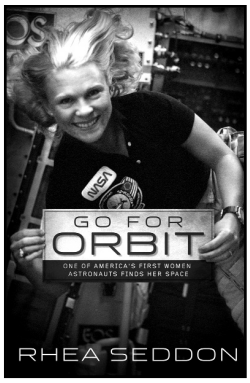
Book Review

Go For Orbit



By Rhea Seddon

Your Space Press, 2015
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At last, one of the first American women to become an astronaut has published a memoir of her spaceflight experiences in the Space Shuttle era. Rhea Seddon's career with NASA spanned almost 20 years from her selection in 1978 until 1997. During that time she held a variety of positions, flew on three missions, married a pilot astronaut (Robert "Hoot" Gibson) who flew five times, and gave birth to three children. Dr. Rhea Seddon, general surgeon, also maintained her proficiency in hospital emergency rooms on weekends.

Seddon's story has a similar pattern to others in this genre as she recounts her education, career preparation, application and selection to be an astronaut, training, technical assignments, and flight experiences. To these, she brings two distinctive points of view: one as a medical professional and the other as a self-described "Southern lady." Both perspectives add new information and insight to the literature of spaceflight.

Seddon applied to be an astronaut, and then eagerly sought assignments, to put her medical abilities and interests to work in space. After basic training, her first role was to organize trauma care as medical coordinator for the search-and-rescue helicopter teams positioned at Shuttle landing sites in case early missions ended in emergencies. Her next job was to operate the Shuttle's remote manipulator arm on a satellite deployment mission (STS-51D in 1985) and also carry out biomedical experiments, including the first use of an echocardiograph device in space.

After that, as a physician and the lead astronaut for crew equipment, she joined the *Challenger* investigation task force, working through recovered vehicle debris and witnessing the effort to identify crew remains and cause of death. She flew again on both Spacelab Life Sciences missions (STS-40 in 1991 and STS-58 in 1993), the second time as payload commander. On these ambitious missions she investigated changes throughout the body in microgravity, with herself and crewmates (and laboratory rats) as test subjects. Seddon's detailed accounts of these experiences, and her ability to explain anatomy, physiology, and medical equipment and procedures distinguish this book from other astronaut memoirs.

The other distinctive quality is Seddon's willingness to admit to her emotions—the angst of leaving her children for the risk of spaceflight, the joy of safe returns, the easy flow of tears in good times and hard ones, embarrassments, frustrations and disappointments, and the surprising self-doubts that arose with each new astronaut challenge, doubts that she defeated with dogged persistence. Such doubts are not the kind of admissions that men typically make, yet they are not uncommon among women who enter a male domain. Seddon, a Tennessee native, was groomed in a Southern style of manners, a more likely reason for her self-effacing modesty than a genuine shortage of confidence. Her petite size was her only limitation, putting EVA out of her range because the smallest suit was too large. In all else, she succeeded.

As a mid-century child, Seddon grew up within the feminine gender norms of the 1950s and early 1960s, but she came of age as new possibilities opened. The smart high school cheerleader became one of a handful of women in pre-med classes and medical school, and then the only woman resident in general surgery. She was maverick enough to become an astronaut, yet traditional enough to want a happy marriage and children. She and NASA had to figure out how to accommodate both; there were no policies yet for astronaut corps couples or astronaut pregnancies or astronaut maternity leave. The novelty of their marriage and the birth of their first "astrotot" made national news. Rhea Seddon achieved her share of firsts and also managed to shape her life as a physician, astronaut, wife, and mother on her terms, staying true to both her feminine and feminist impulses. The subtitle of her book makes that point: *One of America's First Women Astronauts Finds Her Space*.

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