

# Fantasy and Science Fiction

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*Including Venture Science Fiction*

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*Thirty year-old Alfred Connable is a poli sci graduate of the University of Michigan and an MA (Yale) in playwriting. This somewhat unusual combination of studies has produced two plays, "Silver Eagle" and "Shadows in the Court", a tour at the UN with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and such UP news beats as the Jackson prison riots and the Pauline Campbell hammer slaying. Such a combination was not always unusual. For two thousand years the only way to become a member of the Imperial Chinese Civil Service was by inditing essays and poems based on classical literary themes; an agreeable style in writing on the Greek and Roman authors of the Golden and the Silver Age was for centuries one of the best means to political advancement in England; and in the widespread world of the Thousand and One Nights, what better way to wazirate than a deft hand or tongue at couplets? . . . That these days may be returning—indeed, may already have returned, is the message of Mr. Connable's story herewith presented. Having fired off this missile in salute to poetry and the age of space, Mr. C., by his rocket's red glare, is currently engaged upon a book about Tammany Hall, and on several closet plays.*

## **THE SECRET FLIGHT OF FRIENDSHIP ELEVEN**

*by Alfred Connable*

IN ITS MAJOR DETAILS, PROJECT Friendship Eleven was perhaps the best-kept secret since Hiroshima. It was initiated on

August 14, 1961, following a massive screening of potential astronauts. Because of the flight's special purposes (unknown even

to us before blast-off time), qualifying interviews and examinations used rigid criteria which were largely foreign to the previous experience of the examiners.

Seven astronauts were chosen, but by the end of the first month's tests it became apparent that one of them was unsuitable. This was our first confused clue that something extraordinary was afoot. Robin Hood (his true name) had been a picturesque aviator of some renown in the early 1940's. Barely two weeks before Pearl Harbor, he had won the Distinguished Flying Cross for destroying nine suspicious aircraft, including occupants, which had approached him one evening in a beautiful moonlit sky over the Fiji Islands.

It was a particular misfortune that Major Hood should fail so early in the training period. Project spokesmen had considered him a prime contender for orbit. Curiously, they repeatedly praised him as the leading, and most consistently articulate, contributor to the poetry section of *The Air Force Times*. Incidentally (which was not known to us at the time), his demise left the Project without a single experienced test pilot.

Major Hood's crisis arose with the Thematic Apperception Phase (TAP), which cruelly pierced that Achilles heel ostensibly caloused by twenty-two years of exemplary service. On the initial test—a fifteen-second response to

a cleverly drawn juxtaposition of a pencil sharpener and a very bright sun—he wrote: "This looks to me like Man in the cosmos of his SOUL, beckoning forces higher than him, still, at the same time withal, A-OK."

Our understanding was that the "A-OK" ruined him. It was, in fact, the one phrase which the examiners had been ordered to rule as an automatic flunk. Hood himself was heard to mutter as he left the TAP cell: "I couldn't help it. I had to say it. Had to . . ." The next day he dropped from sight, leaving his six fellows to face the Spectrum Differentiation Phase, in which he would have excelled. This was an "irony of the training period," according to the dejected press officer, Lt. Dewey.

The remaining half-dozen were all civilians, two of them veterans of the Flying Tigers (in support capacities), three of them survivors of the post-Korean recession, and one an ardent pacifist. It was on the latter, James Madison Johnson, that the highest hopes were now pinned, for in addition to his talents as essayist and operetta composer, he was a light-skinned Negro. A Johnson orbit would certainly have served to elevate the first of his race to the highest position yet attained.

"Ironically" (as Lt. Dewey later explained it), Johnson had his greatest difficulty in the Color Description Phase. What did him

in, after he had conveyed quite accurately the qualities of the first and second sunrise, was the third: "Again I sense a feeling of brilliance. Brilliance of light, form, space, yea, ideas. Ideas both white and black."

