

# The Space Mail Run

by Richard Elam

The way he felt now, Jerry Welsh was almost sorry he had left Earth. The Moonship landing seemed to be crushing the very life out of him, although he lay flat on a couch to ease the strain.

Jerry turned his head toward his father, who was strapped down like himself, and suffering too. The craft was under its own control, for no human could withstand the rocket's present speed and still be able to steer in for a landing.

Capt. Welsh was on his bi-weekly mail run to Luna, the Moon, and for the first time in ten years of service he had a passenger—his own twelve-year-old son.

At last Jerry felt a hard jolt under him. He knew the rocket's tail fins had finally touched ground. Jerry unstrapped himself with rubbery fingers and sat up. Then he tried to stand, but flopped down again.

“Wow, I feel giddy!” he groaned.

His father laughed. “You'll get your bearings presently, Son.”

How long Jerry had waited to make this space mail run with his father! Then finally last year, Capt. Welsh had said that Jerry could go with him when he became twelve, as he was especially husky and strong for his age.

But now that the great moment had come at last, Jerry wasn't sure he was enjoying it as he had expected, for he had found space so vast, so dark, and so frightening.

“Do you still want to be a spaceman, Jerry?” his dad asked suddenly, as though Jerry had spoken his thoughts aloud.

“I—I think so, Dad,” he replied hesitantly.

“I see you're doubtful, Jerry,” Capt. Welsh said. “I won't put you on the spot so early.”

They climbed into space gear—electrically-heated suits and clear plastic helmets fitted with radios. Lastly they donned oxygen tanks and flooded their suits with the life-sustaining gas.

They gathered up the mail sacks and climbed down the ladder to the ground, heading for the largest of a group of buildings which made up Moonhaven, center of Earthmen's activity on the airless planet.

The stars burned fantastically bright overhead. Traces of frost topped the distant Lunar Alps. It was incredibly cold out here, for the Moon was in its two-week period of night.

Capt. Welsh got a receipt for the largest mail bag, and then he and Jerry went out a rear door of the building carrying the rest. An atom-powered mail car awaited them. It had an open top and huge

wheels that looked like saw-toothed gears.

“Climb aboard the Moon jeep, Jerry,” his father said. “We’ve got ten mail deliveries to make.”

Inside, Capt. Welsh pulled down a section of the dash panel revealing a map. “Here’s a map of our route. There aren’t many mail stops on the Moon yet, but they are all important.”

“And the mail must go through!” Jerry added.

Capt. Welsh nodded soberly. “That’s the first law, Jerry.”

As they moved off Jerry saw the big friendly globe of Earth hanging like a green jewel halfway up the jet black sky. He wondered what his mother and baby sister were doing this moment a quarter of a million miles away.

Capt. Welsh showed Jerry how to run the jeep. Jerry found this easy for he had already had a course in mechanics in preparation for his future career as a space man. But sometime later their peaceful ride was interrupted when Capt. Welsh suddenly leaned over and grabbed the wheel.

Jerry was thrown to the side as the car swerved. The vehicle straightened out and slammed to a halt as his father controlled the wheel and applied the brakes.

“What happened?” Jerry breathed, his heart pounding.

His father pointed behind them. “Look.”

Jerry turned and saw the edge of a treacherous ditch running right across the roadway where they would have passed over. The gorge was several feet wide.

“I didn’t even see it,” Jerry murmured, sick with fear at what might have happened.

This wasn’t the first time he’d been shaken on this journey. It made him wonder as he had once before if he had what it took to be a space man, or if this adventure would make him decide never to leave the atmosphere of Earth again.

“Scared?” his father asked. Jerry nodded.

“Don’t worry. I was too for a moment.”

“You were?” Jerry asked with surprise.

“Fear was given to man, so he could save himself from danger, Jerry,” Capt. Welsh said. “Don’t be ashamed of it. Fear is nothing to be ashamed of unless you let it get the best of you. Never forget that.”

They arrived at their first delivery point, an engineering project on a plateau surrounded by mountains. There were the foundations of great buildings to come, constructed of hard Lunar granite.

The space-suited figures came running when they recognized Capt. Welsh and his mail car.

Jerry marveled how the formerly stern expressions of the workmen brightened when the foreman handed mail out to them.

“It must be fun bringing mail to men who are so far from their homes and families,” Jerry said when they were on their way again.

“I guess that’s why I’ve put up with the lonely hours of seeing nothing but stardust for the past ten years,” Capt. Welsh answered. “But I love it, Son, and I wouldn’t trade jobs with any man.”

Their next delivery site was a cavern where men were prospecting for uranium. They too were overjoyed at receiving messages from home. The jeep rolled on from there to a huge plain which was being prepared for a future spaceport. Capt. Welsh and his helper dropped off another mail sack and then were on their way again. Some hours later, all but two deliveries had been made.

“Next stop is the astronomy observatory,” Capt. Welsh told Jerry.

They crawled over sandy hills that taxed the gripping power of their spiked wheels, wound in and out of towering buttresses of black basalt, and bored through natural tunnels like a pair of human moles. Then the observatory came into view.

A smiling little scientist with thick glasses signed for the mail at the door. He invited Jerry to come back and visit the place before he returned to Earth.

“You haven’t seen anything until you look through their great telescope,” Capt. Welsh told Jerry as they drove off.

“What’s our last stop?” Jerry wanted to know.

“A geology camp where some scientists are digging into ancient rocks,” his father said. “It’s only about seven miles away, but the going will be a little rough before we get there. It’s a good thing it’s our last stop because we don’t have any too much oxygen left in our shoulder tanks. I usually don’t take this long on a mail run.”

