

THREADS *of* HONOR

The True Story of a Boy Scout Troop,
Perseverance, Triumph, and an
American Flag



"This is an
inspiring story that
makes me proud to have
been an astronaut, proud to
be an American, and proud
to be an Eagle Scout."

Guy Bluford, former astronaut
who flew *Challenger's* last
complete mission

GORDON RYAN

FOREWORD BY **SENATOR ORRIN HATCH**

*The published book on the cover of this document expands on the story below told by
Bill Tolbert at an awards dinner hosted by the
United States Air Force Academy, on April 6th 1991.*

*The presentation was awarded the top national award from the
Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge for a public communication in 1991.*

All Rights Reserved © W. Tolbert, 1990

THREADS OF RED & WHITE & BLUE

Henry Ward Beecher once said: “A thoughtful mind when it sees a nations flag, sees not the flag, but the nation itself.” Today, few Americans think much about flags at all, and hardly anyone ever stops to ponder the story behind an individual flag. If they did, it could change their lives. Tonight I want to share an amazing story with you. It is the story of a very simple but special flag, made by the Valley Forge Flag Company in Spring City, Pennsylvania--a flag that changed many lives.

I was an Air Force Officer assigned to the new Air Force Space Command in Colorado Springs. More importantly, I was also Scoutmaster of a brand new Boy Scout Troop with six green young scouts that needed to be motivated to learn to become Eagle Scouts. I had an idea that I thought would give them something to build their pride around. I would get the new Troop an American flag which had flown over the U.S. Capitol. Then to make it something no one else would have, I would get it flown on a space shuttle. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It would be a good way to start these young men on their journey. I never imagined what a journey we all would have.

Getting a “Capitol flag” from one of our Congressional Representatives was the easy part. Getting it flown on the shuttle took more than a year, and every favor I could call upon. During that time our Troop doubled, and so did our excitement. The young men visited aerospace laboratories, flew space simulators, and developed an excitement about space that could not be quenched. However, we did have our disappointments. Twice we were told that our flag would be on the next shuttle launch, only to learn after the flight that it had been “bumped”. Every item flown aboard a space shuttle flight had to be approved by the Administrator of NASA. Then our day came. We were told that our flag would be in the Official Flight Kit of the next shuttle flight, Mission 51-L. After a year and a half, we thought that our dream was ready to come true. Our young Scouts watched the launch of the shuttle Challenger with unbelievable excitement. Most kids had Christa McAuliff to cheer for. We had Christa, and our very own flag. Our hearts soared as we watched the launch, and then sank as we watched in shock as the Challenger exploded. After the shock and disbelief wore off, we realized the magnitude of what had happened and wept together at the loss of the crew.

It was a special crew. Seven completely different men and women from different religions, different cultures, different professions. Yet, all sharing a common dream to carry the honor, pride, and spirit of this country into space.

For a long time none of us were the same. Our Troop had lost its spirit in that explosion. To help deal with the emotional paralysis, I presented each of the young men with a small U.S. flag which NASA had intended to pack with our large flag, but which had been left behind. I challenged each young man to do something really special with his flag in remembrance of the special troop flag which had been lost with the Challenger. I challenged them to take it to the Moon or Mars in their lifetime, or to the bottom of the ocean or the top of our highest mountain or to Congress when they were elected to serve. This challenge and the small emblem of our flag seemed to help, and the Troop went back to living and growing. Yet, deep inside of me was a strange feeling--a sense that flag had been on that particular flight, after being bumped twice, for a reason. For some reason, I felt that it had survived, and I began to call everyone in NASA and the Air Force that I could think of to inquire if it, or part of it, had been recovered. Everyone I asked said the same thing: "It probably didn't survive the explosion and fire. If it did, it will probably never be found. If it is found, you won't ever hear about it. If you do, you won't ever get it back." After months of inquiries, I finally gave up.

Then one morning in September 1986, as I left for my office, I stopped to pick up the newspaper on my porch, and saw a headline. "NASA to return Challenger Flag to Boy Scout Troop." I let out a sound that later I could only explain as an "uttering of the heart" and ran back inside and began making telephone calls. It was our flag, and it was coming home to us! We had no idea what condition it would be in, but we would cherish and protect it.

