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Book Review

Parazynski S, Flory S. *The Sky Below: A True Story of Summits, Space, and Speed*. Little A Publisher; 2017; 325 pgs.; Hardcover; 24.95; available in paperback and as an eBook.

As a crewmember on five Space Shuttle flights, Astronaut Scott Parazynski has had a prolific spaceflight career, but these flight experiences comprise only a part of “The Sky Below,” his memoir of a remarkable life of exploration. Intended as a tribute to the NASA Mission Control engineers that practically overnight engineered a bare-bones fix to a rip in one of the International Space Station (ISS) solar array wings during STS-120, the book is primarily an adventure story that would appeal to both the lay reader and the medical professional.

Parazynski begins his story with his first summit attempt on Mt. Everest, which provides the context for his life story growing up in Senegal, Lebanon, Greece, and revolution-torn Iran, training for the Olympic trials in the Men’s Luge while attending medical school, and immersing himself in climbing the cliffs and peaks of Colorado during his medical residency. His retelling of his spaceflight experiences is lean on details, but provides a survey of major events of the late Shuttle era: a scientific mission observing Earth atmospheric changes (STS-66), Mir Space Station resupply (STS-86), a life sciences mission with the second flight of John Glenn (STS-95), and early construction of the ISS, including installation of the Station’s Canadian robotic arm (STS-100) and one of its solar arrays (STS-120).

As a physician, Parazynski naturally gravitates to describing the medical issues and physiological challenges associated with spaceflight: decompression sickness, radiation, musculoskeletal atrophy, soft tissue injury during extravehicular activity, and

other in-flight medical events. “The Sky Below” provides both the physician and patient perspectives for these issues, and may serve as an intriguing introduction to space medicine for the interested layperson and medical professional. His descriptions of particular medical events—laceration, compression injury, eye contamination—are welcome additions to the sparse space-flight medical event knowledge base available in the popular press.

The insight Parazynski provides into the mindset of the astronaut is perhaps the most useful aspect of the book to the practicing space medicine physician. His boundless curiosity, confidence, and fierce work ethic suffuse his stories, and he particularly focuses on his mental preparation technique of “previsualization of success,” which he adopted during luge training and used throughout his career. Perhaps of greatest value to the reader will be Parazynski’s deeply personal accounts of the toll his spaceflight career had on his family and his struggles to recover from the loss of colleagues in the Shuttle Columbia accident.

The nonmedical audience will enjoy the ‘The Sky Below’ as a well-written and entertaining snapshot of a piece of shuttle space-flight history and, while not intended to be a medical reference, should still provide valuable insights for the space and aviation medical professional into the physical and emotional challenges that face athletes and explorers at the extreme edge of experience.

Reviewed by

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