SELECTION

On February 1, 1978, the first space shuttle–era astronauts, thirty-five in number, stood on the stage in the auditorium of Building 2 at Johnson Space Center (JSC) to be formally introduced to the world. I was one of them.

The actual press announcement had come two weeks earlier. At that time I had been on temporary duty from my Florida base to Mt. Home AFB, Idaho, testing the new EF-111 aircraft. Like the other 208 people who had gone through the astronaut selection process, I had had an ear tuned to the telephone for several months. Not that I expected to be picked. Far from it. I felt it had been a fluke I had made the interview cut in the first place. In their more studied deliberations the NASA committee would finally realize what they had in Mike Mullane: an above-average type of guy; nothing spectacular; a twelve-hundredand-something SAT guy; a 181st-in-his-West Point-class type of guy; a guy incapable of counting backward by 7s. There was no way I was going to twice fool an organization that had put men on the moon. But, like a lottery player who knows he is going to lose, I was still going to check the numbers.

On Monday morning, January 16, 1978, the numbers came up and I was a loser. I was certain of it. While dressing for work, I turned on the TV. I wasn't on it. But Sally Ride and five other women were. NASA had announced the newest group of astronauts, including the first women astronauts. There was video of newshounds jostling for position in front of their homes. Vans with brightly colored TV call letters crowded the streets. Curious neighbors circled the houses. And these smiling, radiant, joyful young women answered questions shouted by the press, "What's it like to know you are one of the first women astronauts? When did you want to be an astronaut? Did you cry when you heard the news? Will you be scared when you ride the shuttle?"

I went to my living room and drew back the curtain to see if there was a squadron of news vans parked in my driveway. Nope. No vans. No frothing press. No neighbors. Nothing. I was alone to dwell on my rejection. I tried to rationalize my loss:

It wasn't meant to be.

I had given it my best shot.

Maybe I'll get selected next time.

You never know unless you try.

I sought comfort in these and a hundred other motivational platitudes. But none helped. The winners were on TV. The losers were watching them. I thought of calling my wife, Donna, in Florida and telling her the bad news, but decided it could wait. I just didn't feel like talking about it.

I drove to my Mt. Home AFB office to find Donna had tried to reach me there. She had left a message, "Mr. Abbey at NASA called this morning and wants you to call him back." George Abbey was chief of Flight Crew Operations Directorate (FCOD), the NASA JSC division that included the astronaut office. He had chaired the astronaut candidate interview boards. I was certain this would be his "thanks for the effort" call.

I dialed the number and got Abbey's secretary. After a moment of holding (more proof of rejection) he came on the line. "Mike, are you still interested in coming to JSC as an astronaut?"

In the moments that followed I proved it is possible to live with a stopped heart. Over the previous hour I had built a precise rejection scenario. The women on TV were proof NASA had notified the lucky winners. (Actually, the women had been notified first so there would be thorough news coverage of their novelty.) Now, NASA was just following up with courtesy calls to the rest of us. But George's lead-in question certainly didn't sound like a prelude to a rejection.

There wasn't enough spit in my mouth to wet a stamp but somehow I managed to croak a reply, "Yes, sir. I would definitely be interested in coming to JSC."

Interested?!What the hell was I saying?! I wasinterested in having Hugh Hefner's job. I wouldkill to be an astronaut.

Abbey continued, "Well, we'd like you to report here in July as a new astronaut candidate."

I don't recall anything else from that conversation. I was blind, deaf, and dumb with joy. NASA had selected Mike Mullane as an astronaut.

I immediately called Donna with the news. "I told you! I told you, Mike! Didn't I always say everything would work out for the best? I told you!" And she had. Again and again she had. She had never lost faith. I wanted so much to be with her to share in the thrill, but it wasn't to be. I wouldn't be home for another couple days.

I called my mom and dad and they were as stunned as I. My dad and I laughed as we reminisced about launching my homemade rockets. I could sense that my mom, ever the pragmatic parent, was already anticipating the danger this new job would bring. No doubt her rosary was going to get a workout over the next couple years.

I called my commander in Florida. After offering his congratulations, he said Brewster Shaw and Dick Covey, both test pilots in the squadron, had also gotten Abbey calls. They were in. But other pilots were receiving rejection calls. I hurt for them. But not for long. My boundless, intoxicating joy roared back.

That night I bought beer for the rest of my Mt. Home AFB office and included them in my celebration. At that particular moment I was glad I was away from my home squadron. Most of the Idaho EF-111 flyers were from the USAF Tactical Air Command and none had applied for the astronaut program. My celebration with them was unalloyed. That was not going to be the case at my Eglin AFB flight-test squadron, which was filled with test pilots and test engineers. Virtually everyone had applied. The losers' disappointment was going to be as crushing as my joy was over-the-top. Shaw and Covey would have their celebration tempered by the presence of people who were dying inside.

