

The NASA Astronaut Selection Process

The selection process that NASA used for the selection of the first Space Shuttle specific Astronaut group, or class, was the first time in almost 10 years they had conducted Astronaut selections, due to the availability of Astronauts from previous programs to fill mission positions in the interim years between the Apollo, Apollo-Soyuz, and Skylab missions and the early years of the Space Shuttle Program. As the Space Shuttle was being developed, NASA believed they would be flying many missions per year, with some estimates as high as 60 missions per year! They needed many more Astronauts to be able to fly that many missions per year, and when they advertised the start of the selection process, applications started to roll in. For military people, the applications had to be screened by the respective military personnel centers to make sure applicants met the minimum requirements established by NASA. I remember thinking I was never going to be able to collect everything that had to be submitted, but eventually I got the whole package assembled, and off it went to AFMPC. Time passed. Eventually I learned my package met requirements, and was sent to NASA. More time passed. Then “we” started to hear that some applicants were receiving word that NASA was inviting groups of applicants to Houston, the Johnson Space Center, for a week long session of evaluation. My name was finally included in one of the groups to be evaluated in late September, 1977, which happened to be the week of my 33rd birthday. This was a really nice birthday present!

The week long evaluation consisted of a number activities, including a very thorough physical exam (much more included in it than our annual Air Force flight physicals), psychiatric evaluations, evaluations of new equipment NASA was developing for possible use, and the grand finale of an hour and a half or longer personal interview with a whole team of NASA personnel, any of whom could ask any question that came to mind. Oh, and interspersed throughout the week, were “social” events, or gatherings of other NASA personnel, mostly current Astronauts, their spouses, and some other accomplished NASA Space Operations personnel. I have to say that it was a most interesting, exciting, stressful, and yes, kind of “fun” week. For example, I had never really been evaluated, or talked with, a psychiatrist before, but during this week, there were sessions with two different psychiatrists, and it turned out to be pretty much one was the “good guy”, and one was sort of a “bad guy,” with the first asking just general questions and having a nice discussion, and the other being more demanding and “technical” in his approach, to see if I was easily flustered by his demands and questions. The “social events” could have been easily dismissed by young fighter pilots, but I had decided that everything that happened during the week would be part of my “interview,” so while being “social” I was not going to overdo it or make a complete fool of myself, and I believe that was a good approach.

THE INTERVIEW. I have to admit that the prospect of the interview with all the NASA folks and me was on my mind a good deal from the moment I knew I was going to Houston. Who would be there? What were they going to ask? How technical would it be? My actual interview turned out to be a series of discussions with the NASA participants about things they were interested in, as we went along. It varied from quite technical questions and answers from me about my experiences, my flight test programs, the F-15, my specific favorite areas of flight testing, and all the way to how farming in Iowa had changed since my early days as a kid, and even the fact that I played fast pitch softball on a team at Edwards AFB!

It actually was a very civilized, straightforward discussion of many topics of interest to everyone in the room.

When the week was over, I returned to Edwards AFB and resumed my F-15 test work. I believe my sense at the time was, "well, that was all interesting, it was a lot of work to pull everything together, but I am still young with not as much experience as others who interviewed, so my chances of being selected are small to non-existent!" More time passed-months. Then one morning in late January, 1978, just as I am getting out of bed to get ready for going to work for the day, the phone rings. My first thought was "Oh Damn, someone has died." I answer the phone, and in a few seconds of listening to the voice, and because he introduced himself, I realize I am speaking to the Director of Flight Crew Operations at the Johnson Space Center, who was the Chairman of the Selection Board. After a few more words of pleasantries, he asked me what I thought was one of the strangest questions I had ever been asked. I do not remember the precise words, but it was like: "I wanted to talk to you and see if you are still interested in becoming an Astronaut, because we have selected you as one of the group to begin training in July!" I believe without hesitation, I told him "Yes, I am very interested, and I am very happy to have been selected!" After just a few more words, that was it, the call was over. Diane, my wife, knew this was not an ordinary call, and so when I explained what had just happened, both our jaws were on the floor for a while, while the thoughts began swirling through my head. Now what? I guess I get ready and go to work and see who else has been called. The moment I walked into the Test Ops building, there were two questions asked. "Did you get a phone call this morning?" "Who called you?" Unknown to me, the people already at work had figured out the hard data. If you had been called by the Director of Flight Crew Operations, it meant you had been selected. If you had been called by the personnel assistant, it meant you had not been selected. I had wondered why people were congratulating me when I had not even told them about my call, except who it had been from.

The whole selection process had been almost a year long, and by the time our class reported in July, 1978, it had been over a year long. Over the next 15 years in the Astronaut Office, I learned first hand why it took so long. I participated in two selection processes, as a member of the interview team making recommendations to the Selection Board Chairman. The selection process for our Class of 1978 had nearly 10,000 applicants, and NASA selected 35 Astronauts, a very big class. Today's numbers are higher, and the classes smaller. To conscientiously screen thousands of highly qualified people with highly diverse backgrounds, is an almost impossible task. It is a grueling process, but it does work. And after the field is narrowed, that good old interview is the key to the final selection. After one sees and talks to the real person, the "paper person" is either confirmed or denied.

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