Six weeks before the launching there were but five men to choose from, though we were given to believe, for obvious reasons, that Johnson was still on the scene. Very soon thereafter were lost three of the finest candidates in the course of what must be considered in retrospect a completely arbitrary experiment with minimal bearing on what was to be accomplished. The Zero G Communication Phase tripped up both Flying Tiger alumni and one of the post-Korean survivors in its use of the following multiple-choice question:

- 17) Did you feel in the *first* moment of weightlessness:
- a) A sense of release from earthly burdens and anxieties.
  - b) A oneness with Nature, God, Universal Law, and/or The Void.
  - c) An immediate desire to re-assume earthly burdens and anxieties.
  - d) A sense of discovery, uniqueness, I amness.
  - e) Something quite indescribable to those never having been at Zero G.

The correct answer, of course, was a, b, *and* d, but the ill-starred trio, all being college graduates, selected only one of these apiece, and have since charged privately that they were tricked. This may well have been the case. Susceptibility to trickery was not a criterion which we in the pressroom were led to believe was relevant to the flight. Nonetheless, two exceptionally qualified men were still in the running. For this reason, after visiting with a finely dressed youth described only as a Washington "operative," the wash-outs were careful not to give their complaints public airing.

In the aftermath of the disaster which was to befall Friendship Eleven, there was considerable speculation (all unofficial) that the last two phases of the training program—*i.e.*, Spontaneity of Expression and Fidelity to Stated Duty—had been eliminated for fear of losing the last two astronauts. Total attrition would have involved a six-month wait for the next cycle, something which the Senate Space Committee, it was thought, would have dealt with unkindly.

The two qualifiers, one of whom would be selected (for maximum security) only minutes before blast-off, were closely guarded from our surveillance. Lt. Dewey, a capable chap on loan from the Marine Corps, did impart, however, the salient facts: Samson

Mahong, 29, of Chinese and Sicilian parentage, was a sculptor and biographer from Logansport, Ind., divorced, two children, editor of a prize-winning anthology of the late Edgar Guest's selected works. Basil Fitchell, 52, only son of a Lutheran minister, was a prominent druggist and part-owner of a leading art gallery in Yonkers, N.Y., married, no children, had worked in the late 1940's for the Army Signal Corps, recipient of a Meritorious Award for three training films based on Rudyard Kipling's "Gunga Din."

Photographs indicated Mahong to be a rather thin-faced and tired man with no visible sense of humor, slightly stooped shoulders, carefully pressed dungarees, probably a person of solitude. Fitchell (in a snapshot taken eight years previously) bore himself proudly despite a spreading paunch, wore a slight smile on his fatly handsome face, blinked his eyes shut at the moment the camera snapped. No further information about the surviving candidates was given us, though one reporter from a large midwestern daily threatened to bring suit against Lt. Dewey if he did not disclose vital statistics of height, weight, and blood pressure. The lieutenant, a pleasant and conscientious fellow, explained politely that such information was not pertinent to the scope of the space shot, and most of us felt he was probably correct.

During the fortnight previous to the launching, we were barred from the missile base. Most of this waiting time was spent sunning, swimming, and spreading false alarms in crowded bars among envious colleagues who vaguely sensed the importance of our clandestine assignment. In time we were searched out in one of these bistros by a breathless messenger. The event, he said, would take place the following morning.

According to the notes, both Mahong and Fitchell were aroused from their rooms in a beachside motel at 4:38 a.m. to eat breakfast with Lt. Dewey, Mrs. Fitchell, and several unidentified Project officials. Lt. Dewey informed us later that Mahong consumed a very small bowl of spaghetti and rice, an end slice of unbuttered toast, and two cups of an unspecified soup. Fitchell had a softboiled egg, three strips of bacon (broken into the egg), some kind of crackers brought by his wife, and a tall glass of prune juice. The men talked of their good fortune, according to Lt. Dewey, to be participating in the flight, neither aware which would be the lucky pilot. Neither displayed any apprehension, although Mrs. Fitchell noted that her husband had suffered a mild seizure two weeks before.

A van rolled up to the motel at 5:52 and the two men climbed aboard eagerly. Mrs. Fitchell re-

mained behind in the motel to watch television, though she knew the flight would not be telecast. Fitchell explained that it was not unusual for her to watch the early morning programs. Mahong was characteristically silent during the 14 minute ride to the base, but Fitchell talked quite animatedly, Lt. Dewey recalled, about the importance of the flight and his determination that he, and not Mahong, would make it.

