

Flight: My Life in Mission Control

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One of the architects of the U.S. space program recalls his most exciting moments at mission control as he guided heroes like Alan Shepard and John Glenn on their historic missions.

On July 20, 1969, near the end of a great decade of near-space exploration, a small craft called Eagle landed on the moon's surface. As anyone who watched the televised broadcast of the landing might recall, the astronauts aboard Eagle were guided to their objective by a capable ground crew headed by Chris Kraft, whom his colleagues had long called "Flight." Kraft was unflappable on the surface, but, as he writes in this memoir, the Eagle's landing had moments of drama that gave him pause, and that few outside NASA knew about--including baleful alarms from the ship's on-board computer that warned of imminent disaster.

For Kraft, frightening moments were part of his job as director of Mission Control. He encountered many of them in the early years of the space program, when failures were commonplace and all too often caused not by mechanics but by politics. We learn of many in Kraft's pages. One such failure was the Soviet Union's Sputnik launch, about which Kraft thunders, "We should have beaten them.... We were stopped by anonymous doctors in the civilian world who didn't know what they were talking about, by a bureaucrat in the White House who'd been stung when JFK shot down his position on manned space flight, and by our friend the German rocket scientist, who got cold feet when he should have been bold."

Plenty of other contemporaries, including John Glenn and Richard Nixon, come in for a scolding in Kraft's fiery account, which offers a rare insider's portrait of the challenging work of astronautics--work that, Kraft writes hopefully, is only beginning. --Gregory McNamee

After graduating from Virginia Polytechnic Institute with a BS in Aeronautical Engineering, Chris Kraft went on to become the director of the NASA Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas from 1972 to 1982. Since his retirement from federal service, Chris Kraft has served as an aerospace consultant to Rockwell International, IBM, and a number of other companies.

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7.7 APPLY NOW In filling out Table 7.1, the reader can expand on his or her own personal examples, or experiment with different scenarios, to obtain a better understanding of the leadership and ... Flight : My life in Mission Control ."