

## Mercy Flight to Luna

by Richard Elam

Toby Workman stared out of the window of his room on the rim of the space station, wondering what he should do. As the countless stars of black space trooped slowly past in an endless caravan, the boy was still haunted by the nightmare of last week. That nightmare could yet end forever his dreams of a space pilot's career. Toby was looking in the direction of the mist-covered globe, five thousand miles away, which was Earth. The space station was a celestial lookout, a scientific laboratory, and a harbor for space-going rockets.

"What're you thinking, Toby?" asked Lou Penner, his roommate.

"I'm wondering if I should take Dr. Shepard and Deb to Luna," Toby answered.

"Are you crazy?" Lou blurted. "Do you think they'd ride with you after all that mess that happened last week? Remember, too, you never did get along with Deb's dad very well."

Toby turned from the window, his sturdy shoulders slumped in defeat, a brooding unhappiness on his sensitive face. "You sound just like the others, Lou," he said bitterly.

"I'm not saying I believe you were responsible for the accident," Lou said carefully. "I'm just giving you the cold facts."

Just then over the wall speaker of their room came another appeal for a pilot to carry the doctor and his daughter, who was a nurse trainee, on the desperate mission to Luna to administer antitoxin in the sudden outbreak of contagious fever.

"There's no one else, Lou," Toby said. "I'm the only licensed pilot on the space station right now. You've got fifty hours to go yet on yours, and the express bringing other pilots from Mars won't be in for a long time. A delay may let the fever grow into an epidemic." Toby opened his locker and began pulling out flying gear. "I'm going to try it, Lou."

"How are you going to get the doctor to ride with you?" Lou wanted to know.

"Just keep out of his sight until we've blasted off and are on our way," Toby said. "Then he'll have to go along."

Lou grinned at him. "I should have guessed you'd try this, knowing how daring you are and your mania for helping people."

The event which had been ruinous for Toby had occurred when he had been piloting a sight-seeing rocket for vacationists from Earth. It was his first big job. While they were coming into dock on the giant revolving wheel which was the space station, something had happened to the braking rockets, and the ship had collided with the hangar, injuring several people. When it was discovered that nothing was wrong with the rockets, Toby was unofficially accused of negligence pending further investigation, although his license hadn't been taken away. If no mechanical defect should be found, Toby knew he would be suspended from space flying indefinitely, possible for life.

Toby had Lou inform the operations officer of his offer to make the flight to Luna. Then he dressed and made his way toward the inner hub of the wheel where the vast hangar was located. He walked along the narrow corridors in a jerky movement, not yet having gotten used to the artificial gravity which was created by the continual rotation of the space station. He and Lou had been on the station only a month. Many high-school students came here every summer in order to build up a flying record, thereby hastening the day when they would be full-fledged rocket pilots.

As he looked for his ship, Toby saw the investigating crew still examining the big craft in which he'd had the accident. Their significant report might come at any time. Toby had the small rocket flyer, which Lou and he were renting together, towed to the air lock. Toby wished he had time to have the ship checked, but if he waited for that, they'd lose their precious time advantage.

Toby waited, with pounding heart and idling rocket motors, for his passengers. Presently, through the side port of his pilot's compartment, he could see the brisk strides of Dr. Shepard and his young daughter. A steward helped the two inside with their medical equipment, then waved a farewell to Toby.

"All set, sir?" Toby called to the doctor.

"Yes," Dr. Shepard returned.

Toby clamped shut the airtight door. He revved the motors to launching thrust, and their roar drowned out the quiet hissing of the oxygen out-putter. He fastened his safety belt, told the others to do so, and then was off.

When the painful effects of blast-off were over and the ship was on a smooth trajectory, Toby heard a click of metallic soles along the magnetic floor and braced himself for the unpleasantness he knew was coming.

When Dr. Shepard recognized him, he exclaimed angrily, "You!"

"Yes, it's I, sir," Toby admitted. "I knew you and Deb had to get to Luna as quickly as possible."

The doctor's lean, angular face reddened. "But you're incompetent! I thought your license had been revoked! If you believe you're doing something heroic, Toby, consider also that you're risking the lives of us who could be of service to those stricken people on Luna!" He paused a moment for breath, then went on. "A person your age has no business flying rocket ships in the first place. It's a job for older men with mature judgment!"

With that, Dr. Shepard clattered back to his seat in the back, leaving Toby with a feeling of being as incompetent as the doctor had said. He stared glumly out the forward port at the wrinkled witch-face of Luna. Her gaping craters were like taunting eyes, and her jagged mountains appeared to wear the twisted grin of a mocking giant. Even nature herself seemed allied against him.

Suddenly he had company again. It was Deb this time. He studied her pretty face closely, wondering if the inscrutable look on it meant that she was one of that majority of disbelievers or whether perhaps....

“Tell me, Deb,” he said to her, “do you believe that accident was my fault?”

She smiled sympathetically, tossing her titian curls. Her large clear eyes were sincere and direct. “Would it make any difference to the examining board if I did believe in you?” she asked.

“No, they’d still lift my license if they wanted to,” he answered, “but it would make a lot of difference to me.”

“You said it wasn’t your fault,” she said softly, “and I believe you, Toby.”

Suddenly Toby didn’t feel quite so lonely. “It helps a lot to know that one person, at least, believes in me,” Toby said gratefully. “Thanks, Deb.”