The roadway carried them through a narrow pass with a high hill of loose rock on one side and a sloping embankment on the other. Jerry’s first warning of trouble came when he was flung suddenly forward. He heard the sickening drag of the wheels as his father’s boot hit the brakes. Just ahead of them he saw a cascade of rocks sliding down the hill.

The next moment Jerry felt an even harder blow as the jeep was grazed by one of the large boulders. The small car was swept out of the roadway like a toy and rammed against a pillar at the cliff edge.

Jerry screamed in fear as he felt himself being thrown out of the car. He struck the ground hard and began rolling head over heels down the precipice.

When the numbing shock of his fall had worn off, Jerry climbed dazedly to his feet and looked up the slope down which he had been thrown.

“Dad!” he cried. He slipped and scrambled up the incline in reckless haste. He found Capt.

Welsh sprawled unconscious just below the upper brink of the precipice. Jerry knelt and looked into his face through the clear plastic helmet. His father's eyes were closed and there was an ugly bruise on his forehead where it must have struck the helmet in his fall.

"What am I going to do?" Jerry groaned aloud.

He himself would have to make the decisions and carry them through if the two of them were to survive. It was a shocking thought. Then it came to him what his father had said about fear: a person need never be ashamed of fear so long as it was not permitted to get the upper hand.

Jerry pulled his father up onto the roadway and tried to bring him around, but without result. Jerry examined the jeep. One side was badly smashed, but the engine still appeared sound. The car was tipped over against the rock column. Jerry was thankful that the jeep was only one-sixth of its Earth-weight on the moon. It was a tremendous effort but he finally righted the car and got it back on the road.

He jumped into the front seat and started the engine. It sputtered, then hummed into activity! Jerry studied the map on the panel. He located their present position by the giant crater, Plato, at his distant right. Then he traced the winding route leading to the geology camp. He was closer to the camp than the observatory, but ahead lay a rugged route, one with which Jerry was totally unfamiliar. He got out and went back to where Capt. Welsh lay.

"Which way should I go, Dad, ahead or back?" he asked helplessly, just as though his father were able to answer him.

Something told him that Capt. Welsh would want him to go ahead—to finish the mail run that had never missed a round in ten years. Jerry got his father into the back seat, then gunned the jeep and struck off into the unknown ahead.

He was thankful for the old worn trail that led the way for him. It presently carried him through a gloomy valley. Jerry switched on his headlights, but the twin spears of brightness gave him little comfort in the spooky place. Grotesque rock columns rose like menacing ghosts on both sides of him.

At last he was out in the open again. The road led him around the steep ledge of a yawning crater, evidently caused by a huge crashing fireball from outer space.

Jerry carefully guided the jeep along the dangerous cliff. If one of his wheels should slip over the side, it would be a fall to frightful death a hundred feet straight down. At last even this peril was past, and Jerry drove up a gradual incline over bare rock to a bluff that overlooked the distant land for many miles.

"The camp!" he said joyfully. "That's it below—only a few miles away!"

He followed a curve that swept onto the plain below. When he was on a level again, it seemed that all his troubles were over. He felt better by the moment as he drove closer and closer to his destination.

Then, without warning, his wheels began to bog down in a pumice mire. His heart did a flip-flop and he checked the map. He saw a warning to drivers to avoid this spot. In his overconfidence, he

had blundered right into it!

He gave the little jeep full power. It jerked crazily through the clinging stuff. Over to the right the pumice seemed to thin out, and farther over he could see the roadway he should have taken. He swung his wheels to the right and the jeep lurched through the gray sand, using up a lot of power, but making little progress. For minutes on end Jerry gave the jeep all it had, and he could hear its engine laboring tiredly.

Suddenly the motor died. Jerry tried to start it again but could not. He checked his temperature gauge. The engine was extremely hot from the continual use of top power. From his mechanical school course, Jerry realized the rotors had “frozen” and that it wouldn’t run again until they had cooled off.

As he waited impatiently for the engine to cool, a warning voice in his mind was saying: “Your oxygen is getting lower by the second. If the jeep doesn’t get out of here within the next fifteen minutes, you and your dad will never make it.”

Jerry shook off the terrible thoughts. He stamped his feet to warm them. The electric circuit in his suit seemed to be breaking down. If it collapsed completely, he would be frozen instantly by the Lunar cold.

Jerry massaged his dad’s hands and legs in case his suit, too, was getting colder. He worked steadily until his hands ached. Then he checked the gauge again. It was falling slowly, but heavy insulation was still keeping the engine hot.

At last Jerry decided he should not wait any longer. With a prayer on his lips, he pressed the starter button. The engine rumbled sluggishly, coughed, then quickened to full strength. He jammed the fuel pedal hard and tried to guide the jeep’s swirling, spinning motion through the Lunar sand. Slowly the little car pulled itself like a weary swimmer toward the firm bank. Finally the wheels found good traction and the jeep lurched onto the roadway.

Jerry heaved a tremendous sigh and sped down the path toward the geology camp.

Less than an hour later Jerry was being permitted into the room of one of the huts where his father had been carried for examination by the camp physician. Jerry had been told that his father had suffered a slight concussion, but that he would be all right.

Capt. Welsh smiled from his cot as Jerry walked in.

“Hi, space man,” his father greeted. “The doctor says the men here were mighty happy to get their mail on time.”

“I’m glad I came on here, then, instead of going back to the observatory,” Jerry murmured.

“You did the job in the best tradition of the Space Mail Service, Jerry,” Capt. Welsh said, smiling proudly. “If I had any doubts that you’d be able to follow me some day, Son, they’re gone now.”

Jerry nodded happily. A few doubts had been removed from his own mind in the past hour.

Source:

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