

:: A trip to Philadelphia ::

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On an October morning in 1954, when I was a research fellow in the Cardio-Pulmonary Laboratory at Bellevue Hospital in New York, the nurse called me to the telephone.

“You don’t know me, Dr. Fritts,” the man on the phone said, “but my colleagues and I know a good deal about you, and in the light of what we know, we believe you are uniquely qualified for a job we need to fill.

“I can’t tell you my name or the names of the agencies I represent, nor can I, at the moment, tell you more about the job. I can, however, say that the salary would be around \$28,000.

“Please think about whether you would be willing to change jobs, and then, if it’s all right with you, I’ll call again next week.”

As I stood there, trying to grasp what the man had said, I had trouble deciding about a second call. Yet the \$28,000 salary had caught my attention. No wonder. My salary, from a Life Insurance Medical Research Fund Fellowship, was \$4,200.

I said it would be all right for him to call again.

That night my wife and I considered all the possibilities we could think of to explain the call. Was it a joke? A hoax? A message from some secret group, like one of the Communist cells Senator McCarthy had talked about?

“We shall just have to wait and see what turns up in the call next week,” my wife said.

I had never, since coming to New York a year earlier, considered changing jobs. The laboratory was a happy place, and my work was both interesting and instructive. More importantly, my bosses and mentors, Dr. Andre Cournand and Dr. Dickinson Richards, were fine men and fine teachers. It would take an extraordinary offer to induce me to leave.

:: Uniquely qualified . . . for what? ::

And what in my background made me “uniquely

qualified” for the job? I thought back over my life: in college I had earned a degree in electrical engineering; during World War II I had served on an LST in the South Pacific; and following my discharge from the Navy, I had entered medical school. After graduating and then completing an internship and residency, I had come to Bellevue for training in heart and lung disease. I couldn’t see anything in this record that made me “uniquely qualified” for a job of any sort.

On the other hand, I saw no reason to turn the man down before learning what he had in mind. So when he called the next week, I told him there was an outside chance I might be willing to change jobs.

“I’m pleased,” he said. “And as a first step, I would like you to come to our home base in Philadelphia next Thursday for a two o’clock appointment. The people there will be expecting you, and will be glad to answer your questions.”

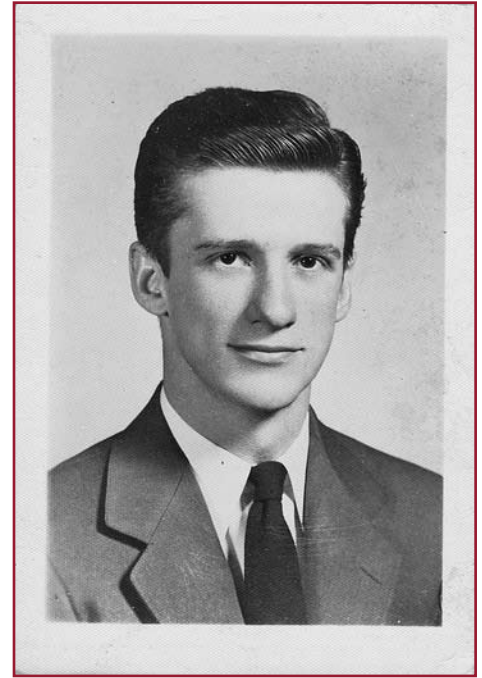
So the next Thursday I rode the train to Philadelphia, hailed a cab, and handed the driver the address the man had given me. As we drove along, the neighborhoods became seedier and seedier. I began to wonder whether coming to Philadelphia on such a mysterious errand had been wise.

We pulled up in front of a huge building that, in its prime, must have been a warehouse. As I walked up the steps, I saw a Marine colonel guarding the door. He was six feet tall, and had four rows of battle ribbons. When I gave him my name, he picked up a phone, spoke to someone, then turned to me and said, “A messenger will come pick you up.”

The messenger led me through a labyrinth of narrow, temporary hallways to a small, windowless room containing a table and two chairs. Shortly afterward, a young man stepped into the room, introduced himself, and invited me to take a seat.

:: The Feds and GE are hiring ::

“You may wonder who we are,” he said. “That’s easy. We are the General Electric Company and the federal government.



Courtesy of the author

“You may also want to know why we chose you to come for an interview. That’s easy, too. It’s because you have degrees in both medicine and engineering, and the job we have in mind requires a knowledge of both.

“That job centers on putting men in space. Hence, whoever takes the job will have to know about the effects of altitude on the human body, and also about rockets and rocket ships.

“Since you would be in charge, you wouldn’t need to know all of this yourself. Instead, you could tell us who the experts are, and we would recruit them for you. Your job would be more administrative, which means you would assign tasks, supervise the way the project is going, and most important of all, help instill a spirit of competition, because *we are going to beat the Russians in putting a man on the moon.*”

A man on the moon! Should I believe this? If he was telling the truth, it would be Buck Rogers and my childhood all over again.

I listened carefully to what the young man said, and realized that the job, in addition to paying a lavish salary, was probably a marvelous opportunity. Yet as he had ticked off the talents they were looking for—assigning, supervising, whipping up a spirit of competition—I knew they had invited the wrong person. I had little interest in any of these things, and I told him so.

“I understand,” he said, “and I nevertheless thank you for coming. Now, is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I would be grateful if you would reimburse me for my train fare.”

A few weeks ago, as I was clearing out an old file, a piece

of paper fell out. It was a travel reimbursement voucher, written on the stationery of the General Electric Company.

It read:

| Date | Description | Type of Expense | Amount | Total | |
|------|-------------------------|-----------------|--------|--------------|-------------|
| | Plaza - NY (Round Trip) | RR | 1.70 | 1.70 | |
| | Train | | 1.70 | 1.70 | |
| | Taxi | | 1.60 | 1.60 | |
| | | | | TOTAL | 5.00 |

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Commentary

What a wonderful story! Ted Harris asked if I would like to comment on this gem-like essay, since it seemed to have some commonalities with my own career. Indeed it does, from two aspects: Dr. Fritts’s brief exposure to the American space effort, and the intellectual and emotional conundrum imposed by a potentially seismic career decision.

I was unaware that the United States was contemplating such a program in 1954. Among other events, it was the year we tested the H-bomb on Bikini, the USS *Nautilus* was converted to atomic power, and the demagogue Joseph McCarthy was brought to earth. It was four years before NASA became an entity. Obviously, some visionaries in GE and the federal government were thinking well ahead of their time. It was only in the early 1960s that John Kennedy issued his epochal challenge to achieve a manned lunar landing.

My “invitation” to become a NASA medical flight controller came much less gently—as a military order in 1961.

I was involved with NASA and the space program in a rather desultory fashion in various capacities for the next eighteen years.

I empathize with Dr. Fritts’s anguish. To be working in a laboratory with the celebrated Cournand and Richards must have been cardiovascular research paradise. I am not sure what I would have done under similar circumstances, but I suspect the lure of being offered the power and resources to be a pioneer in investigating the physiological and psychological aspects of prolonged weightless flight might have won the day. I have made a few admittedly less momentous decisions in a lifetime a career choices—and luckily have never regretted taking the leap.

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