Dr. Shepard called his daughter back. Toby had half expected Deb to say what she had. She was a swell person. Even since she had been transferred to his school class, he had known her as a quiet girl who couldn’t believe the worst in anybody. Like Lou and himself, she was doing extra summer work in order to earn her space nurse’s rating sooner. Her father was considered one of the best space surgeons. Toby had never been one of his favorites among the fellows who came to see Deb. Toby had heard from Deb that her father regarded him as reckless and too ambitious for his age. The doctor’s own education had been a plodding one, hence his inability to accept the idea of young people still in high school piloting rockets.

The flight continued to be a tense one for Toby as the dragging hours passed. Dr. Shepard kept Deb in the back, leaving Toby with only the cold remote stars for companionship. When Toby slept, he put the rocket on automatic pilot, but he could not completely relax.

On the last leg of the journey, Toby heard a buzz on his radio set and tuned it in. It was Lieutenant Cameron, operations officer at the space station, and Toby’s heart froze with dread as his sobering message came through:

“I’ve been instructed to tell you that this is your last trip as a pilot, Workman, at least for a long time. The investigation of the craft in which you had the accident is nearly completed, and there seems to be no mechanical defect upon which the disaster can be blamed. I’m afraid it boils down simply to a serious error of judgment, Workman. I’m sorry, but the chief says your license will be revoked upon your return to the space station.”

“Yes, sir,” Toby murmured, and signed off numbly.

Although the message was not exactly a surprise, Toby hadn’t known it was going to be so hard to take. It made him feel all empty and hopeless inside. He had a strong urge to get up and walk right out of the ship into the black deeps, there to drift in the weightless vacuum forever. But the fact that he was responsible for his passengers kept him in his seat, told him to stick to his job and see it through, to dare hope even in this grimmest hour.

At last the forward port revealed the bleak wilderness of Luna down below. Toby lined up the tiny space harbor in his landing sights. He placed the rocket flyer on automatic pilot and went back to the rear.

“We’re about to land,” he told his passengers. “Fasten your belts securely.”

He returned to his seat and began sliding shiny floor levers. There was a rumble of smooth gyroscope bearings as the rocket's outer torpedo-shaped casing did a complete half turn. This brought the rear jets facing the moon so that they were in position to act as brakes as the rocket plunged groundward. The passengers were unaware of this, for the inner shell in which they sat remained in its original position, but they could feel the drag of deceleration as the ship began losing its blazing speed. Toby steeled himself for the agonizing pressure that would come when the ship reached full deceleration.

Suddenly something prompted him to look at the speedometer. What he saw nearly caused his heart to stop beating. The ship was not losing enough speed. The jets were jammed!

He thought how ironical it was for the very same thing to happen to him twice—two cases of jet braking failure—but he might never live to bear the disgrace of this one. Nor would the Shepards, with their precious knowledge and serum. Thinking of them brought Toby up out of his seat.

Toby's fumbling hand found the lift stick. As the rocket angled up from the frost-bitten ground, he saw a racing blur of Lunar landscape, pumice drifts, and buildings so near he could almost have reached out and touched them. It was such a close call that it left Toby shaking. The rocket scurried off over the barren land like a frightened bird.

Toby heard a clatter down the aisle. He turned and saw Dr. Shepard being flung about like a chip on an ocean. Toby staggered down the passageway after him. Necessarily rough, he shoved the doctor back into the seat from which he had unbuckled himself, and strapped him tightly. Deb was a pale ghost still buckled down beside him, her eyes wide in terror, her body tense as a coiled spring.

"Make him stay put!" Toby ordered and slipped and slid back to the front. As the rugged moonscape swept dazzlingly across the port, Toby headed the rocket's nose upward again. A nauseating giddiness was threatening to overcome him. Toby shook his head vigorously and hung on.

When the rocket had lifted high over the planet, he began "purging" the jet chambers, a procedure sometimes effective in pulling them out of a state of jamming. The action consisted of alternately giving the tubes a sudden full thrust, followed by a few moments of total inactivity. At each burst, Toby felt as if his head would be snapped off his neck. At last he sensed that the jets were working freely. This was confirmed by a glance at the instrument panel.

Once again he headed the ship in for a landing. He felt the rhythmic jerks of the firestreams in normal braking thrust, and he sighed in relief. Some minutes later the rocket touched down gently on the soil of the moon. They were safe.

Toby helped the bruised and shaken Shepards into space suits and got them outside. He felt pretty badly mauled himself and thought he'd keel over at any moment as he saw the eternal stars of the Lunar sky grow dim before his eyes. Then someone gave him a supporting arm into the waiting room of the spaceport.

It was some time before Toby felt like himself. He found that he and the Shepards, coming to full consciousness themselves, were surrounded by people.

"I've been in the space service a long time," Toby heard someone say, "but that was the slickest

landing I've ever seen! That young fellow must have superman nerves to do what he did!"

Toby never saw so many grinning faces watching him or so many hands clapping him on the shoulder.

"It was certainly a show of calm judgment and expertness, Workman," a man in uniform said and stuck out a big palm to him. Toby took it, blinking incredulously, for he faced none other than Commander Jameson, the chief on Luna.

"I thought you'd like to know," the commander went on, "that I just now got a message from Lieutenant Cameron reporting that, upon re-examination, they found a defective valve that could conceivably have caused your accident last week. After your showing on this landing, I'm sure they'll agree it wasn't a case of incompetence."

"Thank you, sir," Toby mumbled, bewildered by this sudden reversal of fortune.

"You've convinced another person, Toby," the boy heard beside him and saw a haggard, rarely smiling Dr. Shepard. "I guess I've misjudged you young people. It seems you can handle ships with the best of them!"

Toby looked past the doctor and saw Deb regarding him with quiet admiration. Her wordless compliment was the most appreciated of them all. Who could say but that her lone faith had kept him going in that dark moment when he had been ready to give up?

Source:

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