

All Aboard for Space

by Richard Elam

It had already been a wonderful birthday for the twins, Sue and Steve Shannon, when their father asked, “How about it, kids—are you ready for that space ride I promised?”

Sue’s big hazel eyes looked like walnuts as she stared in surprise. Steve’s blue eyes were more like plums. Could they really believe what they were hearing?

“I said I’d take you on the ride when you two reached 12, didn’t I?” Mr. Shannon went on.

They hadn’t forgotten and were suddenly as excited as two young ducks who have just discovered water. Mr. Shannon looked at his watch. “We’d better get ready. The next flight is at four o’clock.”

Less than a half hour later, Mrs. Shannon was bidding goodbye to the three as they climbed into the family helicopter on the roof of their home. In this year of 2004 nearly everybody owned a ’copter. Mrs. Shannon had been invited to go along but she said no coaxing in the world could get her up in one of those “rocket things.”

The overhead doors of the garage swung open as Mrs. Shannon pushed the button on the wall. As soon as the three riders were comfortably seated, Mr. Shannon started up the engine and the overhead blade began churning. Gently the ’copter lifted into the blue sky and headed out over the city.

“I can’t really believe we’re going to take a trip into space!” Sue said happily.

“Some day I’m going to be a spaceman and travel to *all* the planets!” Steve declared.

The plane passed over beautiful triple-decked highways, over green farms loaded with scientific equipment and solar mirrors, over plastic-domed skyscrapers. Presently a large oval appeared just ahead. “There’s the space port!” Sue exclaimed.

When Mr. Shannon got the signal to land, he brought the helicopter down into the parking lot at the edge of the port. Then the three jumped out onto the ground. As they walked toward the main building, the twins excitedly noticed the busy activity of the field. What impressed them most were the massive torpedo-shaped rockets which were half-buried in their concrete launching pits.

“Where is that biggest rocket going, Dad?” Steve asked.

When his father said it was going to the moon, a tingle raced up the boy’s spine and all at once he wished he could be on the ship himself.

“There’s our rocket over there,” Mr. Shannon said, pointing to a smaller craft of light-weight beryllium metal just across the way. Near the pit was a sign that read:

SPACE RIDES DAILY.
ENJOY THE THRILL OF A LIFETIME A THOUSAND MILES

ABOVE EARTH.

Mr. Shannon got their tickets. Then after a heart check-up they waited in line with the other eager sight-seers. Finally the space port officer took down the chain that held back the crowd and permitted them to approach the rocket. They had to cross a bridge to get from the pit edge into the ship. As they crossed, Steve looked down into the hot pit and saw clouds of flame and smoke pouring from the great jet tubes.

In the ship, the Shannons were given couch numbers in a large room with the rest of their companions. Then a steward came around with a special candy which he told the passengers to eat to prevent their getting sick. Next everyone was issued queer-looking shoes with metal soles.

“What’re these for, Dad?” Sue wanted to know.

She saw her father and brother exchange winks. “She’ll find out, won’t she?” Mr. Shannon teased.

As Steve and Sue lay on their soft couches and fastened plastic belts across their bodies, their father explained the purpose of this. “We’ll blast-off at a pretty fast speed and if we weren’t buckled down we’d be thrown about and hurt.”

When the moment of blast-off came, Steve and Sue went through the most exciting experience of their lives. A loud roar filled their ears and it felt suddenly as if the bottom of their stomachs had dropped out. They were pressed deeply into their couches and they had the feeling of being flattened out as though under the foot of an elephant. Then slowly Steve and Sue felt the awful weight lifting from them and finally it was gone altogether.

“Ugh!” Sue groaned dizzily, unstrapping herself as the others were doing. “What happened?”

When she tried to walk, she understood the purpose of the metal-soled shoes. “We scarcely weigh anything now,” their father explained. “The magnetism of our soles is the only thing that keeps us from floating about like a feather.”

The guide, who said his name was Mr. Quinlan, led the sight-seers to a huge window. The young Shannons gasped in wonder at what they saw. The sky was nearly pitch black and filled with more burning lights than they even guessed could exist.

“We’re about a thousand miles above the earth,” Mr. Quinlan said. “We’re out of the earth’s atmosphere and that’s why the sky is dark and the stars so brilliant. Our rear jets are thrusting just barely enough to keep us from being pulled back down to earth.”

The guide next said that they would go outside the ship in space suits. Sue and Steve whooped in joy for they had not expected this. Mr. Quinlan distributed space gear from a cabinet. Then he explained how they were put on. After the flexible suits and plastic helmets were donned, everyone turned on his oxygen, which came from shoulder tanks. The others looked to Steve like balloon toys inflated with air and he had to laugh as they waddled about.

The tourists were led out of a side door onto a balcony which resembled a large fire escape. Everyone was told to buckle himself to the rail by a short length of cord in front of him.