At 6:06 the van pulled into the fog-enshrouded launching area. Project officials had emphasized that weather would not be a factor in the flight of Friendship Eleven. Most of us had overslept and when we arrived at 6:47 we heard scuffling within the van. Lt. Dewey stepped out and walked toward us with a cheerful grin. He appeared to be swaying slightly, but an aide rushed up with a container of black coffee which steadied his course. Three minutes later, Fitchell and Mahong, both in space suits, emerged also from the van. The sound of scuffling was never explained.

As Fitchell and Mahong neared the blockhouse, a tall General with two stars, whom we did not recognize, opened the door and whispered to them briefly. The three men disappeared through the doorway. Lt. Dewey escorted us to a partially rusted press trailer, related the astronauts' break-

fast menu, composed a short quip about his being unaccustomed to public speaking, and hurried over to the control center. It was now one minute and twenty seconds past seven.

The trailer was fairly cold so we broke out a thermos bottle of rum for purposes of temperature adjustment. Through the small windows we observed Friendship Eleven on the launching pad, but fog hampered our vision. There seemed to be little activity around the pad and we concluded that the countdown was going extremely well. At 7:12 the loudspeaker clicked on and Lt. Dewey's voice, poised and lowered in pitch, could be heard clearly. He spoke very slowly with admirable detachment.

"One. Two. Three. Good morning. This is Control welcoming you to the premier flight of Friendship Eleven. You will note that telephones, teletypes, and typewriters are not functioning at present and will not function until the go signal is given. All of you must by now be aware of the significance of this morning's shot. It is, in the deepest sense, Man's first voyage into the unknown. Our purpose here is *not* to test technical devices, physiological stresses, or—"

Excited voices were babbling in the background and the loudspeaker clicked off. We jotted down a few notes and passed

the thermos until 7:17 when Lt. Dewey resumed.

"Countdown is now at T minus 2 minutes. Basil Fitchell of Yonkers, N.Y., has been selected to be the astronaut aboard Friendship Eleven. This choice does not cast any . . . Listen here, Mahong —"

Again the voices. The loudspeaker ceased for only a few seconds, then clicked on again.

"Mr. Fitchell is now boarding Friendship Eleven."

Through the fog we saw Fitchell dashing for the elevator.

"Countdown is now at T minus 90 seconds. Mr. Fitchell has been selected from more than 800 applicants on the basis of sensitivity, sense of adventure—Countdown now holding at T minus 79 seconds. Countdown is holding at T minus 79 seconds to enable Mr. Fitchell to reach the capsule prior to blast-off."

Fitchell, we observed, was now climbing into the capsule. He did not look back. Fog closed in tightly around the launching pad and we could see nothing more.

"Countdown now moving again. Recovery vessels are already at full steam toward positions approximately 58 miles East-South-East of Pigeon Key, Florida, for pick-up after one orbit. Gentlemen, today for the first time Man sails into the spatial ocean as a voyager of old. Such as Columbus, Magellan, Disraeli.

And Balboa. Men who, and there were also women, set down in their logs, odes, and private correspondence to friends and close relatives, the poetry of discovery. This is our tribute to—Countdown now at 53 seconds. This is our great purpose today: to record Man's true reaction to the new adventure of space. To send forth once again Man the poet, the restless dreamer, the creative spirit. That is our sole mission. Something that has been missing from —31 seconds to go, gentlemen. Our anchorman today is Mr.—is Astronaut First Class Sam Mahong of Logansport, Indiana. Prior to later censorship and final passage on national transmission, we shall make available to you simultaneous broadcast of orbital conversations between Mr. Fitchell and Mr. Mahong, subject to—12 seconds. Is Fitchell strapped in there? Mr. Fitchell is secured at ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Zero. Ignition. Lift-off. Best of luck, Mr. Fitchell."

The blast-off was unusually impressive, Lt. Dewey later told us. Through the fog we saw only a faint light which rose quickly and vanished. There was little tension to be felt, similar to, say, the departure of a shuttle flight from New York to Washington. Lt. Dewey's voice, betraying just a quiver of excitement, nudged us from quiescence.

"This is Control. Mr. Fitchell is go for one orbit. Repeat. Mr. Fitchell is go. We have inserted him in outer space. Anchorman Mahong will commence earth-to-space interrogation."

