

Everette Collection

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Everette Collection

Before writer-director Philip Kaufman brought Tom Wolfe's book *The Right Stuff* to the big screen in 1983, onscreen astronauts were little more than alien quarry or asteroid bait. In Kaufman's hands, however, spaceflight became a far more human pursuit—a story not of external threats but inner resolve. With its three-hour-plus run time and unconventional structure, the film—which tells the story of test pilots like Chuck Yeager and Gordon Cooper as they break the sound barrier and launch toward the exosphere—was almost as daring as its subject. (Kaufman calls it “the longest movie ever made without a plot.”) But it introduced an entire cinematic genre, what Quentin Tarantino has called the “hip epic,” inspiring everyone from Michael Bay to James Cameron, who hired its cinematographer for *Titanic*. Its dialog has become a go-to signifier of human accomplishment; director Rian Johnson celebrated landing his *Star Wars* gig by tweeting a clip from the movie. Phil really pulled it off, George Lucas says. None other than Christopher Nolan has called it “an almost perfect movie.”

Making it was an epic in itself. Its locations were hard-earned; its special-effects plan was largely reconceived during production; one man lost part of an ear on the set, another lost his life. But more than three decades later, *The Right Stuff* still resonates, a testament to the incredible feats of bravery, sacrifice, and intelligence of which humans are capable—and to the inherent absurdity of climbing into tin cans mounted on ballistic missiles and blasting into space.

I.

We Wanted to Make A Serious Film.

Ed Harris looked so much like astronaut John Glenn that producer Robert Chartoff said, “Please, don’t let this guy get hit by a car & until after the picture is made.”

Dan Winters

In 1979, Hollywood producers Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff (*Rocky*, *Raging Bull*) paid \$350,000 to purchase the film rights to *The Right Stuff*, Tom Wolfe's runaway best seller about the space race.

CHUCK YEAGER (RETIRED GENERAL, U.S. AIR FORCE): Tom Wolfe started writing a book about the astronauts' early days. Through that, he discovered the Air Force test pilots who were doing the nitty-gritty work. We weren't getting free houses or notoriety. We were working our tails off for \$250 a month. Many of us were dying in the process.

IRWIN WINKLER (PRODUCER): There was a competition with Universal to buy Tom Wolfe's book. They wanted it for John Belushi as a comedy.

ROBERT CHARTOFF (PRODUCER): Like the Airplane series.

WINKLER: We wanted to make a serious film.

CHARTOFF: We bought the book for \$350,000, which was a lot at the time.

WINKLER: We hired Bill Goldman to write the screenplay.

CHARTOFF: Probably the hottest writer in Hollywood.

1 Yeager was the first pilot to break the sound barrier, on October 14, 1947.

WINKLER: But Bill's script didn't include the Chuck Yeager character, the epitome of the right stuff. 1 So we started looking for other writers.

GEORGE LUCAS: I was born and raised in the Bay Area, so when I got out of film school at USC I wanted to come back. Francis Coppola wanted to get out of Hollywood, so the two of us, we decided we'd move to San Francisco. There was a cadre of people here who were making movies, but more with a San Franciscan sensibility than a Hollywood sensibility. Phil Kaufman was living here. He worked on Raiders for about a week. [Laughs.] He came up with the idea for the ark.

PHILIP KAUFMAN (WRITER, DIRECTOR): When I read The Right Stuff I was just amazed. What I loved about it was not only getting to the truer stories but really beginning where he did, with a quality called the right stuff as personified by Chuck Yeager. I envisioned a movie that could be based around that central character or quality.

WINKLER: Originally we wanted Phil to direct and we couldn't find another writer that we could agree on.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: Tom Wolfe didn't want to write the screenplay. He just didn't feel that was his métier. I wound up outlining the script, and when Chartoff and Winkler asked me to write it, I turned around the first draft in about eight weeks. I really wanted to go back to Tom Wolfe's attitude, atmosphere, and humor. I really wanted to find that Tom Wolfe quality, the craziness of the American circus how the astronauts would be defined publicly by a Life magazine story while the truth was far more interesting, important, and heroic.

WINKLER: We gave Phil's script to the Ladd Company, ensconced at Warner Bros.

PETER KAUFMAN (PRODUCTION ASSISTANT): Phil and Walter Murch made a great trailer to show Alan Ladd Jr. that making the movie was possible. This was back when Francis Coppola had American Zoetrope, and we rented some offices up off of Little Fox Theater. We had a little editing room. We'd find Walter asleep in there in the morning after working all night.

