In May 1990, I retired from the USAF and NASA in an astronaut office ceremony attended by thirty or so of my peers. The gathering was held in the main conference room where, twelve years earlier, I had first heard John Young welcome our TFNG class. Dressed in my air force uniform, with my ribbons and the astronaut wings I had flown in space pinned to my chest, I accepted the Air Force Legion of Merit from USAF Major General Nate Lindsay. Nate had become a close friend over the course of my two DOD missions and I was honored he and his wife, Shirley, had taken the time to fly to Houston to attend the ceremony. Donna, my mom, and my son, Pat, were also in attendance. Even my Pettigrew genes couldn't completely subdue the emotions that stirred in my soul at the sight of Pat. I could feel my throat tightening and my eyes welling. I began my air force career at my commissioning on the Plain at West Point in 1967. At that time, Donna and my mom had each pinned on one of my second lieutenant butter bars. Now, my twenty-two-year-old son, dressed in his air force uniform and wearing the same virginal rank, was shaking my hand and hugging me.

I kept my comments brief knowing everybody had to get back to work. Somewhere there was a countdown clock urgently marking the weeks to the next launch. I thanked everybody for their years of support, making a special reference to Pat, Amy, Laura (the girls had been unable to attend), and my mom. I saved my greatest praise for Donna. Tears threatened to douse her cheeks. I then concluded with the observation that I was the third generation of my family to have seen combat. My maternal grandfather had served in France in WWI and my dad in WWII. I had done a tour in Vietnam. I offered the hope my children's generation would never see a war. At that time it seemed like a sure bet. The Soviet Union had ceased to exist. How could there ever be another threat to America as great?

That night, the astronaut office hosted a going-away party for Donna and me at a local restaurant. Beth Turner, one of the office secretaries, obtained a life-size cardboard rendition of a studly bodybuilder and placed it at stage center. She covered the face with my astronaut photo and the crotch with a sequined jockstrap stuffed with something flattering. Against this backdrop Hoot Gibson roasted me with stories of my botched T-38 landing in Brewster Shaw's backseat, my near death experiences while performing STS-1 chase duties with "Red Flash" Walker, and my intercom comment from STS-27—"The RSO's mother goes down like a Muslim at noon." He also recounted how a group of female DOD security secretaries, tasked with declassifying our STS-27 audiotapes, had been confused by my multiple references to the "Anaconda." They had assumed it might be a secret code word for our payload. I had to explain to them it was a Swine Flight euphemism forpenis. As the crowd laughed at

Hoot's stories (he was so damned good ateverything ), I thought of how all astronauts long to leave a memorable and heroic legacy. Hoot had defined mine…screwing up a T-38 backseat landing, slandering the mother of the man who was two switches away from killing us on Swine Flight, and introducing some sweet young innocents to the disgusting humor of Planet AD. Oh well, I guess it could have been worse.

Hoot finally ended the roast by embracing me in a cheek-to-cheek hug, an act of physical affection that surprised me. But I understood. Like warriors back from the battle, we were intimately bound by our own unique duels with death, by the incommunicable experience of spaceflight.

The audience applauded, the youngest astronauts being the most enthusiastic. It had been the same way back in my freshmen days.Why don't these old farts just leave or die or something? I was now the old fart and my departure was freeing up one more seat into space. For silver-pinned astronauts, that was something to applaud.

Back home Donna and I talked long into the night. I tried to convey to her my everlasting gratitude for the life she had given me, but how do you say thanks for a dream? I tried with "I'm glad you walked out of that party in 1965 to kiss me." I don't think I could have said it better than with those few words. But for that kiss, my life would have been different.

As sleep was approaching, I thought there was one other thing I had to do before I walked out of NASA. I needed to hitch a ride to KSC.

I stopped outside the launchpad perimeter fence, where the tourist buses parked, and stepped from the car. The visitors center was closed and tours had ended so I knew I wouldn't be disturbed.Columbia was being prepared for her tenth mission and was almost completely hidden by the rotating service structure. Only her right wing and nose and the tips of the SRBs were visible. I had wanted to drive to the pad and take the elevator to the cockpit level, but I knew that would have been a bureaucratic hassle. Even astronauts weren't free to move through security checkpoints. So my last view ofColumbia would be as the tourists saw her: from a quarter mile away, wrapped in her steel cocoon, hardly looking like a spaceship at all.

