

LANEI CHAPMAN

SPACE ROOKIE

SPACE: ABOVE & BEYOND

SPACE: ABOVE AND BEYOND followed the adventures of a group of Marine Corps top-gunners fighting an alien war in the year 2063. It looked like it might survive American television's dead zone, Sundays at 7pm, a time slot that has shot down many promising programmes, but it didn't...

The series was populated by a group of young, vibrant and talented individuals who performed the show's weekly quota of heroic deeds. One of these spaceage daredevils was actress Lanei Chapman, who played rookie pilot Vanessa Damphousse.

It was the actress's agent who arranged for her meet with Randy Stone, senior vice-president of talent and casting at Twentieth Century Fox Television and the person responsible for casting all the principle players on the series. Stone wasted no time in deciding that the actress could fill Vanessa Damphousse's boots. "Halfway through my audition he said, 'Okay, okay, you can do this.' He was terrific. They brought me back two days later to meet with David Nutter, the director of the two-hour pilot episode, and then I went back one more time to meet the producers before going to the final very nerve-wracking and stressful network audition.

First Meeting

"I met Kristen Cloke [who played Shane Vansen on the series] at this audition," she continues. "We have the same agent, so, I was told to look out for her. I also briefly met Rodney Rowland [Cooper Hawkes]. We were all so nervous. I was in the room, I think, for two-and-a-half minutes, and later on that day I found out that I had gotten the part and that Kristen had also been signed. It was my very first regular part on a television series and I was extremely excited that we were going to shoot the pilot in Australia."

Chapman's early career ambitions were more down-to-earth. She had dreams of



Lanei Chapman as Vanessa Damphousse

interview

becoming a dancer, and a writer, but became fascinated with watching other children performing on tv. She joined her school's drama club and made her professional debut at the age of 13 in a Kentucky Fried Chicken commercial.

"I did a couple of other commercials and a lot of plays when I was a teenager," she says. "I eventually followed in my brother's [she has three] footsteps and left California to go to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. I started out as a drama major but then found out that the school had an extensive foreign language programme. I was good at English and Spanish in high school, so I changed my major and graduated with a degree in Spanish."

During her final semester the actress took a playwriting course. For an assignment she wrote a play about her relationship as a little girl with her grandfather and his death. When Chapman returned home she was asked to direct her play for the Los Angeles Cultural Short Play Competition.

"I suddenly thought, 'I don't know how to do this,' and asked my family and friends for help. One of my aunts knew an actress named Chip Fields and sent the play to her and asked if she could help. Chip wrote back and said that she wanted to play the part of the mother and would get some other castmembers together, including her daughter Kim, who was also an actress. It was a great experience and I was really moved by the ability to create

something that people would walk away from and be touched by."

Although her play was a success Chapman wanted to make use of her education and became a bilingual kindergarten teacher. Eventually the acting began to conflict with her work as a teacher, so she quit and began acting full-time. Not one to waste time or an opportunity, Chapman applied to the University of Southern California's (USC) film school and spent the next three years studying film production as well as working as an actress.

Trek First

Chapman already had her spacelegs long before signing up for a tour of duty on **Space: Above and Beyond**. Her first venture into Outer Space was aboard the Starship Enterprise as Ensign Rager in four episodes of **Star Trek: The Next Generation**. "I think I said 'Aye, sir,' seven times in my first episode," she recalls. "Every episode I did after that got increasingly more intricate for me because I would get a little more to do each time.

"The whole experience was an acting lesson in and of itself," continues the actress. "I learned so much by just watching people like Patrick Stewart, Jonathan Frakes, LeVar Burton and Brent Spiner. Working on **Star Trek** also gave me a little more of an insight into what happens on these types of [Science Fiction] shows, especially in dealing with the blue screen, where you have to

imagine what's going on in front of you and try to find some way to make it real. Everyone was very open and receptive of me and helped to make my stay there enjoyable."

Space Background

Returning to **Space: Above and Beyond**, Chapman describes her character as tenderhearted and someone who pursues her life with a great deal of compassion. "I've created my own background for the character of Vanessa, which has changed somewhat as the character has evolved with the show.

