

BOOK ONE

THE SHUTTLE SAGA



THE CHALLENGER:
TRIUMPH, TRAGEDY
AND TRANSITION





'He was just people'

No matter how much success Ron McNair enjoyed — at school, in sports and on the job — he didn't consider himself special, according to his younger brother, Eric. Ron's philosophy was, 'If I can do it, you can do it, too.'

By Joan Heller

Ron McNair wanted to go to Carver Elementary School, but the principal said no. It didn't matter that the little boy could read: They didn't take 4-year-olds in the first grade. But Carl McNair Sr. knew his son was ready. Ron had been reading for more than a year.

A slight alteration of the birth certificate and a trip beyond the city limits did the trick, and Ron became the littlest kid at Camerontown Elementary School.

That didn't mean his young life would be easy.

Times were hard in the tiny South Carolina town of Lake City. What money Carl earned repairing cars and his wife, Pearl, earned teaching school bought the barest basics for their three sons. The extras came from the tobacco and cotton fields.

Just 8 years old and hoping for summer work, Cub Scout Ron McNair stood on the side

of a dusty rural road with his 9-year-old brother, Carl Jr., and waited. Sooner or later, a farmer would drive by and offer them a day's wage for a day tying tobacco bundles in a barn.

As they grew older and stronger, there were more waits by more dusty roads. The work got tougher — picking cotton and harvesting tobacco. The money they made bought school clothes for the coming year and gave them pocket change until the next summer.

Back home at the aging whitewashed house on Pine Street, Carl and Ron had a menagerie to attend to — Ron's cat Felix, Carl's cat Meanie and a collection of mutts, snakes and turtles they picked up on their neighborhood travels.

They stalked the woods as great hunters, attached balloons to their bikes so the spokes would make motor noises and tried to convince their little brother, Eric, that a watermelon would grow in his stomach if he swallowed one more seed.

"One Saturday morning, I woke up and there was a big lump under the blanket. Ron and

Carl were standing there laughing. They were trying to tell me that the watermelon had grown out of my stomach," Eric said.

Between pranks, Ron made his dad rue the day he promised a dime for every A on a report card.

"For Carl and me, my dad didn't mind," Eric said. "But when it came to Ron, he was about to go broke."

Despite consistently high grades, Ron wasn't tied to the books.

At Carver High School, he spent four years on the varsity football team, two as team captain. He also was captain of the track team, performed in the school's orchestra and marching band and played pop music in a band he and his friends called "The Shades."

After graduating at the top of his class in 1967, Ron headed to North Carolina Agriculture and Technical State University to study physics. A presidential scholar for four years, he graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor's degree.

He moved on to the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

With financial help from the National Fellowship Fund and from fellowships offered by the Ford Foundation and NATO, Ron spent five years working toward his doctorate degree.

During the Massachusetts years, he studied high-pressure lasers, became a karate champion and courted a young woman he met at church, Cheryl Moore.

Newly wed and newly graduated in 1976, Ron went to work as a staff physicist for Hughes Research Laboratories in Malibu, Calif. He continued his work with lasers, including an electro-optic laser for satellite-to-satellite communications.

Within two years, NASA was inviting him to become an astronaut.

A year of training at Johnson Space Center in Houston made it official. He spent his five-year wait for a mission pursuing his laser studies.

While he worked and waited, the McNairs became parents. He later described his children — baby son, Reggie, and daughter, Joy, born two years later — as his most important contributions.

Five months before Joy's birth, Ron finally got his chance to fly. With commander Vance Brand, pilot Robert Gibson and fellow mission specialists Bruce McCandless and Robert Stewart, he helped launch two satellites and film the Cinema 360 film "The Space Shuttle: An American Adventure."

Mugging for pictures in sunglasses, a director's beret and a name patch that said "Cecil B. McNair," he talked about the wonders of the Space Shuttle and about next time.

Next time came Jan. 28, the last flight of the Space Shuttle Challenger.

Looking back at his brother's life, Eric said:

"What he was saying was that, 'If I can do it, you can do it, too.' I think about that. If he could do it, I can. I knew him. He was just people."



NASA

READY TO TAKE PLUNGE: Astronaut candidate Ron McNair watches for directions from an instructor during water survival training July 31, 1978, at Homestead Air Force Base.



FAMILY MAN: Astronaut Ron McNair holds his 2-year-old son, Reggie, Feb. 11, 1984, just after McNair returned from a Space Shuttle mission aboard Challenger.

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