

An excerpt from the film **THE RIGHT STUFF**

Plot segment:

In 1957, the launch of the Sputnik satellite alarms the United States. Politicians such as Senator Lyndon B. Johnson and other military leaders demand that NASA help America defeat the Russians in the new Space Race. At first the people around President Eisenhower suggest that they get “the best pilots they can” but the pilots would need to cowtow to the political order. Eisenhower bucks political tradition and demands that test pilots be used.

The politicians are alarmed. “You can’t reason with them,” says one. “They flout the rules and disobey orders.”

“I don’t care,” he insists. “I want the best pilots!”

But the search for the first Americans in space excludes Yeager because he lacks a college degree. (This standard was soon adopted by other industries, where it did not matter how much knowledge or expertise you had on the job, you still have to have that god damned piece of paper.)

In the next few months, after interviewing hundreds of pilots from the armed forces, grueling physical and mental tests select the first astronauts, including John Glenn (Ed Harris) of the United States Marine Corps, Alan Shepard (Scott Glenn), Walter Schirra (Lance Henriksen) and Scott Carpenter (Charles Frank) of the United States Navy, as well as Cooper, Grissom and Slayton. As part of his bid to become an astronaut, Gordo Cooper must persuade his ex-wife Trudy to lie and talk about their marriage as “solid and ideal.” As the Mercury project astronauts they immediately become national heroes, boosting the popularity of the space program into high gear.

But the logistical problems mount on. Several early NASA rockets explode during launch as the ambitious but committed astronauts each hope to be the first in space as part of Project Mercury. No one has been selected as yet. But a chimpanzee is sent up first to test conditions in space. After this, the astronauts decide to take a proactive approach to their project. There is a scene in which the seven band together to demand modifications to the Mercury capsule. The engineers saw the men as merely passengers, to go up and ride around in orbit without any way to see the outside.

The pilots now insist that the Mercury spacecraft must have a window, a hatch with explosive bolts, and manual controls at their command. The pilots threaten to go on strike rather than become “spam in a can.” These modifications put the Americans somewhat behind the Russians, who had already sent up a dog named Laika. The Soviets beat them on April 12th, 1961 with the launch of Vostok 1 carrying Colonel Yuri Gagarin into space.

The Mercury astronauts then decide they've been waiting long enough. Alan Shepard is the first American to reach space on the sub-orbital flight of Mercury-Redstone 3 on May 5th. Mission control has been dithering while he sits on the launch pad, trying to decide whether to launch now or not.

In a humorous scene, Shepard politely asks Mission Control for permission to urinate. By this time, the suits have been modified for both environmental and external problems. His monitor Cooper recognizes that he has been sitting in the capsule for hours. While he waits for the word, a montage of scenes show various people visiting the restroom, showering grass and equipment with hoses, women pouring coffee, etc., showing the predicament he is in. The project manager objects, saying they did not plan for this; the flight was only supposed to last for 15 minutes.

Gordo lazily drawls that “we advise you maintain a holding pattern, and we’ll be sure to stop at the next gas station.” Shepard accepts this, but a few minutes later is at the brink. Gordo turns to the flight manager and says, “the man has got to go.” The manager relents; Shepard smiles as he wets his suit. “Wayo. I’m a wetback now. Now fix your little problems and light this candle.”

The flight lasts only 15 minutes (one orbit), launching Shepard into historic fame. Everyone celebrates, and the press corps Yeager calls “root weevils” try to worm their way into the astronauts’ personal lives to get the gossip scoop. Life magazine captures group portraits of the astronauts and later their wives. So far everything is gravy and things are humming along.

But, while all this history is being made, Pancho’s Happy Bottom Riding Club burns down, taking with it the history of the pilots who gave their lives to make spaceflight possible. Later, Yeager rides out to the ruin and wanders among the debris, where he meets his wife. She tells him not to take too many risks or she will leave him. Yeager tells her that he is afraid of almost nothing but he is terrified of her. She replies that he is really not, but he ought to be.

Shepard and Grissom are celebrating together at the local watering hole at Cape Canaveral when Grissom produces several rolls of coins, model capsules and other bits of "stuff", intending to take them with him on the next launch. Shepard asks why, and Grissom demonstrates his crude flirting skills to the bartender, asking her if she would want something from outer space. She smiles and says, "I might."

But when Gus Grissom returns to earth on the Mercury-Redstone 4 on July 21st, the capsule's hatch unexpectedly blows open and the capsule quickly fills with water. Grissom is unharmed but the capsule sinks. Once he is returned to a ship, he is subjected to grim silence and skeptical faces. Grissom is given a medal of honor with the president in absentia.

Many criticize Grissom for possibly opening the hatch prematurely in a panic. But Grissom is adamant that the whole thing was a technical malfunction. It does not help him when the rolls of dimes and other novelties fall out of his suit's pockets. It is not possible that the added weight of a single pound of stuff would have triggered the hatch to blow. It's as if NASA is trying to sweep the whole flight under the rug.

Grissom is treated like a pariah after that, and his wife is livid about their cheap accommodations. She claims that the nation owes her for giving up so much for nationalistic pride: "are these the goodies?" she complains bitterly. But the press is not bothered by that, they want the deep dirt. Here, there is an opportunity to be vindicated.

There are recriminations galore when Glenn discovers that his fellow astronauts have been carousing and cheating on their wives with astronaut groupies. Shepard claims that he has no right to foist his morality on them, but Grissom agrees with Glenn to a certain extent. The issue is not morality, it is funding. They have to keep their reputations clean and their objectives clear, or the whole program will fall apart. "No bucks, no Buck Rogers, remember?"

Before long they have unionized, and form a unique band of brothers. Each looks out for the other, and they are unified in their resolve. As far as they are concerned, they are the space program, and they had better get what they want or they will strike. Chief of their demands is for better designs of spacecraft, the absolute right to manual control and the power to make their own decisions in flight.

John Glenn becomes the first American to orbit the Earth on Mercury Atlas 6 on February 20th 1962. His trip is narrated by Glenn as he passes over continents, clouds, cities at night. While he is up there, Gordon Cooper makes his way to Australia to monitor the event and is met by a tribe of Aborigines. In a friendly exchange, the eldest of them leads an unusual ritual, in which a fire is made and the flames rise up into the air to "protect" Glenn from harm. But they do not know there is a danger to Glenn as the NASA engineers discover that the heat shield on the capsule has come loose. Without it, Glenn and the capsule could burn up on re-entry.

They debate what to do, and decide to say nothing to Glenn at first. Shepard bucks the sense of secrecy, saying, "he's a pilot. He needs to know the condition of his craft." He then radios Glenn and informs him of the problem. If Glenn can adopt a shallower entry pattern, the heat shield might hold. Glenn is already seeing particles of light (embers from the heated shield) flowing past his window, coinciding with the embers of the ritual fire on Earth, but steels his courage and rides along singing "Glory Halleluiah" in a flaming comet plummeting toward Earth.