The sun had recently set and the pad xenon lights were on. The wind brought muted loudspeaker calls to my ear and the techno-talk spun me back to the summer of 1984, which had been filled with so much fear, disappointment, and joy. But mostly it was the joy of August 30 that now sharpened in my mind's eye. My heart accelerated at the memory of engine start. I could feel the rattle of max-q and see the fade-to-black asDiscovery raced toward her orbit. Hank's voice was as clear in my brain now as it had been six years earlier: "Congratulations, rookies. You're officially astronauts." I could hear the cheers of Judy, Mike, and Steve at the realization our silver pins had undergone the alchemy of fifty miles altitude and been transformed into gold.

I got back in the car and steered for the astronaut beach house. My last moments as an astronaut had to end on that beach. No other place conjured up more memories or more emotions than its sands. Its quiet solitude and proximity to the infinity of the sea and sky gave my soul a release unattainable anywhere else.

I pulled into the driveway, climbed the stairs, and opened the door. The house was deserted, as I knew it would be. Except for prelaunch picnics and spousal good-byes, few astronauts or NASA officials ever visited the facility.

Nothing had changed since my STS-36 visits. In fact, nothing had changed since my first beach house visit twelve years earlier. A framed abstract painting, which suggested a collision of multiple sailboats, hung on a wall. It had probably been selected by the same decorator who had chosen an exploding volcano for crew quarters wall art. (We were astronauts, for chrissake. What would be so wrong with some space and rocket photos?) The mantel of the fireplace was still crowded with various liquor and wine bottles. Some had probably been emptied by Alan Shepard, Neil Armstrong, Jim Lovell, and other legendary astronauts. On the windowsills and end tables were shells, sand dollars, and other flotsam collected by generations of astronauts and their spouses. I was sure their beachcombing, like Donna's and mine, had merely been a distraction from that impending final good-bye. The small den was still crowded with the same Ozzie and Harriet–era furniture: orange vinyl chairs, orange vinyl sofa, faux-wood coffee and lamp tables, and ceramic light fixtures decorated with splatters of, what else, orange paint. A small television, old enough to have captured the 1960s Gemini launches, sat on another imitation-wood piece.

I walked to the kitchen, ignored the desiccated carcass of a roach on the countertop, shoved a few dollars in the honor cash box, and liberated a Coors from the refrigerator. I sipped on that as I continued my tour in the back bedroom. It held another astronaut artifact, the convertible sofa bed Hoot and Mario had used for their high jinks with the STS-36 wives. I knew the bed had supported more than just that one prank—at a Houston party one tipsy TFNG wife had jokingly complained, "I hated doing it at the beach house on a bare mattress." I looked in the closet. There was still no linen. If Hoot and the wives had thought about the multidecadespecial use of that particular piece of furniture, I doubt they would have climbed onto it. Even dressed in an LES, I wouldn't have sat on it.

On the other side of the den was the dining/conference room and I entered it. A large table dominated the area. An easel holding a blackboard and chalk sat at one end. The board featured a hieroglyphics of engineering data from a premission briefing on a prior shuttle launch. It was easy for me to imagine the crew in the surrounding chairs hanging on every word of the VITT presenter, praying he wouldn't use the D word…delay. I would never miss those worries.

Finally, I walked to the door and paused for one last moment to allow the memories to congeal and be sealed in my brain. As it was with every step of this journey, I was seeing a part of my life I would never see again. In a few more weeks I would be a civilian outsider with no more ability to access this beach house than one of the tourists on a KSC bus tour. With a lump in my throat I switched off the light, closed the door, and headed down the crumbling concrete walkway to the beach.

The breeze was cool and I zipped my jacket and took a seat in the sand. As far as I could tell, I was the only living being on the planet. Even the gulls had retired for the night to their hidden nests. The only sound was the respiration of the surf.

I had no agenda. I just wanted some time with my thoughts, wherever they might take me. And they immediately took me to the land of doubts. For the millionth time I wondered if I was doing the right thing leaving NASA. Even at this late hour, I knew my decision was reversible. I could walk back into the beach house and call Brandenstein and tell him I'd changed my mind and would like to stay at JSC as a civilian mission specialist. I knew he would make it happen. After my retirement ceremony, I had run into him at the bathroom urinals and he had said, "Mike, you should stay. I'm running out of MSes." But I knew if I returned to Houston with the news I had changed my mind, it would kill Donna. My decision stood. Now was the time to leave. My astronaut career was over.

