



Shoot for the Moon: The Space Race and the Extraordinary Voyage of Apollo 11

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By [James Donovan](#) (Author)

„It does not really require a pilot and besides you have to sweep the monkey shit aside before you sit down” a slightly envious Chuck Yeager is quoted in chapter 2 of the book, titled “Of Monkeys and Men”. In the end, the concept to first send monkeys as forerunners for humans into space was right: with a good portion of luck, excellently trained test pilots, who were not afraid to put their lives on the line, dedicated managers and competent mission control teams Kennedy's bold challenge became true.

This book by James Donovan was published in 2019 for the 50th anniversary of the first landing of the two astronauts Neil Armstrong and “Buzz” Aldrin on the Moon.

The often published events are re-told in a manner making it worthwhile to read again as an “eye witness” but it serves also as legacy for the next generations. The author reports the events as a thoroughly researched adventure but also has the talent to tell the events like a close friend to the involved persons and astronauts and is able to create the resentments, fears and feelings of the American people with respect to “landing a man on the Moon and bring him back safely” over the time period which was started by the “Sputnik-shock” in 1957.

The book can also be seen as homage of the engineers, scientists and technicians bringing the final triumph home. Complete professional and private background information is provided for Wernher von Braun (“the seer of space”), Chris Kraft, Max Faget, John Gilruth, James Webb...and the “Seven” Mercury Astronauts Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, and Deke Slayton, not to forget the Apollo astronauts Ed White and Roger Chaffee, Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin. Their personalities and experiences during their flights are described so colorful that you feel sitting in the (cramped) capsule besides the pilot(s) and a lot of not yet published details are provided – new interesting details for “old-timers” like me, were for example, the history of the Starlight motel at Cocoa Beach, the invention of the “Go/No-go” role-call before liftoff (“go flight”) by Chris Kraft or the countdown process, which was never used by Russian launch teams.

The enthusiastic exclamation by Walter Dornberger on October 3, 1942 after the first V2 reached the mesosphere “this afternoon the spaceship has been born” proves that the rocket development at Peenemuende was not entirely driven by military aspects.

The “learning curve” and the avoidance of impending disasters during the Mercury and Gemini flights are told like an adventurous expeditions into “space incognito” by truly documenting the collective experience made by the astronauts in their capsules as well as by the supporting engineers and flight controllers which had to come up with “split-of-a-second”- decision making in the mission control centers on the ground (“Flight Director is God” – Chris Kraft).

NASA's unprecedented learning process, supported by almost unlimited funding and countless overtime hours is described for all aspects of human spaceflight. The conclusion at the end of the Mercury and Gemini programs was: "only humans did not fail".

Rocket developments leading to Wernher von Braun's Saturn V as the "winner" of various approaches and strategies as well as the exhaustive (new) test and training activities are described in every detail. From today's vantage point you only can marvel about the dedication and enthusiasm of the politicians, managers engineers and of course the astronauts (Shepard after his first US suborbital flight : "I am ready for the Moon").

After the "inferno" (Chapter 9, loss of the first Apollo" astronaut crew) Gene Kranz observed: "Grissom and his crew had not died in vain... we did not do our job [at mission control]... we have to prevent a new tragedy by being":

"Tough and Competent"

As a reminder for the team he pinned the pledge on the wall of the Houston Mission Control room.

With the Apollo program finally continuing the much publicized events ran their course culminating in the legendary Apollo 11 flight by Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins. Starting with "the Eagle got wings" called out after separation from the Command module by Armstrong, Jim Donovan not only researched the history to such a detail by giving a breathtaking minute by minute account of the flight, but also praises and tells the background of the decisive contributions of engineers not standing in the focus, like mission control team members Steve Bales ("1202" alarm during LM descent) or Jack Garman Bill Tindall and Guenter Wendt, "der Fuehrer of der White Room", finishing with the legendary "Houston, the Eagle has landed" announcement by Neil Armstrong as matter-of-factly as a pilot of a commercial airplane.

In summary Jim Donovan delivered the ultimate, brilliant story of early spaceflight up to the successful Moon landing by re-creating the waxing and waning moods, doubts, concerns, conflicts, fears, achievements and triumphs of the engineers, the managers, the politicians and the public and of course a detailed insight into the private and professional life of the astronauts.

In my opinion the James Donovan's "Shoot for the Moon" would deserve to be added to the canon mankind's great achievements.

PS: My personal account of the historical day is, that I was on my first business trip from Munich to the Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC) on July 20th, 1969. Halfway across the Atlantic Ocean the pilot of the 707 announced "the Eagle has landed safely on the Moon" - the passengers applauded enthusiastically and it was "Champagne for All".