

# Help Wanted: Space Shuttle Astronaut/Tile Mason

by Scott Merritt

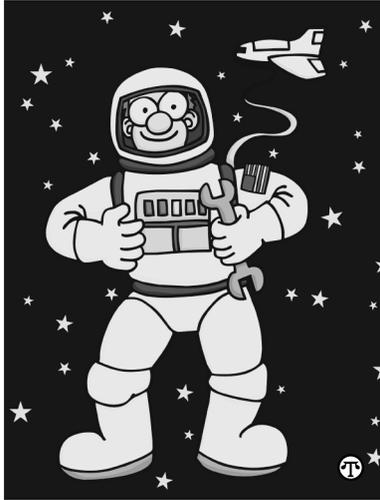
(NAPSA)—Is it me or do they launch the space shuttle these days for the sole purpose of repairing what went wrong on takeoff to avoid catastrophes upon re-entry? I support safety but nowadays the phrase “Let’s light this candle”—famously spoken week after week by Rabbi Mordechai Goldfarb of Congregation Beth Shalom in the Connecticut suburb of Old Saybrook—takes on a new meaning.

The space program was all but dead after a successful series of moon missions in the ’60s and ’70s. Though that was the heyday of LSD, so whether or not man actually walked on the moon remains a mystery. One thing that we know for sure is that Tom Hanks was THIS close to doing so, but didn’t (as illustrated in the Hollywood blockbuster film “Tom Hanks Never Walked on the Moon”).

Launched with much fanfare in the early 1980s, presumably by engineers who hated ’80s electronic music so badly that they couldn’t even stay on the same planet with it, the space shuttle program represented the next revolution in space travel. The orbiter was able to run missions repeatedly...unless, of course, someone forgot to tighten a screw somewhere along the way.

Such was the unfortunate case with the space shuttle Challenger, which completed nine missions before disintegrating on January 28, 1986. This disaster could have been avoided had the O-rings been shaped like actual O’s, rather than rhombuses. Seven lives, and a vehicle almost as cool as a DeLorean, were lost as a result of a simple geometry problem.

The Challenger disaster brought the space program to a



grinding halt—until they built a space shuttle with a much cooler name. Thus was born the Endeavour, which while an American spacecraft, was inexplicably named by a Brit called Reginald Huggins, III—thereby explaining the randomly placed “U.”

Shuttle launches eventually became passé. Launch coverage moved from broadcast networks to the Weekly World News, which features the latest-breaking space news you won’t read anywhere else, such as this actual passage:

“...the fifty-four-year-old astronomer claimed that not only was Pluto still a planet but that it was inhabited by Irish sheepdogs.”

This is clearly news you will see nowhere else.

The shuttle program languished until February 1, 2003, when Cuban percussionist Ramón “Mongo” Santamaría passed away unexpectedly. Ironically, his music was playing at mission control that day when Columbia burned up upon re-entry. NASA scientists determined that a hole formed on the shuttle’s wings, caused by a piece of foam that peeled away from the fuel tank during the launch.

Since then, NASA has become the king of all overprotective mommies when it comes to its space program. Upon launch, every shuttle’s cargo bay is stocked with heat-resistant tiles, a Costco-sized container of Tang and several cases of those diapers the crazy astronaut wore when she drove cross-country faster than a shuttle in order to “talk to” someone who made whoopee with her imagined astronaut boyfriend.

The tiles in the cargo bay are there to replace damage sustained upon takeoff. Meaning: The space program has become the world’s costliest unnecessary repair shop.

In the old days, astronauts lived on the edge. Staring death in the face, and in most cases dying doing so. But they earned the acclaim of the American people.

Noted sci-fi author Larry Niven put it best in 2001 when he said, “Dinosaurs became extinct because they didn’t have a space program. And if we become extinct because we don’t have a space program, it’ll serve us right!” Which begs the question: Has he been conscious for the past 40 years?

Nevertheless, the space program forges ahead. The space station won’t build itself, diapered astronauts need training for their next tile-replacement mission and sci-fi writers need to ignore reality and say ridiculous things about why dinosaurs went extinct.

•*Scott Merritt’s work has appeared in Newsday, Travel + Leisure and Business Traveler. He’s won awards for all sorts of stuff, including raising \$65 million for a charity and having perfect attendance in third grade. His amusing musings can be found on his humor blog at <http://funnylittleworld.blogspot.com>.*