When I was sufficiently sober, I left for my apartment. The base was far out in the desert and the road was deserted. I honked the horn and screamed like a teenage girl at a rock concert. I rolled down the window and screamed into the icy wind. I detoured into the desert, got out of the car, and screamed some more. I couldn't calm down. I punched the air with my fists. I jumped and sprinted and kicked the sand and laughed out loud. Finally, I hopped onto the warm hood, lay back, and watched the stars turn over my head, just as I had done on countless occasions as a child. When a satellite twinkled over, my heart gave a small lurch. God willing, in a few years, I would be riding rockets. I would be in a satellite…the space shuttle.

Now, two weeks later, I was standing with the other thirty-four astronauts of my group. Though our official report date wasn't until July, NASA had gathered us all together for an early, formal introduction to the world.

The Astronaut Class of 1978

(towns and cities are birthplaces)

Pilot Astronauts

Daniel Brandenstein, Watertown, WI, Lieutenant Commander, USN, age 34

Michael Coats, Sacramento, CA, Lieutenant Commander, USN, age 32

Richard Covey, Fayetteville, AR, Major, USAF, age 31

John "J. O." Creighton, Orange, TX, Lieutenant Commander, USN, age 34

Robert "Hoot" Gibson, Cooperstown, NY, Lieutenant, USN, age 31

Frederick Gregory, Washington, D.C., Major, USAF, age 37

David Griggs, Portland, OR, Civilian, age 38

Frederick Hauck, Long Beach, CA, Commander, USN, age 36

Jon McBride, Charleston, WV, Lieutenant Commander, USN, age 34

Steven Nagel, Canton, IL, Captain, USAF, age 31

Francis “Dick” Scobee, Cle Elum, WA, Major, USAF, age 38

Brewster Shaw, Cass City, MI, Captain, USAF, age 32

Loren Shriver, Jefferson, IA, Captain, USAF, age 33

David Walker, Columbus, GA, Lieutenant Commander, USN, age 33

Donald Williams, Lafayette, IN, Lieutenant Commander, USN, age 35

Military Mission Specialist Astronauts

Guion “Guy” Bluford, Philadelphia, PA, Major, USAF, age 35

James Buchli, New Rockford, ND, Captain, USMC, age 32

John Fabian, Goosecreek, TX, Major, USAF, age 38

Dale Gardner, Fairmont, MN, Lieutenant, USN, age 29

R. Michael Mullane, Wichita Falls, TX, Captain, USAF, age 32

Ellison Onizuka, Kealakekua, Kona, HI, Captain, USAF, age 31

Robert Stewart, Washington, D.C., Major, U.S. Army, age 35

Civilian Mission Specialist Astronauts

Anna Fisher, New York City, NY, age 28

Terry Hart, Pittsburgh, PA, age 31

Steven Hawley, Ottawa, KS, age 26

Jeffrey Hoffman, Brooklyn, NY, age 33

Shannon Lucid, Shanghai, China, age 35

Ronald McNair, Lake City, SC, age 27

George “Pinky” Nelson, Charles City, IA, age 27

Judith Resnik, Akron, OH, age 28

Sally Ride, Los Angeles, CA, age 26

Margaret “Rhea” Seddon, Murfreesboro, TN, age 30

Kathryn Sullivan, Paterson, NJ, age 26

Norman Thagard, Marianna, FL, age 34

James “Ox” van Hoften, Fresno, CA, age 33

Actually, I was standing with thirty-four other astronautcandidates. Our group, ultimately to be known as the TFNGs or Thirty-Five New Guys, became the first to have the suffixcandidate added to our astronaut titles. Until the TFNG handle stuck, we would be known as Ascans. (A later class would call themselves Ashos forAstronaut Hopefuls. ) NASA had learned the hard way that the titleastronaut by itself had some significant cachet. In one of the Apollo-era astronaut groups, a disillusioned scientist had quit the program before ever flying into space and had written a book critical of the agency. Since his official title had been astronaut, his publisher had been able to legitimately promote the book with the impressive astronaut byline. Now NASA was hedging its bets with our group. For two years we would be candidates on probation with the agency. If one of us decided to quit and go public with some grievance, NASA would be able to dismiss us as nothing more than a candidate, not a real astronaut. Personally, I felt the titling was an exercise in semantics. In my mind you weren’t an astronaut until you rode a rocket, regardless of what a NASA press release might say.

Dr. Chris Kraft, the JSC director, welcomed us. As a teenager I had seen his picture inLife magazine articles about the Apollo program. Now, he was welcoming me into the NASA family.Pinch me, I ordered my guardian angel.

A NASA public relations officer began to read each of our names and an audience of NASA employees applauded. There were fifteen pilot astronauts. I was one of twenty mission specialist (MS) astronauts. MSes would not be at the stick and throttle controls of the shuttle. In fact, most of us were not pilots. Our responsibilities would

include operating the robot arm, performing experiments, and doing spacewalks. As the name implied, we would be the specialists for the orbit activities of the mission.

As the role call neared the “Ms,” my heart was trying to make like an alien and explode out of my chest. I still couldn’t believe this was for real. When he got to it, I expected the announcer to pause on my name, look bewildered, consult with Chris Kraft, and then say, “Ladies and gentlemen, there’s a mistake on this list. You can scratch R. Michael Mullane. He’s a typo. He couldn’t count backward by 7s.” Then, two burly security guards would grab me by the elbows and escort me to the main gate.

