

## **CONVERSATION WITH A FICTIONAL CHARACTER**

### **Author's note:**

In 1955, Patrick Moore published his first in a series of exciting adventures to the Planet Mars. The central character is Maurice Gray, a young trainee radar engineer based at Woomera Rocket Base, some 280 miles north of Adelaide, Australia.

In Moore's first book, Gray was famously selected for a mission to Mars at the age of sixteen, to rescue three stranded astronauts. One of the astronauts was his uncle and guardian, Bruce Talbot. In the second adventure, *The Domes of Mars*, which is my favourite book in the series, Gray returns to Mars to help establish a colony base on the surface.

Sixty years or more have passed and Gray is now a retired Commander, living alone in the Australian wilderness but not far from Woomera. I have decided that I am a journalist from *The Sunday Times* and have flown to Woomera to interview Gray. Gray is known for rarely giving interviews. However, impressed with my track record reporting accurately the Voyager missions to the Planets, Gray has granted an exclusive interview – his last and final interview.

Ahead of the formal interview, Gray and I exchange pleasantries.

## **CONVERSATION WITH COMMANDER MAURICE GRAY**

### **By Ian Welland**

'Commander Gray, thank you so much for your time today. I understand you don't give many interviews?' I said as I walked up to the veranda of Gray's home. The wooden log cabin stood on a plot of mainly burnt grass enclosed with half round rails. It was like a scene from an old Hollywood cowboy film. Beyond the ranch was a prairie of dust.

Gray, a spritely eighty-four, held out his hand to greet me.

'The world has moved on,' said Gray in his Australian twang. His plummy English accent had long been replaced. 'Besides, I was part of a team at Woomera so it would be amiss of me to claim any credit for what happened back some sixty years ago. So, no, I don't give interviews as a rule,'

Come, let's sit in the easy chairs here on the veranda. Tea?' Gray poured a fresh brew and we sat down lazily gazing over the prairie.

'You've retired to a remote but beautiful ranch. Do you get lonely?'

'I was orphaned at sixteen so joined my uncle, Bruce Talbot, here in Australia. My career took over and I had no time for normal life you might say? I like the privacy and of course, the dark skies for observing. I still do a little. I don't have television,

but I enjoy listening to the radio and of course a place such as this allows one freedom to think clearly and write.'

'Bruce Talbot, ah yes, the first man to step foot on Mars.'

'Indeed,' said Gray proudly. 'We were close, and I think the rescue mission brought us even closer.'

'How did you come to be selected for the rescue mission?'

'It was a long time ago and men forget!'

'You don't wish to tell me?'

'It's personal.' Gray looked out over the desolate scene in front of us. 'The desert beyond is not unlike the Martian surface,' he said wistfully. 'I suppose it was my destiny to rescue my uncle; after all, he had rescued me in a roundabout way.'

'You say you had no time for the normal things in life?'

'I suppose I didn't want to be hurt by life. I decided early that work would come first. I was totally committed to the UK-Australian Space Alliance Project as it became known, so there was no time.' Gray looked at me pensively. He sighed. 'There was a lady. Julia. An astronomer who spent some time at Woomera. We met up a few times, but she was only in my life but a brief moment.'

'What happened to Julia?'

'Julia returned to Moscow. I later discovered she had perished at the hands of a revolt in southern Ukraine.'

Gray lent back in his chair. I took out my notebook and pencil ready for our interview.

'I won't be mentioning any of that in my piece. I will keep to our agreed script,' I reassured Gray.

'Bless you, Ian. I knew I could trust you.'