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MIKE MULLANE

SPUTNIK

On the morning of October 4, 1957, I entered my dad's bedroom to say good-bye before departing for school. As usual he was drinking coffee, smoking his pipe, and reading the paper. This morning, however, he was purple with rage. "The goddamn Reds have put some type of moon around the earth. Balls! What the hell is Eisenhower doing? What if there's an H-bomb on the damn thing?"

I picked up the paper and read about the orbiting Sputnik and how the Russians were saying it was just the beginning of their space program. They were working to put men into space. There were interviews with American scientists who predicted our nation would do the same. A smaller sidebar explained that Sputnik would be visible as a moving dot of light over Albuquerque just after sunset.

That evening I stood with the rest of the city population in the cold October twilight to watch the new Russian moon twinkle overhead. My dad watched from his wheelchair, cursing Eisenhower for being asleep at the switch. I was struck dumb by the spectacle. The paper had said the object would be moving at 17,000 miles per hour, 150 miles in the sky. I was mesmerized by the thought of traveling at such speeds and altitudes. The newspaper had said men would someday do it. The science fiction movies of my youth had long depicted manned spaceships flying to distant planets. Now Sputnik proved that was really going to happen. There would be spaceships! I couldn't imagine a more exciting adventure and I wanted to be part of it. I wanted to fly in space.

Within weeks I was launching my own rockets in the New Mexico desert. These were not the cardboard and balsa-wood rockets seen in today's hobby stores. Those didn't exist in my youth. My rockets were multistage steel-tubed devices, five feet in length with welded steel fins, and filled with wicked home-brewed propellants. Basically, my rockets were pipe bombs. How I survived this period of my life, I have no idea. I was a preteen boy mixing rocket fuel in glass jars and tamping it into steel tubes. You couldn't get closer to mayhem and death than that.

I searched for any source of steel tubing. An early find was the extension piece of my mom's vacuum cleaner. Its stainless-steel gleam and lightweight construction hadrocket written all over it. "It's perfect, Mom!" I cried. Without hesitation she handed it over. She and my dad were oblivious to the dangers of my experiments. In response to the new celestial Red menace, school-sponsored rocket clubs were organized to get kids interested in science and engineering and the formula for rocket fuel was passed out like raffle tickets. If the school was involved, then it must be safe, was my parents' erroneous thinking.

Not only did my mom give up her vacuum extension (and henceforth had to vacuum like a scoliosis victim), she also let me use her iron to heat plastic to form parachutes for my capsule payloads of ants and lizards. That work destroyed her iron. She let me use her oven to bake recipes of foul-smelling, fertilizer-based rocket fuel. My dad's extensive tools were at my disposal, as was his time. He would drive me to machine shops to have nozzles turned on lathes, and to chemical supply companies to purchase rocket fuel ingredients. He would drive me and my bombs into the desert. There he would rise onto his braces and crutches and hold a Super-8 movie camera on the action. I would set up the rocket and lay wire to the car battery. Dad would offer an irreverent prayer that the rocket would land on Khrushchev's head, then he would recite a short countdown. At zero I would touch the wires to the battery and hope for the best. Sometimes that best was a perfect streak of smoke leading a thousand feet into the azure blue. A white puff would mark the firing of the parachute extraction rocket and we would be treated to the glorious sight of my Maxwell House coffee can capsule descending on a parachute of dry-cleaning plastic and kite string.

More frequently, however, my launches closely mirrored NASA's. At the count of zero an explosion would rend the air and a sulfurous cloud would be all that remained of my creation. My dad, ever the optimist, would opine that the rocket had gone into orbit or possibly hit the moon. We would remain silent and listen for any sound of a whine or thud of an impact, but there would be none. That was proof enough for my father that the rocket was on its way to the Kremlin.

