about to suggest that someone else be nominated, when I pulled Bad-ass Alien Whomper out of my vest, cocked it, and placed it on the table. All three hands went down. It's so nice when people realize the error of their ways and learn to embrace the truth.

With that out of the way, I began to entertain suggestions for a low-cost jetpack substitute. I explained my own idea -- a man-sized slingshot constructed from two metal stakes jammed into the ground and a large elastic band that could be stretched enough to launch one brave TSA marine into the air. I took it to be my finest work of genius. Comprox, however, pointed out that it would be difficult to pierce the ground with the metal stakes, since most of the ships infested by the Kharaa were made of (hard to believe) metal. Furthermore, there would be quite a bit of aim necessary in order to land a marine in a vent, and the TSA does NOT have a good field record of aiming accurately, as is well known. (I bet Comprox was just jealous that he didn't think of it first.) He did, however, like the idea of using a system of elastics to transform ordinary grunts into human projectiles. He suggested a trampoline, which could easily be picked up at sporting goods stores anywhere in the sector, for a rock-bottom cost. About this time, Rob6264 shouted that we were barking up the wrong tree, so to speak. He stated that the jetpack was so effective because it was a self-contained system, it allowed marines to adjust their trajectories in mid-air, and furthermore, it actually allowed the marines to FLY, instead of just being launched into a bulkhead or down a deep pit. He suggested that we think of things that can fly. A minute of quiet contemplation went by before BlackWolf blurted out "Well, Lerks can fly!" He received incredulous stares from the three of us for quite a few seconds, and he was very clearly embarrassed.

BlackWolf's comment got me thinking. We all know Lerks are nasty little buggers, especially when their teeth are going like a meat grinder into your leg -- but what if they could be domesticated? The possibilities would be endless. You could have Lerks delivering packages, Lerks doing wiring on the ceiling, Lerks as pets, Lerks as food -- and maybe even Lerks as a means of human transportation! And I would make millions! It was the perfect idea. I agreed with BlackWolf and suggested we look into a way to use Lerks in place of jetpacks, much to the apparent chagrin of Rob6264 and Comprox.

The first question was how to find and capture a Lerk. I noted the Lerk's propensity to cover hallways in some green, foul-smelling gas. I figured that a Lerk would be attracted to a substance such as this, and in that vein, I told Rob6264 to steal some perfume from his girlfriend's apartment. Comprox also recognized that Lerks enjoy hiding behind turret factories when attacking a heavily defended base, so as to provide cover from the turrets and the marines. Therefore, it

would be a good procedure to construct a turret factory around the vicinity of the experiment, so the unsuspecting Lerk could be trapped there, then coerced into taking one of us for a ride.

The next consideration was preventing our subject Lerk from biting our collective heads off before the experiment could be conducted. Rob6264 put forth that since most of the Lerk's attacks come from its mouth, the Lerk would be rendered harmless if its mouth area could be closed off. Immediately, I was reminded of my days at the sea shore, where my mother would buy me and feed me so much caramel that I couldn't speak, or even breathe. (She was such a caring person.) The clearly obvious solution would be to stuff the Lerk's mouth with caramel, which would disable it. BlackWolf asked if doing this would blind the Lerk, but I found it simply preposterous that a Lerk would see from inside its mouth and not its eyes, so I quickly dismissed this point. The only question that remained was how to get the Lerk to ingest such a great quantity of caramel. This was easily solved by Comprox, who mentioned the Lerk's inevitable tendency to munch on marine buildings. Given that we already planned to construct a turret factory, we needed only coat it with caramel, and we would have ourselves one unsuspecting and disarmed Lerk, perfect for the experiment.

When we went down to discuss what kind of equipment would be needed for this experiment with our good buddy Corporal Richard McDougal of the TSA, we were disappointed to find that McDougal's bunker was locked and a sign reading "Do Not Disturb (especially if your name is Rhoads)" had been on the door. We questioned one particularly blabby private who happened to be passing by as to what had happened to McDougal, and he told us about some rumor that McDougal had gotten wind of some of the details of our current experiment and was reduced to a crying shamble in his room. He quoted McDougal as "not wanting to be responsible when those dumbasses bite the big one." I was appalled and quite hurt -- to think that he didn't want to be involved when we bit into a large, celebratory sub sandwich! I wouldn't let small details get in my way, though, and went on with the experiment. The armory was locked shut, so we couldn't get any additional weapons (not like we needed another one besides Bad-ass Alien Whomper). We did, however, take a little bit of rope to tie our subject Lerk to whichever one of us was going to be flown around. I also smashed the snack machine and took the entire supply of Milky Way candy bars, each chock full of Lerk-mouth-jamming caramel. I concluded that the experiment was ready to be run, and requested a flight to an alien-infested facility. Results:

After being dropped off at the local starship Intolerance, stuffed to the brim with aliens, and informing the dropship pilot that yes, we DID require a flight back to base, we were set to go. We wandered around until we came across an area that I thought was sufficiently wide-open to conduct the experiment. A series of cold, blue-green lights illuminated the dull metal walls from above, and caused an unearthly shadow from the bizarre alien infestation. The drone of a ventilation system could be heard from the numerous ducts positioned overhead. The ceiling arched hundreds of feet above us, and we stood on a walkway suspended above a pit whose depth was difficult to calculate due to the darkness, with a definite mechanical grinding sound coming from down below. It was perfect -- not a hint of danger at all if someone was to fall down there! I immediately assigned duties to all of us. Comprox would log into the command station and watch over us from above, as well as providing a turret factory to bait our precious little Lerk. Next, Rob6264 would coat it in caramel while BlackWolf would spray perfume all over the place. My mission was to shoot anything that wasn't a Lerk. (I made sure that the way my objective was stated meant that shooting my teammates was NOT out of the question.)

