

Feel CIA Involved, Ask Probe

By ARETHA WATKINS

Was Maj. Robert H. Lawrence, America's "forgotten" black astronaut, deliberately killed in order to keep the glorious achievements of the U.S. space program lily white?

Sounds preposterous?

Not to a growing number of blacks who believe with a passion that the December, 1967 plane "accident" was deliberately staged in order to rid the program of its only black participant.

The belief was reinforced when recent presidential and news media eulogies to astronauts killed in the space venture carried no mention of Lawrence's name. Skeptical blacks were especially incensed when President Nixon announced that medals bearing the names of three astronauts, "who gave their lives" when fire roared through their ship anchored on a launching pad at Cape Kennedy, would be left on the moon.

Speculation that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was responsible for Lawrence's death has been mounting mostly in Chicago, where the brilliant scientist-pilot grew up. Ishmael Flory, director of organization for Chicago's African-American Heritage Center, has demanded a full probe on circumstances of Lawrence's death.

According to press reports, Lawrence died when his plane crashed on the runway during a proficiency training flight. Another pilot, Maj. Harvey J. Royer, who was with him at the time, survived the crash but was injured.

However, noted journalist L. F. Palmer, in a recent column in the Chicago Daily News, revealed that an Air Force spokesman told him the official probe shows that both pilots ejected before the crash and that Lawrence's parachute "did not open sufficiently."

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Palmer said the spokesman told him Lawrence's death was due to low ejection but nowhere in the official report was there information on the attitude at which the pilots ejected, "despite the fact that one survived to tell what happened."

It is known, Palmer wrote, that the dead astronaut's family has been "extremely unhappy about many facets of his death, including press reports indicating he was the pilot of the plane which crashed. He was not at the controls."

His widow, Mrs. Barbara Lawrence, and mother, Mrs. Gwendolyn Duncan, have refused to talk with newsmen about his death. His wife's mother, Mrs. Ida Cress, explained that it was a "combination of bitterness and the emotional stress of publicly reopening the fact of (Lawrence's) death."

"There seemed to be an effort to make it appear that Bob was to blame," Mrs. Cress is quoted as saying while speaking of reports that he was piloting the plane at the time of the crash. "And why have they tried to obscure his role in the space program? Black boys and girls need the kind of image that Bob represented."

Flory, Palmer wrote, was more blunt.

"Certainly there is in the Afro-American community a suspicion that Maj. Lawrence might have died from foul play," Flory said. "And as long as the nation can talk about the space program and those who died for it, and ignore a black U.S. citizen like Lawrence, there will be further suspicion."

Palmer admits that the possibility of Maj. Lawrence's having been deliberately slain is stretching the imagination and that chances of it being admitted, if true, is "most unlikely." However, he blames the government and its snub of Lawrence, when handing out space program credits, for leaving the door open to this kind of mistrust.

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