“If one of us were to lose contact with the ship,” Mr. Shannon warned his son and daughter, “he’d go drifting off into space.” Sue and Steve shuddered at the thought of this.

Mr. Quinlan pointed out whirls of misty clouds that were called nebulas. He also showed them star clusters and the brighter planets. The sight-seers had a closeup view of the earth that looked like a shimmering green ball. The guide did his speaking through a small radio attached to his suit. Each tourist had a receiver in his helmet through which he could listen.

For almost a full hour Sue and Steve, together with the other spell-bound passengers, took in the splendor of this strange silent place, the vastness of which staggered the imagination.

“Isn’t this a wonderful tribute to the greatness of God’s creation?” Mr. Shannon said to his children. Steve and Sue had to agree with him wholeheartedly.

When Mr. Quinlan was ready to go back into the ship, he tried the outside door switch, but the door failed to open. Over his two-way radio circuit, the passengers could hear a worried discussion between him and the pilot inside. They learned that a tube of compressed air which operated the outer door was jammed. There was nothing that could be done about it from the inside. Some of the women began sobbing, believing they would never return to earth again.

Mr. Shannon looked at his son and daughter anxiously. “Keep your chins up, kids,” he said. “Nothing was ever gained by people losing their heads. I’m sure they’ll figure out some way to save us.”

“I—I’m not afraid, Dad,” Steve said bravely.

There were tears of fright in Sue’s brown eyes but her small chin was courageously set and she would not permit herself to give in to the terror she really felt.

“You’re brave ones,” their father said, putting his big arms around their shoulders.

Mr. Quinlan approached the Shannons. “Mr. Shannon,” he said, “I’ve got something important to talk over with you and your son.”

The two listened closely as the guide outlined a daring plan. He pointed to a small, circular opening some ten feet above the platform. He said that if a person could climb into the opening he could turn an emergency valve that would double the air pressure and clear the jammed tube. Since Steve was the only boy on the platform, and therefore the smallest, Mr. Quinlan wanted to know if Steve would try it. Steve felt his heart fluttering crazily. He was both afraid and excited.

“There’s only one danger, son,” the guide pointed out. “You’ll have to unfasten your safety line. If you think you can keep calm, though, there should be no real risk.”

“What will happen if the job isn’t done?” Mr. Shannon asked grimly.

Mr. Quinlan shrugged. “There’s not much that can be done. These suits will run out of oxygen in twenty minutes and only your boy is slim enough to get inside the opening. Then, too, they can’t land the ship without the risk of tossing us all out.”

Mr. Shannon said quietly to Steve, "It's up to you, son. If you believe you can go through with it without losing your head and getting thrown from the ship...."

Steve swallowed hard, thinking of the lives of the others around him that depended upon him. "I'll try it," he managed to say.

He felt his knees go weak when the safety rope was unfastened from his waist and he realized there was nothing now but his magnetic shoes to hold him to the ship. Carefully Mr. Quinlan boosted him up toward the opening above. *Tick-tick-tick* went his metal soles against the shiny skin of the craft as he made his way upward by means of special climbing handles on the rocket hull.

"Keep calm," he told himself. "A spaceman doesn't lose his head."

He was thankful for the firm grip of his gloves as his fingers closed about the sides of the chamber and he pulled himself up inside. It was a close fit even for him. Mr. Quinlan had told him that usually the emergency valve was easily reached from the deck above but that during this trip the deck was closed off for repairs and couldn't be entered.

Steve found the valve handle and turned it as he was instructed. Almost immediately he heard the deafening blast of many voices in his receiver. Among the words he heard were, "The door's opening!" Steve sighed deeply and carefully started down again.

But the danger was not over yet. He still had to be very cautious. This was brought to him sickeningly when he drew his foot back with greater force than usual and found himself weaving backward into space. With a chill of terror he grabbed a climbing handle and pulled himself snug against the ship's hull again. Finally he felt the strong arms of his father on the lower part of his legs. He relaxed and was helped down onto the platform amid the cheers of everyone around.

The sight-seers, sobered by their close call, trooped silently back into the ship. A moment later the craft began dropping earthward, its jets acting as brakes to check the rapid descent.

After landing, the Shannons were called into the office of the Chief of Operations at the space port.

"Young man," the chief said to Steve, "let me congratulate you for the brave thing you did." He offered his hand and Steve felt a flush of pride as he took the big palm in his own.

"Such an unselfish deed can never be fully repaid," the chief went on. "Tell me, Steve, do you like space-going?"

Steve's eyes glowed with stars. "Very much, sir," he said. "Some day I'm going to become a spaceman myself."

"Then this little reward we have for you and your sister may help you reach your goal." He held out a plastic-sealed card. Steve took it as his heart raced. It was a lifetime rocket pass!

Source:

Elam, Richard. "All Aboard for Space." *Young Readers Science Fiction Stories*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Inc., 1957. 55 – 68. Electronic.