Joy was the next emotion to overcome me. I was a three-time astronaut. My pin was gold. Sputnik had set me on a life journey toward the prize of spaceflight, and I had gained that prize. It had not been easy. I started the journey without pilot wings, when only pilots were astronauts. I did it without the gift of genius. But God had blessed me through his earthly surrogates: my mom, my dad, and Donna. Every step of the way, they were at my side, physically and spiritually, giving me the things I needed to ultimately hear my name being read into history as an astronaut.

Mom and Dad gave me the gift of exploration. They tilted my head to the sky. They supported my childhood fascination with space and rockets. In dealing with my dad's polio, they were living examples of tenacity in the face of great adversity. On countless occasions I had needed that example to persevere in my journey. I needed it to survive the rigors of West Point, to survive airsickness in the backseat of the F-4, to survive graduate school and flight test engineer school.

Donna was the other great dream-maker in my life. She never wavered in her support…ever…even though the journey had been difficult and terrifying. She assumed the role of single parent to our three children to give me the focus I needed for the journey. She waited for me through a war. She buried friends and consoled their widows and children. She came to accept my limitations as a husband—my sometimes blind selfishness for the prize. She endured the terror of nine space shuttle countdowns, six beach house good-byes, six walks to the LCC roof, an engine start

abort, and three launches. Throughout my journey she was my shadow…always there next to me.

I thought of the NASA team upon whose shoulders I had been lifted into space. While I had serious issues with some of NASA's management, I had only the greatest respect and admiration for the legions who formed the NASA/contractor/government team…the schedulers, trainers, MCC team members, the USAF and other government personnel associated with my two DOD missions, the Ellington Field flight ops personnel, the admin staff, the flight surgeons, the suit techs, the LCC teams, and thousands of others.

I considered how my NASA experience had changed me. I walked into JSC in 1978 as a cocky military aviator and combat veteran, secure in my superiority over the civilians. But watching Pinky Nelson steer his jet pack across the abyss of space toward the malfunctioning Solar Max satellite humbled me. Hearing Steve Hawley joke in the terrifying first moments of our STS-41D abort, "I thought we'd be higher when the engines quit," was another lesson. I learned that the post-docs and other civilians had skill and courage in spades, and I admired and respected them all.

By far, the greatest personal change my NASA experience had wrought was in my perception of women. I learned that they are real people with dreams and ambitions and only need the opportunity to prove themselves. And the TFNG women did. Watching a nine-month-pregnant Rhea Seddon fly the SAIL simulator to multiple landings was a lesson in their competence. Watching video downlink of her attempting an unplanned and dangerous robot arm operation to activate a malfunctioning satellite was a lesson. Watching Judy perform her STS-41D duties was a lesson. Knowing Judy might have been the one to turn on Mike Smith's PEAP in the hell that wasChallenger was a lesson. Through their frequent displays of professionalism, skill, and bravery, the TFNG females took Mike Mullane back to school and changed him.

It was impossible to sit on this beach and not think aboutChallenger. The ocean that churned at my feet was more of a grave for that crew than anything in Arlington Cemetery. Why them and not me? As January 28, 1986, receded into the past, that question loomed larger and larger in my consciousness. There had been twenty TFNGs with the identical title—mission specialist. One in seven of us had died. It could have been any of us aboardChallenger. Why wasn't it the atoms of my body rolling in the beach house surf? It was the unanswerable question survivors everywhere asked…the soldier who sees the friend at his side take a bullet, the firefighter who watches the house collapse on his team, the passenger who missed her connection to the fatal flight. For some reason, known only to God, we had all been given a second life.

And where would I journey on the ticket of my second life? I still didn't know. I had yet to do a job search. I just didn't have a passion for anything in the civilian world. I was facing what every retiring astronaut faces—the reality we had reached the pinnacle of

our lives. We groped above us searching for the next rung on the ladder of life and it just wasn’t there. What does a person do for an encore after riding a rocket? Whatever it was, we would have to climbdown that ladder to reach it. No matter how much money we made or what fame we acquired in our new lives, we would never again be Prime Crew. We would never again feel the rumble of engine start or the onset of Gs or watch the black of space race into our faces. We were forever earthlings now. It was a sobering thought, but I knew I would adjust. I would find a challenge somewhere. If there was one thing my mom and dad had taught me, there were plenty of horizons on the Earth I had yet to look over.

I swallowed the last of my beer and rose from the sand. As I turned, my eyes were seized byColumbia’s xenon halo. Over the black silhouettes of the palmettos, the salt-laden air glowed white with it. She awaited her Prime Crew. I envied the hell out of them.