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Astronaut's Wife Reveals Hidden Life After Launch

By Joy Neumeyer

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Lena De Winne and Yulia Romanenko, both married to astronauts in the simulator of the Soyuz space vehicle. **Lena De Winne**

In May 2009, Lena De Winne stood on a barren steppe in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, as she watched her husband, Belgian astronaut Frank De Winne, launch into space. Struggling to remain the composed wife amid cameras and a crowd of observers, she alighted on an unexpected source of emotional support: 1980s power ballad "The Final Countdown," which she played on her iPod as the shuttle disappeared into the atmosphere.

"I created for myself an alternative reality, because if you take it too seriously, you can go completely crazy," she said.

Russia's recent celebrations commemorating the 50th anniversary of Yury Gagarin's first human spaceflight gave little hint of the wives who watch astronauts back on Earth. According to De Winne, women's absence from the most recent reprisal of the country's love affair with

cosmonautics is unsurprising. As she recounts in her new book "My Countdown: The Story Behind My Husband's Space Flight," the Russian space program has long failed to take into account the human relationships that ground cosmic achievements.

"In the Russian space tradition women aren't welcomed. They're marginally tolerated," she said. Frank De Winne's flight marked the first time that wives were allowed to attend the launch at Baikonur.

The book is the first time an astronaut's wife has opened up about her experiences.

"No one has ever shared these impressions, no one had the strength for it," said Yulia Romanenko, who is married to Frank's crewmate Roman Romanenko. "[The wives] always lived through this in a very small group and didn't want to share those worries they had to encounter during their husbands' flight."

Even astronauts themselves haven't always been privy to their wives' perspectives. "I understood the worries of our relatives and dear ones ... but it was a male point of view," said Gennady Padalka, another of Frank's crewmates.

Lena, who grew up in Moscow, didn't plan on marrying a man whose job involved periodic stints away from Earth. "I'm not a space fan. I haven't been since the age of 7," she said. At that time, like all her school friends, she idolized the Soviet Union's space program and its great hero, Gagarin. She went on to earn a master's degree in electrical engineering at Moscow's Power Engineering University, and later an MBA in the Netherlands and a Ph.D. in psychology in the United States.

She met Frank in 2000 at the European Space Agency in Holland, where she was working as an interpreter. She tends to shrug off the aura of celebrity surrounding her husband's profession, which brings frequent requests for autographs and eager questions of how astronauts urinate in space.

"It's an industry like any other," she said. "They are intelligent people, they're focused people, they're capable people, they're healthy people, but they're humans nevertheless."

After all, Frank "can fix computers, but he can't change a roll of toilet paper," she said.

For Lena the idea of shedding light on her and fellow wives' experiences came as she video-chatted with her husband one day while he was on board the International Space Station. As she complained about a writing project she was working on, Frank's crewmate Bob Thirsk "floated by" the screen and suggested that she try writing about the mission.

"And you don't say 'no' to an astronaut in space," she said.

Lena notes that being married to an astronaut is not necessarily the most difficult of "long-suffering spouse" positions. "To my mind [being the wife of] a submarine captain is much worse, because they disappear for six months and you can't even be in touch." During his mission, Frank says he and Lena talked on the phone "several times a day," in addition to once-weekly family videoconferences and e-mails.

Video also allowed the crew and their families to enjoy morale-boosting events such as a call

with actor Patrick Stewart, stalwart captain of the Starship Enterprise on the television series "Star Trek." But frequent communication brought its own difficulties.

For some of the crew's wives, daily routines served as the best antidote to fear or loneliness. "The thing is, I have two children, so I had no time to miss [Roman]. I also have an interesting job," said Yulia Romanenko, who heads the economic planning department at Star City.

But no spouse could fully relax until the entire mission had been completed. For Yulia, the most worrisome moment of the voyage was the landing, which her husband told her was "the most crucial moment": "My heart simply jumped out of my chest."

For Lena, the most difficult experience was not takeoff or landing, but the disregard she says the families received from Russian authorities in the days before the launch. At Baikonur, the couples were housed in different hotels and allowed little contact beyond stiff news conferences. Officials justify such separation as a necessary precaution against germs and distraction, but in the book Lena likens it to "emotional rape."

"The whole attitude towards families is that it's something to the side," she said. "According to the Russian mentality, they're all heroes, and when you're a hero you need to suffer."

Lena and Yulia see wives' recent attendance at Baikonur as a hopeful sign that Russia is beginning to acknowledge the earthly women behind its cosmic idols.

"Maybe in the future we'll even be able to live together," Yulia said, laughing. "But there's little chance of that."

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