

Book Review - Sky Walking: An Astronaut's Memoir

Thomas D. Jones. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006. 369 pp., illus. Foreword by astronaut John W. Young

"I held on as a thin howl from outside penetrated the cabin walls. As we accelerated through the lower atmosphere, I shrank from the mental image of a fiery tornado, half as hot as the Sun, burning not twenty feet away. Just the cabin wall and two thin steel SRB casings stood between me and, well, vaporization. Think about something else."

Though not the first memoir written by an astronaut, *Sky Walking* stands out both as one of a handful of autobiographical works by shuttle-era astronauts and in the way Tom tells his story, emphasizing the intensely human aspects of space flight. A masterful storyteller, he's able to put his readers in the cockpit and expose them to the sights, the sounds, the exhilaration and even the fear that surrounds the experience of space flight.

Tom brings the reader along for the ride, beginning with astronaut candidacy in the "Hairballs" class of 1990 through his first mission aboard Endeavor in 1994 when he and crewmates deployed Spaceborne Imaging Radar-C then culminating in 2001 aboard Atlantis with the delivery of the Destiny Laboratory Module to the International Space Station. His recounting of those events is interlaced with excerpts from letters exchanged with family and handwritten log entries, both taken while in orbit, and ground-orbiter communications dialog. Far more than a dry historical recounting of mission details, Tom's is a human story told by a deeply spiritual, family man with a child-like awe and enthusiasm.

"I've seen the northern lights for the first time! I've never seen them except in a B-52 up there at 35,000 feet and they were always on the horizon. Incredible! Incredible! And they stretch all the way around to the sunrise band coming up over the Atlantic. Whoa!"

There are uniquely human problems that surface both in flight and after landing that are not generally known by the public. Tom gives us the insider track on tasks as seemingly simple as staying cool during exercise. Since no cool air circulated inside the spacecraft, perspiration would coat the body, requiring frequent towel offs. When a re-hydration needle malfunctioned before it could moisten meals, some astronauts suffered stomach problems from the injection of too much air into the food. And when he returned to earth, the simplest tasks proved challenging. After one mission, he noted that, ***"if I accidentally dropped something, I could pick it up only by bracing myself against a wall or table; bending over for it would quickly cause me to topple."***

The moment you start to get the idea that problems in space are mundane, you're wrenched back into reality, the reality that your life can hang in the balance the moment you let your guard down.

"The roar of escaping air didn't stop but immediately grew louder. The digital readout on the DCM showed the airlock pressure still dropping. My mind raced, sorting through possibilities, but I couldn't put a finger on anything. The depress is still continuing! - Not surprising, the pressure was now down to 4 psi, heading for vacuum, and we had missed the automatic suit safety check."

In the final chapter, Tom tells us with remarkable candor the cause behind the loss of shuttle Columbia, writing that, ***"the tank's foam insulation was not performing as designed, yet NASA reacted too slowly to the possibility that a larger strike in a critical area could cause a disaster."*** He goes on to say that NASA, ***"...neglected to order satellite***

images of the foam damage that might have warned of danger." These are painful admissions of the failings of that agency, but he faces them with courage and seems to pull no punches in his assessment of the facts.

Tom concludes his memoirs with an epilogue in which he gives some final thoughts on humanity's future in space that include his desire to see the International Space Station host, ***"...an advanced crew habitat designed for lunar or deep-space voyages"*** and to do it, ***"[m]uch sooner than 2010."***

The book includes 22 color photos; an appendix listing mission statistics; a glossary for those not acquainted the terminology and the acronyms unique to the space program; and an index.

In the waning years of the shuttle era comes *Sky Walking*. Tom chronicles for us the highs and lows of his career in space and of the impact those years had on both he and his family. With the hand of a skilful writer, he puts us inside a spacesuit several hundred miles above the earth and lets us experience the fantastic, the exhilarating and terrifying experience of space flight. He also places us next to the brave family member who can never know whether the laugh being played out before them just a few miles away will end in a triumph or a funeral. Yet through it all, you'll take away a sense that his adventure was part of a larger picture, that humans were born to explore. That urge to push beyond what is known has been with us since we first stood upright and it will be with us until the chapter that is man closes forever.

