

'Space Odyssey' come true

'Rocket Guy' plans on being first private citizen to shoot self into space

By Kyle Ross
THE BATTALION

As a child, Brian Walker spent hours in his back yard gazing at the stars and dreaming of becoming an astronaut. Growing up in the 1960s during Project Mercury, the United States' first manned space program, he would lie in his bed and explore places only found in a young boy's imagination. Now, years later, Walker says his dreams have not faded.

Walker, now a thriving toy inventor, plans to take a ride some 30 miles upward in a rocket he has built at his home in Bend, Ore. If successful, he would break the altitude record for a private citizen.

"I realized at a very young age that I would very likely never get selected for the space program, so if I was ever going to venture into space I would have to hope that the story portrayed in '2001: A Space Odyssey' came true, or I would have to build my own rocket," Walker said.

Walker, referring to himself as "Rocket Guy," said he still gazes at the stars some nights. But it is not just a back yard he does his gazing in; it is in a complex he has built that he has named "Rocket Garden." The complex consists of a three-story geodesic vehicle assembly building, a rocket scaffold, the rocket itself and a distiller where he purifies hydrogen peroxide, his fuel of choice. And what rocket garden is complete without a centrifuge that gives him practice traveling under the effects of 6 Gs?

All of this, built mostly with his own hands and the money he did not need for food, is a far cry from NASA and its annual budget. At times, it might have seemed like just another dream or unreachable goal, but Walker said he feels the only way for space travel is his way.

"I have not been in contact with NASA, although I have been contacted by a number of NASA and ex-NASA people over the past several years. As to why I did not go that route, I firmly believe that the move into space needs to be a private, corporate effort if it is ever going to be feasible and actual," Walker said.

He designed the rocket to be catapulted into the air by a ground-based launcher. The motor in the rocket fires at the same time as the launcher shoots the rocket into the air.

"This lessens the fuel requirements at liftoff and offers immediate dynamic stability," Walker said. "Also the rocket is a mono-propellant type, meaning it is a single element. I chose to use 90 percent pure hydrogen peroxide."

The hydrogen peroxide is forced by compressed air into the engine housing where it passes over a silver catalyst pack. The fuel immediately reacts to exposure with the catalyst, silver, causing it to expand 600 times its volume as it turns to 1380 degree Fahrenheit steam.

Walker said he feels that using hydrogen peroxide as steam, rather than other fuels that cause flames, greatly decrease any chance of explosion.

The premise of Walker's flight plan is simple: The rocket will fly straight up, burning fuel at approximately 90 pounds per second. Once the fuel is completely exhausted, the fuel tanks will detach and he will slow to a stop somewhere at the top of the Earth's atmosphere, just this side of the cold vastness of space. Once there, he will switch on a small thruster in the tail of the rocket, directing him back to Earth. Parachutes will deploy and float him home. The flight is expected to last 15 minutes.

Peter McIntyre, professor of physics at Texas A&M, said he can relate to Walker and his dreams of becoming an astronaut. He said as a child in the late 1950s, he was fascinated with the space race.

"I built and launched a variety of model rockets," McIntyre said. "I trained lizards as my astronauts by whirling them in a home made centrifuge that I built from the parts of a house fan that had lost its blades. Then I launched the lizards that survived their training."

Unfortunately for Walker, he does not have the resources to build multiple rockets and test them. When the time comes, Walker will be his own lizard, something that has McIntyre concerned.

