

Scott Williams

Of Poetry & Space: This Texan's Orbit is Soaring Adventure

Scott Williams has his application in to NASA because hell, he laughs, "what pilot wouldn't want to fly the Space Shuttle?" Becoming a pilot-astronaut is the goal, with service as a mission specialist runner-up. And phooey to any who pooh-pooh the plan after getting wind of Williams's age: 42. "I have two words for that," says the Continental Airlines First Officer of 16 years' standing. "John Glenn." What's more, the 14,000-hour ("mostly jets") career flyer has all the grit and goods required of one who'd tinker on the space station or pilot an Earth-orbiting ship. He says in the drawl native to his Kingwood, Texas home: "I can bench-press 255 so I'm not in bad shape." And having recently earned his degree in Professional Aeronautics from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, FL, Williams has mastered the severest test yet to his derring-do: statistics. "Hey," he jokes, "if I can make it through two classes of statistics, I can make it to Mars in a rowboat."

Obviously, the witty Scott Williams loves a good laugh.

And his wry way with words serves him well those times he's not easing a Boeing 767-400 into the air for work, or for play piloting his schoolteacher wife, Sabra, and gymnast daughter, Lindsey, 14, to some fabulous far-flung tropical locale in the family Cessna 310: Williams is a published poet. He explains his creative process like this:

"On layover in Anchorage, Alaska, I woke up in my hotel room and noticed the wallpaper color (purple and gray), and also a painting of flowers. The colors reminded me of a model airplane I had as

a kid, a WWI German fighter, and I related the flowers to tulips in Holland for some reason." Pshaw all you want over this airborne artist's thoughts; he's going to have the last laugh, for out of this mental flight of fancy there developed *A Bubble of Tranquility*, Williams's deeply thoughtful



Cernan, Commander of Apollo 17.

Fires frequently are lit under this poet of the skies. As a flying-besotted kid in Charlotte, NC, Williams joined the Civil Air Patrol, a "first big experience with aviation" that well-prepped him for what came next: honor as the top-ranked cadet in ROTC; four years of stellar US Air Force service as an air traffic controller; work as a flight instructor; and finally, in 1987, a rewarding job with Continental. Along the way there have been many memorable planes: the Airbus he trained on in France; a twin turbo prop Beechcraft 99; and "the most beautiful planes in the world, though actually very ugly," the Shorts 330 and 360. Lately taking the stick of a high-performance L-39 Albatross jet fighter has added heft to the astronaut hopeful's resume. At one point, he recalls, "going from Captain on a Shorts 360 to flight engineer on an A300 Airbus was like going from a Model A to a Lamborghini." All in a day's fun with flying for this imaginative pilot who loves to travel to Alaska, Costa Rica – he

and his wife speak Spanish – and Brazil.

"Seems flying is in my blood," says Williams, who may "shop around" for a master's program in aeronautical science with the specialty of space and space station operations. "There's this tremendously vast frontier we haven't explored," he says, and hints of *The Dream*: "I'd love to fly the fastest thing on the planet. What a pretty unique experience and quite an accomplishment!" Indeed. So when NASA opens his application and perhaps ridiculously is tempted to think *old man*, Williams will be ready with all

the right words – at the very least – to offer compelling argument on his own behalf. As one stanza of his poem *A Bubble of Tranquility* goes:

*But today the winds are calm
And the enemy is gone
It's just the plane and I
Dancing in an empty sky*

"Aviators may relate, military or civilian," he says of the entire poem, which juxtaposes the romance of the air with the bitter reality of combat, "because we all deep down enjoy flying for the pure fun of it." Adds the captain who writes about "whatever thing just hits me": "I've even written poems about the Newark, NJ airport!"

And that, dear NASA, has got to be the kind of pilot-astronaut you'd beg to be aboard. After all, the men and women on their way to Mars are gonna love it with this kind of levity along on the ride. ✕



Light on the controls/They do as they're told/In the sky she gracefully frolics...Williams's poetic words are inspired by his Cessna 310 flying formation (above); the happy family man with wife Sabra and daughter Lindsey (below)