During one launch my dad was nearly a casualty. He was whooping and hollering at what appeared to be a perfect ascent until the missile arced into a dive straight for us. "Jesus Christ, Mike! It's coming right at us!" He was ten feet from the car and did his best to sprint for its cover. With the clatter of steel braces and aluminum crutches he sounded like a machine gone wild. I was powerless to help and abandoned him like a dropped Popsicle. I dove under the car and turned to look up, certain I was going to witness my dad getting shish-kebabed by a five-foot smoking skewer. I made one final, not so helpful cry, "Watch out, Dad!"

"Balls!" he roared. As a whistling sound gained in decibels, Dad suddenly stopped and jerked himself into a ramrod-straight pose, holding his crutches as close to his body as possible, trying to minimize his target footprint. His face was scrunched up, eyes squeezed to slits, teeth bared. There was a brief whooshing sound followed by a loudwhoomph. The rocket embedded itself in the sandy soil no more than ten feet away. A thin curl of smoke corkscrewed from its nozzle.

"Christ on a crutch, that was close, Mike."

Dad christened that rocket the "Kamikaze," which set him off on another story about how a damn Jap kamikaze had almost rammed his plane. "I emptied my twin 50s at the

bastard and never landed a hit. But he missed us anyway, just like that rocket."

As 1957 drew to a close, I was filled with anticipation. Not because of any party to celebrate the New Year, but rather because 1958 was to be the IGY, the International Geophysical Year. If there was ever a measure of how consumed I was by space, this was it…that I was as impatient for the IGY to arrive as most kids were for the end of school. I had read about it in several science magazines. A host of countries were to cooperatively investigate space with sounding rockets and instrumented balloons, and the United States was going to launch its own satellites. I couldn't wait.

My greatest treasure of this epoch was the bookConquest of Space by Willy Ley. Forget Homer and Shakespeare and Hemingway. They were hacks. For me Willy Ley was the greatest writer of all time. His descriptions of spaceflight supplemented by Chesley Bonestell's magnificent space paintings launched me into orbit decades before a NASA rocket.

"…there will be zero hour, zero minute, and zero second, and then the roaring bellow from the exhaust nozzles of the ship…the ship will ride up on the roaring flames, disappearing in the sky in less than a minute…

"The earth will be a monstrous ball somewhere behind the ship, and the pilot will find himself surrounded by space. Black space, strewn all over with the countless jewels of distant suns, the stars. Stretching across the great blackness the pilot will see the Milky Way."

To my twelve-year-old brain there was no more wonderful prose written in any language anywhere. I couldsee that great ball of Earth. I couldsee those stars. I couldsee the deep blackness. I read the book again and again. I read it until the pages came unhinged. I consumed Bonestell's paintings like other boys ogled the breasts of African natives inNational Geographic. There were illustrations of astronauts watching a "canalled" Mars from one of its moons, Deimos. Other paintings showed spacesuited explorers walking among the mountains of our moon and on the gravel desert of Saturn's moon, Mimas. The subtitle on Ley's book said it all, "A preview of the greatest adventure awaiting mankind."

As soon as there was a NASA, I became its number-one fan. I watched every launch on TV. I wrote for photos and stuck them on the walls of my bedroom. I knew at sight every missile in the U.S. arsenal…Redstone, Vanguard, Jupiter, Thor, Atlas, Titan. I could recite their height, thrust, and payload weight. I learned NASA's vocabulary: apogee, perigee, payload, LOX, A-okay. I sent NASA drawings of my own rockets and gave them helpful suggestions on how they might build better missiles. I followed the trials and tribulations of NASA's program with the same passion other kids followed their favorite ball team. When theMercury 7 astronauts were announced I memorized their biographies and pored overLife magazine's photo-essays on them and their

machines. I couldn’t wait to be one of them and constructed a fantasy in which I would actuallyreplace them. One of the points continually raised in the news was the anemic thrust of NASA’s rockets. The United States launched grapefruit-size satellites while the Russian payloads were measured in tons. I was convinced, when all was said and done, Alan Shepard and John Glenn and the other astronauts would be too heavy to be blasted into orbit. In my dream NASA would be unable to find any adult test pilot light enough for one of their rockets to lift. They would then search among the skinny kids of America to staff the astronaut corps. I wrote to NASA with that very suggestion, making sure my name and address were prominent.