Comprox mentioned something about hot-wiring the command station so he could place a turret factory without an infantry portal -- seeing as how constructing an infantry portal would be just a waste of resources, no need to do it. I was starting to wonder how long that would take, when a nice, big, heavy turret factory fell out of the sky and landed about three inches behind me. I chose to ignore his comment "Oops, I JUST missed" and quickly researched the procedure of voting a commander out of the console. BlackWolf and Rob6264 thought nothing of this, and they quickly set to building the turret factory. It was up and running in a matter of seconds -- not bad, considering the quality of the people building it.

With our minibase set up to my satisfaction, it was time to attract a Lerk. I handed the bottle of perfume to BlackWolf and instructed him to spray the perfume towards the entrances to the room, while making noises similar to a Lerk. He stared at me incredulously until I scowled and reached for my holster, at which point he scurried off to do his duty. Next, I handed the large supply of Milky Ways to Rob6264, whose task was to unwrap each candy bar and place it on the turret factory. This was done, but I was not impressed with the results. A simple nudge to the turret factory would cause all the candy bars to fall off, and most of them would drop down the chasm below us. Quickly, I had an idea of how this could be rectified. I ordered Comprox to upgrade the turret factory to a siege factory, which he did. As I expected, the heat generated by this process slowly transmuted the solid candy bars into a goeey, chocolaty mess that thickly coated the outside of the factory. I couldn't have planned it better myself.

But I had discovered that the ruckus that we created had attracted the attention of one particularly curious Skulk, whose head was poking out of a nearby vent. Not wanting to give away our location to the entire alien populace of this place, I quickly lined up a shot and delivered a blast from Bad-ass Alien Whomper, which lived up to its name yet again. With a high-pitched cry, the wounded Skulk limply fell out of the vent and down into the abyss. Mission accomplished. I don't care whether or not people say that Skulks aren't injured by long falls, something like that has GOT to hurt. But what I

hadn't counted on was that BlackWolf, who was turned the other way and putting way too much effort into his Lerk imitation, was startled by the crack of the gunfire, and he clumsily dropped the perfume bottle, shattering it, causing the perfume to leak out in large quantities. The smell was absolutely putrid. I wished I had thought to bring along a few gas masks, and I sincerely hoped that this aromatic assault didn't scare off all the Lerks.

Despite my concerns, it wasn't long before a Lerk showed up, probably wondering what happened to his Skulk buddy. It seemed quite concerned and confused about the situation -- a number of meatpops were right in the middle of what seemed to be a sporecloud, while a small structure covered in brown goop churned away. Comprox was the first to notice our long-awaited visitor, and he ordered us to run away in the hopes that it would attack the chocolate-covered turret factory instead of us. We were in luck -- the Lerk's inquisitiveness led it towards the siege factory, and upon realizing that this unknown entity seemed an awful lot like something that those meatpops would build, it took a hasty bite. Its suspicions confirmed, it began attacking with increasing fury, until it found that its mouth had been gummed full of sticky caramel. Lacking the necessary appendages to remove this infestation, the Lerk had been hopelessly disarmed. The creature was so lost in its plight that it failed to notice the three of us running towards it to secure it. I grabbed it in my arms, making sure that its claws were pointed away from me. This phase of the experiment was complete.

The next step was to determine exactly how to test whether using a Lerk to fly a marine was viable or not. This part of the experiment was impeded because BlackWolf insisted on being allowed to rub the Lerk's belly (in his own words, he thought "it was adorable"). We quickly learned that Lerks do not appreciate being tickled. But we came to the conclusion that Rob6264 should be the one to test-fly, since he was by far the smallest of us. Rob6264's hands were tied to the Lerk's feet using the short rope. Next, we elected to throw this amalgamation of species off the walkway -- if the experiment was a success, we could expect to see the Lerk flying back up to us, hopefully with Rob still attached. Nevertheless, to avoid unnecessary casualties, Comprox had us construct a phase gate nearby, and handed Rob a phase gate beacon so that in the (unlikely) event of an emergency, Rob could activate the beacon and he would be teleported back to the safety of the walkway. All parties (the Lerk notwithstanding) were content with the decision, so we went on. Comprox, BlackWolf and I took Rob and the Lerk to the edge of the walkway, and with a mighty grunt we pushed them over the edge. Nothing happened for a few seconds, and we feared the worst. But then we heard a crescendo of flapping wings coming from below, and we cheered as we saw the Lerk lifting our comrade back up to a safe height. Our cheers died out when the Lerk, obviously exhausted from its ordeal, called it quits and slowly started to drift into the void. Rob6264 was lucky to activate the beacon in time and escape from his certain demise. With this settled, we untied Rob's aching hands, tossed the fatigued Lerk back over the edge, and ran back off to our dropship.

The only thing left was to write up the report. I gave this project my full recommendation, especially if the TSA could invest in training midget marines (hey, it's not like it's easy to squeeze normal-sized people into those vents anyway). What's best is that the Mars candy company has agreed to sponsor our lab team, seeing as how we used so many Milky Ways in our experiment. Mars thanked us immensely, for they did not realize that there was such a market for candy bars in the xenobiological demographic. We received a hefty check from them, which we then proceeded to blow on soda and chips. Special Pins:

1 - rob6264 [11/21/02]: I'll have you know that I spent 150 credits on that bottle of perfume. It's the exotic sort. The guy who sold it to me said that it would help me, uh...you know, but I still have yet to get that woman in the sack! I swear she's intolerable. All she does is yap about that cute nurse at the hospital. God, it was only one time...