Static blurred Mahong's opening and we heard what could only have been Fitchell's exuberant voice from high above us.

"This is Basil Fitchell in Friendship Eleven to Samson Mahong in Control. Eleven to Control. Fitchell to Mahong. Zero G Communication. I am feeling a sense of release from earthly burdens and anxieties, a oneness with Nature, God, Universal Law, and/or The Void, a sense of discovery, uniqueness, I amness, Roger."

Mahong spoke, we felt, with some distaste: "Control to Eleven. What is your attitude, Fitchell?"

Fitchell: "34 degrees. Exactly 34."

Mahong: "*Your* attitude!"

Fitchell: "Roger. Beg pardon. Capsule tilted to slightly less than 34."

Mahong: "*Your* attitude, you —"

Fitchell: "Over and out."

Mahong: "It's clear, General, you should have sent—"

The loudspeaker clicked off. Four of us, moving softly to avoid awakening a sleeping associate, reached for the telephones. The lines were still dead. Lt. Dewey's voice sounded again, this time in a soothing tone.

"Mr. Fitchell's attitude is described as one of serenity. Peace. A feeling of the pioneer at rest. He feels apart from, and yet part of, all the peoples of the world below him. Also a sense of universality with brothers in all systems above and beyond him. His perception is go."

Mahong's voice chimed in: "What does it feel like to be in space, Fitchell?"

Fitchell: "I can make out the coast of Africa. Now darkest Africa. India coming up. It cannot be described. Gunga Din."

Mahong: "What are you feeling?"

Fitchell: "I am go. I have a feeling of go. The sunrise was remarkable."

Mahong: "Colors. Quick!"

Fitchell: "The usual sunrise, but seen from a different angle. Usual but unusual. Interesting. The numbers on my instrument panel read 17-428-00-7039846-go."

Mahong: "Exultation! Any exultation?"

Fitchell: "Get off it, Mahong. I'm an astronaut now."

Loud shouts emitted from somewhere in the control center. A frenzied voice, unidentifiable to us, shrieked into the microphone:

"Fitchell! Stop playing with those manual controls!"

The loudspeaker shut off. We put our noses to the window as if for some reason we expected to see



Fitchell come plummeting down on our heads from out of the fog. We knew by now he was well over the Indian Ocean. Four minutes later Lt. Dewey spoke again, with a trace of distraction.

"This is Control. Mr. Fitchell's orbit, for reasons yet unexplained, appears to be slipping southward. Such slippage, however, is no cause for alarm . . . Mr. Fitchell's altitude is now 120 miles over Australia . . . we believe it is Australia, yes . . . Now 110 miles . . . He may be . . ."

Mahong was shouting desperately: "Fitchell! What is it like?"

Fitchell's voice was faraway: "Wonderful! You press the button third from the left and a green light goes on!"

Mahong: "Is there a feeling of joy? Of sorrow?"

Fitchell: "The green light went off. Better have 'em double-check that."

Mahong: "Is there no onrushing into your senses, man, of some new, wildly new, concept?"

Fitchell: "Like Columbus, Magellan, Disraeli. And Balboa. Oscar Wilde. Madame Curie. Me, Basil Fitchell. According to my instruments, the heat in the capsule has now reached 203 degrees."

There was a scream from either the blockhouse or the capsule, it

was hard to tell which, and the loudspeaker snapped off. After a long moment we heard Lt. Dewey once more:

"This is Control. The flight of Friendship Eleven was, for all intents and purposes, a stunning success, albeit we failed to complete the entire orbit. Velocity, altitude, attitude, fueling, and electronic coordination were maximal. Important information was transmitted and received on hypersensitive reaction to poetic experiential data. This will be fully calculated at a later date. The capsule descended, without benefit of parachute, approximately 42 miles due East of the New Zealand coastal line. No recovery vessels are present in the area. Scientists here at Control foresee no setback in our space program resultant from the dislocation of this capsule. No instrument packages were aboard which are not readily available in large quantities at Project warehouse. Newsmen will remain at their posts for a briefing to commence in eight minutes."

After the briefing, we all went over to the motel to check in on Mrs. Fitchell, who was watching a commercial announcement on "As The World Turns". She was saddened by our news, she said, but not really surprised.