The rockets and posters and sky watching weren’t enough. Astronauts were pilots. I had to fly. At age sixteen I began flying lessons. After a dozen hours my instructor deemed me safe enough to solo. There are some memories so seared into our synapses we carry them to our graves—our first sexual experience, the birth of our children, combat, the death of a loved one. I can include my first solo flight in those memories that will play in full Technicolor in my age-addled brain. Four decades later I can still feel the adrenaline-boosted flutter of my heart as I taxied onto the runway and glanced at that empty right seat. My left hand gripped the yoke so tightly I’m surprised I didn’t liquefy the plastic. My right hand was welded to the ball of the throttle. I lifted my feet from the brakes, slid the throttle to the firewall, and the machine slipped down the runway. I had never experienced a sound more sweet than the roar of that 100-horsepower engine. I eased the yoke back and watched the Earth fall away. Even in my later space shuttle launches I doubt my heart was pounding as it was at this moment in my life. I was flying! Later I walked to the car with the three most wonderful words in the English language written in my logbook:Cleared for solo .

Unfortunately, there was one major impediment to continuing my flying lessons. Money. I had a little saved from summer jobs but flying lessons were expensive. It has been said that necessity is the mother of invention. For teenage boys, necessity is the mother of idiocy. At the time I had a teen friend who had also achieved solo status in his flying lessons and, like me, was struggling to find the funds to continue. We put our heads together and came up with a way to make our money go further. He would rent a plane from one of the Albuquerque airports and fly it to another city field. There, I would meet him and we would fly together, sharing expenses and flying time. There was just one small problem with our plan: It was felonious. As student pilots we could only fly solo or with our instructors. On every flight we would be violating FAA rules. But we quickly concluded that getting caught would be the only crime, and with him flying to a secondary airport to pick me up, we had reduced the chances of discovery.

We decided to see how high we could climb and nursed the Cessna to 13,000 feet, violating yet another FAA requirement that supplemental oxygen be used above 12,000 feet. On another day we wanted to feel the thrill of speed and skimmed just yards above the cholla cactus of the Albuquerque deserts. The spires of the nearby Sandia Mountains were a lure and we weaved through those, all the while buffeted by

severe downdrafts.

And on every flight I dreamed of someday flying higher and faster, of doing what Willy Ley had described. I dreamed of feeling the crush of a rocket's G-forces on my body and of seeing the great globe of Earth behind my ship. I dreamed of the day I would fly a rocket as part of the "Conquest of Space."

"Mike, at the most fundamental level we're all motivated by things that occurred in our youth. Tell me about your childhood, your family." A smiling Dr. McGuire awaited my answer. But I kept the shields up. I said nothing about Washing Machine Charlie or polio or near-death experiences in the wilds of the west or exploding rockets or violating FAA rules. What would those stories have said about Mike Mullane? That I had been emotionally scarred by my dad's struggle with polio? That I was an out-of-control risk taker? That I scorned rules? There was no way I was going to reveal that history. So I lied.

"I was raised in a Beaver Cleaver family," I said. "No divorces. No anxieties. No emotional baggage. My dad was an air force flyer and his influence excited me about flight. I was a child of the space race and that exposure excited me about spaceflight. As soon as there were astronauts, I wanted to be one." End of story.

It was probably the same story he heard from every military flyer. No doubt some of the civilians, unaccustomed to the reality that doctors of any stripe can only hurt your flying career, broke down in tears as they revealed they were breast-fed by their mothers until they were six or were abandoned or beaten or molested or sucked their thumbs or wet their beds. But military flyers knew better. We would have lied about a wooden leg or a glass eye.You find it would have been our attitude. I had a one-in-seven chance of making the astronaut cut. I didn't want anything to stand out in any report coming out of my medical exams. I wanted to be so normal that when somebody looked up that word in the dictionary, they would see my picture. So I lied. I didn't mention pissing in radiators or exploding car engines or dodging mountains in a Cessna 150. I lied even when the truth might have helped my cause.