"Vanessa's father is a chief engineer at a nuclear power plant and I think she felt a great deal of pressure to follow in his footsteps. She studied and interned with her father for three summers before becoming an engineer herself. While she was good at the job she wasn't passionate about it. I think that she joined the Marines not only to experience a sense of camaraderie with her fellow cadets but also to gain the courage she needed to basically find herself."

The actress got a taste of what life in the military is really like shortly after she arrived down under to begin work on the pilot episode of **Space: Above and Beyond**. The entire cast and crew of the series were given a set of Marine fatigues and a pair of boots and put through two days of intensive basic training at Australia's Canungra Military Base.



Some of the scenes could have been taken right out of the Marine's basic training manual

"They put us on a bus and drove us out to this obstacle course," she recalls. "Everyone was giggling for about the first 30 seconds before we realized that these people were not joking. They divided us into teams and we did everything from climbing walls and crawling in water under barbed wire to jumping off a 35 foot ledge into a swamp. We had to help each other because your team didn't win unless every one of you made it through. The writers, directors and producers all ran the course with us and did everything we did, and the most gratifying thing was knowing that everyone completed it. The whole company pulled together and we felt like a real team."

Chapman and her fellow cast members must have experienced a sense of *déjà vu* when they walked onto the set to start work on the two-hour pilot episode of **Space: Above and Beyond**. One of the first scenes they filmed could have been taken right out of the Marine's basic training manual. "We were going to have to run a quarter-of-a-mile, leap over these rocks, do a little backroll and then duck into this little crevice, all the time pretending as if we were shooting at the enemy."

"We practiced this a couple of times wearing our normal fatigue outfits and then they said, 'While we set up for the shot you guys go get into your space suits.' We went to the props department to get suited up and the props just kept coming. To top it off there was the helmet, which was terribly claustrophobic. We put all these things on and shot the scene. It was so difficult. After just a couple of takes we came to the realization that this was not all glamour," she laughs.

Rodney Rowland, who was the last member of the ensemble to be cast, arrived in Australia a few days later than the rest of the team and had to shoot some scenes on his own, including one in a space suit. "It was painful to watch Rodney go through that all on his own," recalls Chapman. "We'd all done it together and knew what it was about, so, we were able to help him through it. Of course, he adjusted to it just like we all did. Over time we've learned more and more how to help each other in many ways such as how get someone's helmet off quickly or the best way to hold each other's backpack in order to relieve the weight."

Since being unexpectedly thrown together to save their planet from certain destruction, Vanessa Damphousse and her fellow Marine cadets have found that to survive they must work together as a team. According to Chapman, this sense of com-



Vanessa Damphousse, one of the team

radeship and loyalty was also present in the show's ensemble cast.

Changes

"Things changed a lot since we shot the pilot episode," she says. "All of us grew as actors and became friends both on and off the screen. We learned a lot about ourselves and each other as well as about our abilities, all of which were incorporated into our work on the series. It's a very special thing to be able to take people from very different backgrounds and interests, make them work closely together for such long hours and have them come out of it all with a real fondness for each other. I'm very lucky to have been part of this cast. It's one of those things that, I feel, was divinely created and was supposed to be."

With the pilot completed, cast and crew returned to Los Angeles, where the series was based, and began filming the show's regular hour-long episodes. The actress thinks for a moment before revealing her favourite one. "It's so difficult because so many of the episodes hold favourite moments for me, but I have to say the one that does stick out in my mind is the sixth one we filmed called *The Enemy*, where this

alien weapon magnifies our greatest fears and forces us to turn against each other. The episode was so intense and it really pushed each of us as actors to a place we hadn't been before. It was so exciting.

"The episode was a little short and the writer wanted to add a scene but not just any scene. I remember him coming up to us and asking, 'What have you learned from shooting this episode?' Someone said, 'I learned what everybody is really capable of.' Another person said, 'I learned that no matter how far you're pushed there's a little piece of you that maintains your sanity.' He took everything we told him and somehow used all of it in a scene at the end of the episode. The whole thing made such an impact on me and the episode really holds a special place in my heart.

"The main emphasis of **Space: Above and Beyond** was on individual conflict and the study of the human condition in times of crisis," explains Chapman. "The show was, first and foremost, a military drama dealing with the challenges that our characters face as soldiers of war. This is what I love about it. I love drama and how it has the ability to move people. Our show, I think, did this every week."

Steven Eramo