

NASA Astronaut Turns Attention to Acquisition Workforce

From Early Age, Navy Commander Knows What She Wants Out of Life

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At 10:56 p.m. on July 20, 1969, a 10-year-old girl's life was forever changed when she came face to face with her destiny. Like most Americans, Wendy Lawrence sat with her eyes glued to the television watching as Neil Armstrong walked on the moon and proclaimed, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." That one step captured Lawrence's imagination and it became her dream to one day walk in Armstrong's shoes.

With a focus and determination rarely seen in someone so young, the 10-year-old Lawrence devoted herself to becoming an astronaut. She turned to her father, now retired Navy Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence, for advice on what path she should follow to achieve her dream. The elder Lawrence, who was ruled out as one of the first seven astronauts because of a heart murmur, told his daughter to try and follow in the footsteps of current astronauts.

On the Right Path

As a woman, Lawrence knew she had her work cut out for her. It was during her junior year at Fort

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Hunt High School in Alexandria, Va., that the pieces started falling into place when the U.S. Naval Academy opened its doors to women. Once accepted she knew she was on the right path. She explained that 40 percent of astronauts are active-duty military. Like her father and grandfather, she graduated from the academy and became a naval aviator.

With more than 1,500 hours of flight time in six different types of helicopters, the distinguished flight-school graduate has made more than 800 shipboard landings in her Navy career. Lawrence said few things – space flight being one of them – compare to the adrenaline rush she gets when landing on a ship at night.

During her first 10 years in the Navy, Lawrence worked hard to be a good officer while striving to meet criteria NASA requires of astronaut candidates. In 1991, she submitted her astronaut packet up the Navy chain of command and in August of 1992 she was selected as a candidate and sent to Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas.

A Dream Recognized

After 15 months of training, Lawrence was officially an astronaut, which meant she was qualified for assignment as a mission specialist on future space-shuttle missions. Her first mission, STS-67, came March 2, 1995.

Looking out the window at “the beautiful planet,” Lawrence said she was overcome with emotion. After 25 years of dreaming of space flight, she had finally achieved her dream. She explained that the moment was short lived because she knew she had a mission to accomplish. When Lawrence returned to Earth 16 days later, she said she felt like her body was made of concrete.

Lawrence’s next two missions involved flights to the Russian Space Station Mir. In September 1996 she began training at the Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in Star City, Russia, for a four-month mission to Mir. But destiny intervened when a re-supply rocket hit the space station, damaging the Spektr module.

An astronaut who could fit into a Russian cosmonaut uniform was needed to be able to do space walks to repair the damage; Lawrence was replaced by her backup, Dr. David Wolf. Always the team player, Lawrence accepted the setback and focused on helping Wolf get ready for the mission. She went so far as setting up many of his experiments once they docked with the space station.

Because of her ability to speak Russian and also to help make up for replacing her on the Mir mission, NASA assigned Lawrence as a crew member aboard the last shuttle flight, STS-91, to dock with the space station.

Lawrence said she has many fond memories of her time in space. She explained how one night she was able to identify San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco all at once by their lights. Minutes later, she was able to pick out other cities as the Earth continued its rotation.

What makes looking down at Earth from the heavens most meaningful, Lawrence said, is whom she does it with. She said she has flown with three great crews, and developed a special relationship – a close bond – with each.

One of her most rewarding experiences with NASA came last year when she took water-survival training with John Glenn before he made his return to space. She said she was impressed with how easily he fit in and completed the training. What she especially enjoyed was hearing stories from Glenn about her father when he was younger.

Dare to Dream Big

When she isn’t training, flying in space, or performing her Navy duties, Lawrence, like other astronauts, is required to do public speaking engagements on behalf of NASA. She chooses to speak with school-age children.

She said it is important for kids today to hear that they can dream big dreams. She tells them not to listen to negative feedback. “You must believe in yourself. You might not achieve your dreams, but

you can try. And the road along the way is well worth taking.”

Lawrence practices what she preaches. She encourages kids to live one day at a time and do the best they can. She gives a lot of credit to her parents for this philosophy. “My parents never preached that I had to be the best. They just encouraged me to do my best.” She said she tells children that she was once right where they are, and she is living proof they can do anything they put their minds to. “If you do your best and give it your all, you can always keep your head held up high.”

That is how Lawrence has journeyed through life – with her head held high and her eyes clear and focused. Although she has had to make some sacrifices, she said, “I have no regrets. I’ve accomplished my dream and it is everything I thought it was going to be and more.”

What’s Next?

Lawrence said people often ask her, “Now that you’ve achieved this goal, what is your next one?” She tells them that sometimes it’s just nice to sit back and savor the feeling.

While savoring her achievement, Navy Commander Wendy Lawrence, is hard at work in the research and development directorate at the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO). On a rotational assignment from NASA, Lawrence said her current position gives her the opportunity to work with satellites – the unmanned aspects of space flight.

Lawrence, who works with contractors to develop operating systems in space, said her first real experience with the acquisition community came when she was a student at DSMC. The ISAC 99-03 graduate said her time at the college provided an overall foundation for what is involved in the acquisition process.

When her three-year tour at NRO is up, Lawrence said she hopes to once again suit up and do the no-gravity shuffle.