

BOOK ONE

THE SHUTTLE SAGA



THE CHALLENGER:
TRIUMPH, TRAGEDY
AND TRANSITION



'The whole state is proud of him'

Ellison Onizuka, the first Japanese-American astronaut, inspired students in Hawaii. He told them that living in 'a small town in the middle of the Pacific Ocean' should never limit their dreams.



CHAPTER 3

Challenger

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By Joan Heller

Ellison Onizuka grew up doing what little boys do when they're born in paradise.

If he missed a cave in his boyhood explorations of the Hawaiian countryside, it wasn't because he didn't try.

"He did all sorts of little boy things," Mitsue Onizuka said of her child who one day would become a great man.

Running through their rural tropical playground, El and his friends whiled away the after-school hours swimming and imagining magical things about the bushes they hid in.

Soon the caves and the swimming hole would have competition for El's affections — the Boy Scouts of America.

Even before he knew he was going to love math and science, El knew he wanted to be a Cub Scout.

Still in elementary school and bursting with pride at the short pants and the little blue cap of a Cub, El became a Scout for life.

At school, he was discovering math and science. At home, he was helping out around his parents' small general store and picking coffee beans in the family's small garden. The grades stayed high, and the merit badges kept coming.

Accepting a handshake and his high school diploma in 1964, he walked across the stage at Konawaena High as an Eagle Scout.

When El packed his bags for college at the University of Colorado, his treasured Eagle Scout badge was among the belongings he packed for the long trip to the mainland.

There would be trips home in the summer to see the family and to earn tuition money as an aircraft maintenance worker for Aloha Airlines. And there would be a wedding as El promised to

love and honor his childhood sweetheart, Lorna Leiko Yoshida.

The green uniform of a Boy Scout was replaced with the blues of an Air Force cadet as El joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps. He set to work on the bachelor's degree he would receive in Aerospace Engineering in June 1979 and the master's degree he would receive just six months later.

In the months before the second graduation, Lorna and El became the parents of a baby girl, Janelle Mitsue.

Newly commissioned as an Air Force lieutenant, El moved his growing family to McClellan Air Force Base in California. Working as an aerospace flight test engineer at the Sacramento Air Logistics Center at McClellan AFB, he tested nine different fighter jets and worked to make them safer.

As the couple awaited the birth of their second child, El entered the dangerous world of test flight.

After 11 months of training, the Onizukas packed up for Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., with 5-year-old Janelle and the latest addition to the family, 4-month-old Darien Lei Shizue.

His work at the Air Force Flight Test Center meant pushing planes to their limits and teaching new pilots to do the same. What time off he had was for children, sports, fishing and hunting.

The honors kept coming as El moved closer to the ultimate flight.

Promoted from lieutenant to captain to major, he earned the Air Force Commendation Medal, the Air Force Meritorious Service Medal, the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award, the Air Force Organizational Excellence Award and the National Defense Service Medal.

In January 1978, El won the chance to fly higher and faster than any of the jets he had piloted in his nine Air Force years.

NASA wanted to make him an astronaut.

The first Japanese-American selected as an astronaut, he went home a hero.

Invited to deliver the graduation address at a local high school in 1982, Hawaii's favorite son told the students that living in "a small town in the middle of the Pacific Ocean" should never discourage them from pursuing their dreams.

After the speech, Joann Sasaki, a kindergarten teacher in Kona, Hawaii, said "I think the whole state is proud of him."

When the first Space Shuttle blasted off its Kennedy Space Center pad, El was there to help the two who would go into the history books as the first — John Young and Bob Crippen.

For that and the following mission, El did for those astronauts the chores others later would do for him — corralling the luggage, making sure travel arrangements had been made for family members, taking phone messages.

As the Shuttle program progressed, El worked with computer systems, crew equipment and the crew compartment — and bided his time.

Finally, on Jan. 24, 1985, El roared off the KSC launch pad for the mission that would be NASA's best-kept secret.

The all-military crew on the Department of Defense's first Shuttle mission completed its clandestine mission with none of the traditional preflight interviews and ship-to-shore banter.

Back home in Kailua-Kona, it was time to celebrate. There was a motorcade, a parade and a testimonial dinner for a local hero.

He talked about the University of Hawaii banner he'd taken into space — and about next time.

First scheduled to fly on the Space Shuttle Atlantis in November 1985, a quirk of scheduling put El on the doomed Space Shuttle Challenger.

And Mitsue Onizuka's Eagle Scout was gone.



NASA

READY TO FLY: Astronaut candidate Ellison Onizuka, right, gets some help from U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Rankie Schalk as he dons a parachute harness during survival training in August 1978 at Vance Air Force Base in Oklahoma.



NASA

TEACHING TEACHERS: Astronaut Onizuka helps two trainees in the Teacher-in-Space Project — Christa McAuliffe, left, and Barbara Morgan — become familiar with launch and entry stations in a Shuttle mission simulator in September 1985 at Johnson Space Center in Houston.