On December 18th, 1986, at Falcon Air Force Station, Colorado, Colonel Guy Bluford, an Astronaut and an Eagle Scout presented the flag to me as the Scoutmaster of Troop 514 of Monument Colorado. I in turn presented it to a Troop of the most reverent and stunned young Scouts that I have ever witnessed. You see, the flag had survived unscorched, unstained, unmarked. Some said it was a miracle, some said providence. One thing that everyone agreed on was that there was an amazing spirit in the auditorium that day, and that seven pairs of unseen hands helped to unfold our flag. As we prepared to leave the auditorium that day I shared a quote from President Andrew Jackson with the Scouts:

"You have the highest of human trusts committed to your care. Providence has showered on this favored land blessings without number, and has chosen you, as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race. May he who

holds in His hands the destinies of nations make you worthy of the favors He has bestowed, and enable you, with pure hearts, and pure hands, and sleepless vigilance, to guard and defend to the end of time the great charge He has committed to your keeping.”

As we left with the Challenger Flag many of us thought that its journey was over. In truth, it had just begun. You see, the story of this miracle flag soon spread. Within weeks, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Warren Burger, who was also President of the Bicentennial Commission, designated the flag “the Official Flag of the Bicentennial of the Constitution”. Soon after that, our Troop was designated the Official Delegation from the State of Colorado and contributions began flowing in to fund our trip to Philadelphia to participate in the bicentennial program. The day that we arrived in Philadelphia Paul Harvey released a radio broadcast that told “the rest of the story” about our flag. At the conclusion of his moving presentation he was weeping as he recited the star spangled banner, a tribute written about another great flag. As a result of this and other media coverage, everywhere we went we were met by people waiting to see and touch this great flag. Many of them wept. All were reverent in its presence.

It made me realize that if you were to choose one item to survive the loss of the Challenger and its crew which best epitomized their life, service and sacrifice, what better than an American Flag. And if you were to choose someone to serve as its honor guard and represent its future, what better than a Boy Scout Troop of proud young men.

On the 17th of September, 1987, twenty young scouts and their leaders “presented the colors” to the 14,000 who were in attendance at the nationally televised “We The People 200, Constitutional Gala”. Suddenly, I found myself standing on stage with 100 brass trumpets blowing, 100 members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir on both sides, Sandi Patti singing the most beautiful version of the Star Spangled Banner that I have ever heard, and 14,000 people from all walks of American life with their hands over their hearts and tears in their eyes. I had a strange feeling. I could feel the cartilage in my back stretching. It struck me that I had never stood this tall before, and that after 20 years in a military uniform, the proudest moment of my life had come in a Scoutmasters uniform, beside this flag. I thought of the famous farewell address that General Douglas MacArthur gave at West Point where he talked of “Duty, Honor, Country”. I also envisioned Lord Baden Powell when he founded the Boy Scout Program. His words came into my mind. “On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty, to God and my country...”. The meaning of these words became truly clear to me. I also realized for the first time why it is that we pledge allegiance to the flag. It is more than colored cloth. It is the symbol of our nation, and the principles upon which it is founded.

The journey now continued into Washington D.C., with tours of the White House and Congress, and a special stop for me. On the 18th of September, I took the Challenger Flag back to the Capitol building and had it re-flown. Thus completing its journey from our nation's Capitol, to the tops of mountains, to the edge of space, to the ocean depths, and back.

The 19th of September 1987, was our last day in Washington D.C., so we asked what the young men wanted to do before we left. They replied that they something important to accomplish. They wanted to go to Arlington Cemetery and present the flag one last time at the graves of those Challenger Astronauts which are buried there. In perfect uniforms, with a devotion not often seen in the faces of our youth, the flag was unfurled again. The ceremony was simple. There were no brass trumpets or angelic choirs, but the moment was just as special for those they honored, and all who watched.

Is the journey of the Challenger Flag complete? Perhaps it is. Perhaps not. All that I know for certain is that I will never look at any flag the same way again. Neither will anyone else that was touched by this simple piece of cloth. Why? Because we now understand that every flag is more than just threads of red, and white, and blue.

Tonight as I stand in your presence there is something else that I would like to share with you. You that are here today, are here for a reason. You see, you hold the future of our country in your hands. As Andrew Jackson said: "You have the highest of human trusts committed to your care. Providence has showered on this favored land blessings without number, and has chosen you, as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race."

We are all here this evening for a reason. You have the skills, the knowledge, and the challenge. You need only believe that there is nothing that is impossible. Look at the incredible journey that this flag has made. Look at how it has made you feel about the freedoms that you enjoy in this nation which it represents.

As you look upon this flag tonight remember that you are the threads of red and white and blue that make up the fabric of our country. The challenge now is yours.

As Andrew Jackson put it: "May He who holds in His hands the destinies of nations make you worthy of the favors He has bestowed, and enable you, with pure hearts and pure hands and sleepless vigilance to guard and defend to the end of time the great charge that He has committed to your keeping."