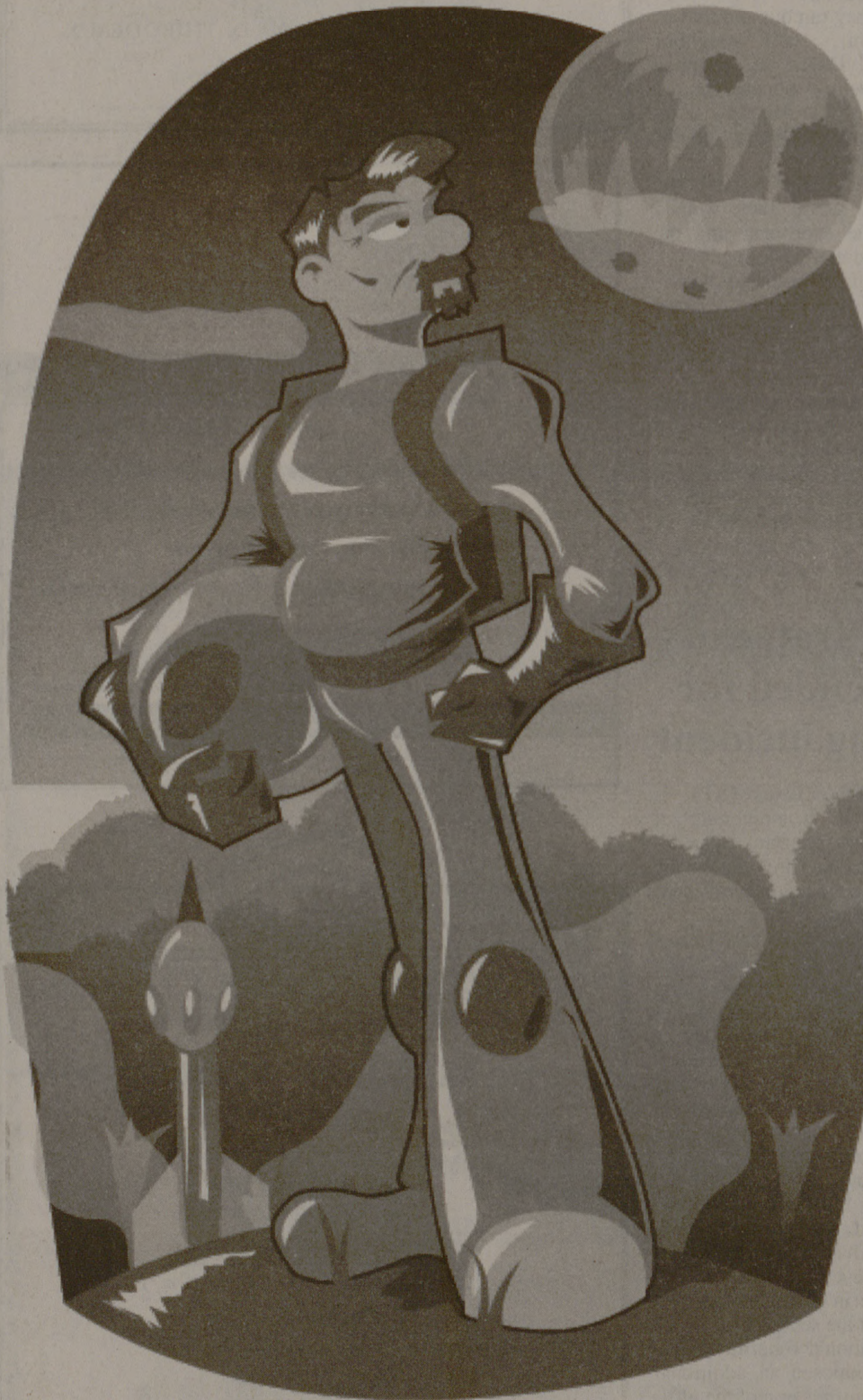
"This sort of mission is certainly doable for a suitable large endeavor with open-ended engineering and technical support, but I believe it is very foolish for an individual to try to do it," McIntyre said. "There is a great risk that he will die in the trying, and life is too precious for that!"

Walker said he has heard comments similar to McIntyre's dozens of times, but feels he has taken considerable measures to ensure safety. He also said that because of these measures, the road to fulfilling his dreams has not always been an easy one.

"Setbacks have come in all different forms, from making mistakes and having to redo months of work to lack of proper funding. There is a very long list of things that happen when undertaking a project of this magnitude. Just trying to maintain my life is sometimes impossible," Walker said. "I did not undertake this project with the intent of winning a prize. I wanted to do it completely under my own schedule and on my own discretion."

Doing things on his own is nothing new for Walker, but it seems this quest he has embarked on has become more than just an endeavor for his own fulfillment. After all, he was not the only child who dreamed a dream of those quiet, clear nights.

"I used to think about space and dream about being an astronaut when I was little. But those are just dreams like that," said Lance Staudacher, a senior electrical engineering major at A&M, "Hearing about this guy building his own rocket is great. I hope he accomplishes it, for him and for me."



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