But the announcer read my name without hesitation. He didn’t stumble. He didn’t consult Dr. Kraft. He read it like I wassupposed to be on the list.It’s truly official now, I thought. I had to believe it. I was a new astronaut…candidate.

The diversity of America was represented on that stage. There was a mother of three (Shannon Lucid), two astronauts of the Jewish faith (Jeff Hoffman and Judy Resnik), and one Buddhist (El Onizuka). There were Catholics and Protestants, atheists and fundamentalists. Truth be known, there were probably gay astronauts among us. The group included three African Americans, one Asian American, and six females. Every press camera was focused on this rainbow coalition, particularly the females. I could have mooned the press corps and I would not have been noticed. The white TFNG males were invisible.

Another first was the political diversity of the group. Military pilots, the mainstay of prior astronaut selections, were almost always politically conservative. They were highly educated, self-reliant, critical thinkers who scorned the “everybody’s a victim” ethos of liberalism. But the reign of the right ended with the large number of civilian astronauts standing on that stage. Among their ranks were people who had probably protested the Vietnam War, who thought Ted Kennedy’s likeness should be on Mount Rushmore, who had marched for gay rights, abortion rights, civil rights, and animal rights. For the first time in history, the astronaut title was being bestowed on tree-huggers, dolphin-friendly fish eaters, vegetarians, and subscribers to theNew York Times.

There was another uniqueness about the civilians…their aura of youthful naïveté. While the average age difference between the military and civilian astronauts wasn’t extreme (approximately five years), the life-experience difference was enormous. Some of the civilians were “post-docs,” a title I had first heard that inauguration day. Literally, they had been perpetual students, continuing their studies at universities after earning their PhDs. These were men and women who, until a few weeks ago, had been star gazing in mountaintop observatories and whose greatest fear had been an A- on a research paper. Their lives were light-years apart from those of the military men of the group. We were Vietnam combat veterans. One helicopter pilot, told of making

low-level rocket attacks and having exploded body parts hit the windshield of his gunship and smear it with blood. We were test pilots and test engineers. In our work a mistake wasn't noted by a professor in the margin of a thesis, but instead brought instant death. Rick Hauck, a navy pilot, had barely escaped death in an ejection from a crashing fighter. I had my own fighter-jet ejection experience.

It wasn't just this proximity to war and death that differentiated the military flyers from the post-docs, it was also the civilians' lack of exposure to life…at least their exposure to the rawer side of life. On a stopover in the Philippines on my way to Vietnam I checked into a hotel and was handed a San Miguel beer and a loose-leaf binder with photos of the available prostitutes. It was room service. Place your order now. As they say, one of the first casualties of war is innocence. To sit at a Vietnamese bar was to have a woman immediately at your side stroking your crotch, trying to make a sale. Everybody had a favorite number at the Happy Ending Massage Parlor (to simplify identification, available girls wore numbered placards around their necks) and I knew many aviators in Vietnam who had their PCOD circled on their calendar. This was their Pussy Cutoff Date, the date at which they would have to stop their whoring to allow the incubation period for STDs to pass (and for a cure to be achieved) before going home. One navy TFNG told of sitting in a dirt-floored Southeast Asia bar while a naked GI got it on with a prostitute on an adjacent table. It was just a wild guess on my part, but I doubted any of the post-docs had similar experiences in the Berkeley SUB. There was a softness, an innocence in their demeanor that suggested they had lived cloistered lives. It was hard for me to look at some of them and not think they were kids. Some might still have been virgins. Steve Hawley, George (Pinky) Nelson, and Anna Fisher were exceptionally young in the face. There was no way they were going to get inside a bar without being carded. Jeff Hoffman was the picture of academia. He had arrived at NASA with a beard and a collapsible bicycle suitable for the Boston subway. He didn't even own a car. He rode to work on his bike and carried a lunch pail. All that was missing were suede elbow patches on his suit coat and a pipe in his mouth to make the "professor" picture complete.

I felt a subtle hostility toward the civilian candidates. I know many of the military astronauts shared my feelings. In our minds the post-docs hadn't paid their dues to be standing on that stage. We had. For us, it had been a life quest. If someone had told us our chances of being selected as an astronaut would improve if we sacrificed our left testicle, we would have grabbed a rusty razor and begun cutting. I couldn't see that passion in the eyes of the civilians. Instead, I had this image of Sally Ride and the other post-docs, just a few months earlier, bebopping through the student union building in a save-the-whales T-shirt andaccidentally seeing the NASA astronaut selection announcement on the bulletin board and throwing in an application on a lark. Now they were here. It wasn't right.

As the photographers continued to flash-blind the females and minorities, I watched Judy Resnik and Rhea Seddon (pronounced "Ray"). Between them, there would be one

more first represented in our group: the first “hotty” in space. Judy was a raven-haired beauty, Rhea a striking Tennessee blonde. No TFNG male was looking at them and fantasizing about their PhDs.