CAE Reading and Use of English Part 7

*You are going to read a newspaper article about a space programme. Six paragraphs have been removed from the article. Choose from the paragraphs **A – G** the one which fits each gap (**41-46**). There is one extra paragraph which you do not need to use.*

How I Became a British Astronaut

May 18, 2009 was a sunny evening – a night that I have good cause to remember. I had recently retired from the Army Air Corps after an extremely rewarding career of nearly 18 years as a helicopter pilot and the future looked good – I'd been fortunate to secure a dream job working as a senior test pilot for a private firm. I had also just completed a year-long selection process for the European Astronaut Corps – an incredible experience that had opened my eyes to the world of human spaceflight.

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A privately funded multi-million dollar seat as a 'spaceflight participant' was unattainable for most. And opportunities such as the commercially sponsored Project Juno, which launched the first Briton, Helen Sharman, into space in 1989, were extremely rare.

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This was designed to identify natural ability in various cognitive skills. In reality, this meant around eight hours of individual computer-based exercises, becoming progressively harder and with only short breaks in between. Skills such as memory retention, concentration, spatial awareness and coordination were evaluated, alongside psychological questionnaires that were to become the benchmark of this selection process – hundreds of repetitive questions, aimed at ensuring consistency of answers over a long duration.

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Historically, around 50 per cent of candidates fail the exacting medical requirements. Although good physical fitness is a strong attribute, the medical selection was not looking for potential Olympians. Instead, it was intended to select those individuals who pose the least risk of having a medical occurrence during their career. Space is no place to become ill.

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As it happens, the medical selection caused exactly 50 per cent attrition, with failure to meet cardiovascular and eyesight requirements being the two main causes. Having endured the most gruelling week of my life, I was delighted to be among the 22 remaining candidates.

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The remainder of the selection process consisted of formal interviews, culminating in the final 10 being invited to meet ESA's Director General, Jean Jacques Dordain. That was one month before that sunny evening in 2009, and I wondered who the lucky few would be. I suspected that I would not be one of them: an ESA press release had already announced that the new candidates would be presented at ESA headquarters in Paris on Wednesday. It was Monday night, I had not been contacted and time was getting tight.

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This was a decision that would affect not just me but also my family. Thankfully, there was no time to dwell – I had to book a flight to Paris for the following day.

A
It was also good to find that there were five British people in the group. Considering that, at the time, the UK was still in the shadow of a historical government policy not to participate in human spaceflight, it was encouraging to see the high level of interest regarding this astronaut selection.

B
Other skills include being trained to perform spacewalks for external science and maintenance tasks and to manipulate the robotic arm in order to capture and berth visiting resupply vehicles. Then there is the medical training, communications skills training, emergency training – the list goes on.

C
So when the phone rang and I was offered an opportunity to join the European Astronaut Corps, there was what can only be described as a wild mix of emotions – elation, excitement, shock and trepidation, due to an overwhelming realization that I was about to take my first steps down one of life's major forks in the road.

D
It was interesting to meet the other candidates from all over Europe and to acknowledge the plethora of diverse career paths that had led us to this common goal. While it is fair to say that the best chances of success are to have a solid foundation in the core sciences or experience as a pilot, there really is no single route to becoming an astronaut – it has more to do with being passionate about what you do and being as good as you can be.

E
Yet that situation changed when the European Space Agency (ESA) announced a selection for a new class of astronauts in 2008, and UK citizens were eligible to apply. My application joined the pile of nearly 10,000 others, and soon there followed an invitation to Hamburg to begin the testing process.

F
During the previous five years working as a military test pilot, I had become much more involved in the space sector – aviation and space are intrinsically linked and share many similar technologies. However, I had not seriously contemplated a career as an astronaut, since the options to do so were extremely limited.

G
Although the Soyuz spacecraft offers an emergency return to Earth in less than 12 hours from the International Space Station, this is an absolute last resort. Also, it is not available once a spacecraft has reached out beyond low Earth orbit.