

Taking flight without leaving the ground

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

No doubt about it. The most frequently voiced goal of kids growing up in the last 50 years has been to become an astronaut. Little boys - and, more lately, little girls, too - have aspired to push their career envelope toward outer space.

But suddenly, they might wonder. A life that had seemed to combine constant excitement with the personal attributes of Eagle Scouts or holy orders has forfeited its trappings of virtue. NASA's chosen few, it seems, share human weaknesses along with the rest of society. Among those who operate beyond the pull of gravity, same as in the San Francisco Mayor's Office, foreplay may be deemed fair play.

These musings are occasioned by a bizarre love triangle within NASA's ranks that burst into the news this week against the decidedly unromantic background of an airport parking lot in Orlando, Fla. In addition to the damage it has caused the long-guarded image of moon men (and women), the incident brought serious criminal charges against Navy Capt. Lisa Marie Nowak.

A mother of three recently separated from her husband, Nowak, 43, seems to have fallen in love with a fellow astronaut, Navy Cmdr. William A. Oefelein, 41, divorced and with two children. Although both have been on shuttle missions - he as recently as December - Oefelein now must deal with a hazard equally threatening in his personal life. He is seemingly the object of the affections of two women, Nowak and Air Force Capt. Colleen Shipman, 30.

It's a plotline to fit TV's daytime soaps. At the moment, there's no telling in which direction Oefelein's preferences lie. But if he leans toward Nowak, he should seek access to some recent reports now available at the Orlando Police Department. Or buy a newspaper.

Because recent events constitute so rare an embarrassment for NASA, the agency has had very little to say beyond its obvious defense - that applicants for space flight are first subjected to rigorous psychological scrutiny. Regardless what those shrinks decided about Lisa Nowak, NASA might better have sought advice of a heart-throb analyst such as Ann Landers. Reports by Orlando police suggest the Navy four-striper carries more baggage than NASA's experts could have guessed.

The offense for which she is being charged is shocking enough. Apparently intending to deal directly with a love rival, Nowak drove from Houston to Orlando. She knew that Shipman would be flying into the airport there Sunday night.

I'm uncertain how closely those NASA psychologists get into personal quirks. Possibly there was no way

to ascertain that when motoring someplace in a hurry, Nowak would gird herself in thick diapers, so as to avoid time-consuming "rest" stops. Protective diapers, it seems, is a trick astronauts have learned for purposes of personal hygiene during supersonic takeoffs and landings of their spacecraft.

And although I, formerly a humble enlisted man, would hesitate to advise a high-ranked officer on matters so intensely personal, I might have invited the lady's attention to the distance from Houston to Orlando - some 900 miles. I think the capacity of her auto's gas tank would compel two or three refueling stops, which - with the detailed planning for which NASA personnel are renowned - she might have combined with visits to the rest room.

But back to our main plot. According to The Associated Press, Nowak had carefully planned how she'd deal with her rival. After donning a wig and trench coat, she boarded the same airport bus on which Shipman headed for an airport parking lot.

"Shipman told police she noticed someone following her," according to the AP account, "hurried inside the car and locked the doors. Nowak rapped on the window, tried to open the door and asked for a ride. Shipman refused, but rolled down the car window a few inches. ... Nowak then sprayed a chemical into Shipman's car. ... Shipman drove to the parking lot booth, and police were called."

Although lacking the dramatic impact of a giant step for mankind, the sequence of events just described induced this explanation from Nowak: "I only wanted to talk with Colleen. I didn't want to harm her physically."

Then why the wig and trench coat, plus stray additional items that the police found in Nowak's car - the pepper spray and an air cartridge BB gun, a 4-inch Buck knife, a steel mallet and handwritten directions to her rival's Orlando address?

Plus, we may assume, an adequate reserve of adult diapers.

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