

TFNG

2012 was a hard year for American astronauts. In last month's editorial, I wrote about Janice Voss, an astronaut who died in February and who once corresponded with us about her love of SF—most especially the works of Isaac Asimov. Her death was followed by the loss of America's first woman in space, Sally K. Ride, in July, and Neil Armstrong, the first person to set foot on the Moon, in August. While I'm saving my thoughts about Neil Armstrong for another editorial, I decided to focus this month's essay on Sally Ride and some of the other members of NASA's Astronaut Group 8.

When NASA selected thirty-five people for Space Shuttle training in 1978, it was the first new group of astronauts since the sixties. Some of these newcomers did not seem to fit the NASA's previous astronaut mold. Kathryn D. Sullivan, the first American woman to perform an EVA, said in a 2007 interview with Jennifer Ross-Nazzari, "There had never been critters that looked like us, admitted into the astronaut corps." The group looked a lot like America, though. In addition to what Dr. Sullivan refers to as "twenty-five standard white guys," Group 8's trainees included the first three African American men, the first Asian American man, and the first six American women. I'm sure my father the vet and my sister the major would be happy to know that the group also included America's first Army astronaut.

Although the news was exciting and inspiring, it couldn't have come as a surprise to those who'd read Robert Heinlein's *Space Cadet* or followed other science fiction literature and television series. In an interview for NPR's StoryCorps in 2011 about his younger brother, and second African American in space, Carl McNair said, "As youngsters, a show came on TV called *Star Trek*. Now, *Star Trek* showed the future—where there were black folk and white folk working

together. I just looked at it as science *fiction*, 'cause that wasn't going to happen, really, but Ronald saw it as science *possibility*." The reporters who peppered Sally Ride and the other women at news conferences with ridiculous questions did not seem to be up on their SF or completely prepared for this new breed of astronauts. (I cannot find attribution for one of my favorites, which ran something like, "What would NASA do if Dr. Ride couldn't find a comfortable position for her knees on the Space Shuttle?" Her response: "Find an astronaut whose knees fit.") Of course, the new breed was much like the old breed: brave and smart and ready to conquer new territory.

Group 8 came to call themselves TFNG, which can be politely translated as "Thirty-Five New Guys," and they were all pretty awesome. Other members of the group included Guion Stewart Bluford, Jr., a test pilot with a Ph. D. in aerospace engineering from the Air Force Institute of Technology, "Guy" was the first African American in space; Judith Resnik, the first Jewish American and second woman in space, held degrees in electrical engineering from Carnegie Mellon and the University of Maryland; Frederick D. Gregory, the first African American to pilot and command a space shuttle; Margaret Rhea Seddon, a medical doctor from the University of Tennessee College of Medicine; Ellison S. Onizuka, with degrees in aerospace engineering from the University of Colorado at Boulder, he was the first Japanese American in space; Shannon Lucid, a Ph. D. in biochemistry from the University of Oklahoma who spent 188 days in space during her fifth and final spaceflight; and Anna Lee Fisher, a chemist and medical doctor, she is the last remaining TFNG still on active duty.

Fourteen of The New Guys were pilots. The rest were mission specialists. They all shared a love of adventure and a zest for space exploration that may be hard to

put into words, but can be easily grasped by readers of *Asimov's*. When Lynn Sherr asked Sally Ride why she wanted to go into space, she replied, "I don't know. I've discovered about half the people would love to go into space there's no need to explain it to them. The other half can't understand and I couldn't explain it to them. If someone doesn't know why, I can't explain it." While the former test pilots must all have known about the dangers that can't be escaped when flying at the edge of the envelope, I'm sure all members of Group 8 were well aware of the inherent risks of spaceflight. In a 1998 interview with *Scholastic.com*, America's first woman astronaut said, "When you're getting ready to launch into space, you're sitting on a big explosion waiting to happen. So most astronauts getting ready to lift off are excited and very anxious and worried about that explosion—because if something goes wrong in the first seconds of launch, there's not very much you can do."

The first in-flight loss of American life occurred on January 28, 1986. Four of the

seven astronauts who died aboard the *Challenger* were members of Group 8. These included the commander, Francis Richard "Dick" Scobee, as well as Ron McNair, Judy Resnik, and Ellison Onizuka. A truly American crew, which meant the disintegration of the *Challenger* brought us a whole lot of heartbreaking firsts.

Although she served on the commissions that investigated the loss of the *Challenger* and later the *Columbia*, *Challenger's* destruction ended Sally Ride's career in space. She became a professor of physics and director of the California Space Institute at the University of California, San Diego. Sally Ride Science and Sally Ride Science Camp for girls, organizations that she co-founded with her partner Tam O'Shaughnessy and others, continue to "educate, engage, and inspire" numerous fourth through eighth grade students.

Sally K. Ride and all TFNG contributed to a legacy that will turn children into scientists and astronauts for generations to come.