GARY GUTIERREZ (SUPERVISOR, SPECIAL VISUAL EFFECTS): Phil Kaufman was looking to storyboard the movie for a presentation to Ladd in LA. It was an enormous job; we created around 1,800 panels. Phil wanted to represent the whole movie. We laid out the storyboards on eight or 10 tables in a conference room and then Phil told the story, walking Ladd around the room. Whenever he'd finish a couple of tables, we'd lay out more. It took several trips around the room.

ALAN LADD JR. (PRESIDENT, THE LADD COMPANY): I said, OK, let's make the movie!

GUTIERREZ: Chuck Yeager became a technical consultant. He was very helpful.

YEAGER: Hollywood is in the business of make-believe. I didn't just walk out and fly the X-1 supersonic. It took unpowered flights and then nine powered flights.

GUTIERREZ: He would look at stuff and say, Well, that's not exactly how it happened, but I know you fellas have to flower it up.

II.

I Felt Like It Was Ridiculous to Play a Living Person.

Our characters had no written lines, Harry Shearer says of the recruiters he and Jeff Goldblum played in the movie. Phil said, You and Jeff improvised. Hopefully it will be funny.

Dan Winters

Ladd gave Kaufman a modest budget to make the film, which meant it would have to be made without any bankable stars and with salary caps.

ED HARRIS (JOHN GLENN): I read for Phil Kaufman and wasn't very happy about how it went. Walking out, I hit the wall pretty hard. Phil saw me do that and said, Oh, the guy's got spunk.

CHARTOFF: Ed Harris walked into the office, and we looked at him and couldn't believe that such a person existed. He was not only a wonderful actor but looked so much like John Glenn. And of course we looked at each other and said, Oh my God, this is the guy we want. I said to Phil, Please, don't let this guy get hit by a car. At least, not until after the picture is made.

HARRY SHEARER (RECRUITER): I don't believe there was an audition, because Jeff Goldblum's and my characters had no lines written for them. Phil Kaufman conceived them, they were not representative of anybody that was in the book, but they were a plot device to move things forward. Phil basically just said, You and Jeff improvise. Hopefully it'll be a little funny.

JEFF GOLDBLUM (RECRUITER): Mr. Philip Kaufman had me in Invasion of the Body Snatchers in 1978. I'd do anything with him.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: There were 134 speaking parts. Every day somebody new would show up on the set. I had my mission of what I wanted to do, but I also wanted to be entertained. I had Harry Shearer and Jeff Goldblum; life could not have been better.

CALEB DESCHANEL (CINEMATOGRAPHER): Phil and I had mutual friends in San Francisco. I'd gone to school with George Lucas. I knew Walter Murch. They were all part of the same small group of San Francisco filmmakers, with Francis Ford Coppola. Phil sent me the script. I loved it, it's the kind of thing I grew up loving. My father was an engineer for Martin, who built Titan rockets. When I was a kid I'd build rockets. My dad helped me until I tried to build a liquid fuel rocket using nitric acid and alcohol. He was afraid I was going to blow myself up.

MARY JO DESCHANEL (ANNIE GLENN): Annie Glenn was already cast, and I just had an appointment to meet the casting director and read. I hadn't been acting because I was having kids. I felt out of practice. Overnight, the actress who had the part asked for more money and fell out. So I didn't know it when I went in, but they were looking for someone. The casting director said, "Do you know how to stutter?" And I said, "No, but I can try."

Mr. Philip Kaufman had me in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Jeff Goldblum says. I'd do anything with him.

Dan Winters

PHILIP KAUFMAN: Dennis had done some movies, but his brother Randy was better known. I was alone when Dennis came in. I was doing the camera work as well as reading off camera, but I didn't really know how the camera worked. Dennis said, "I know that camera. I've got exactly this kind of camera. I pressed the button. It's red and flashing, does that mean it's on?" He said, "Yeah, that's it." So then Dennis did a reading that was phenomenal. A couple hours later Chartoff and Winkler came in and I said, "Let's check it out." Of course Dennis was wrong. The camera was off, and lost to history was one of the greatest auditions I'd ever seen.

TOM WOLFE (AUTHOR): Having Dennis Quaid play Gordon Cooper was a good stroke. Cooper, as a pilot, didn't have much of a background. He was an OK military pilot. They chose him because he was so cool. He fell asleep on the launchpad. These holds would go on for hours. He also fell asleep during a spaceflight. He was an absolutely cool human being.

FRED WARD (GUS GRISSOM): I was asked to play another astronaut at first. But then Phil asked me to read for Gus Grissom. That was exciting because I really liked the character. What he had to go through, his so-called blowing a hatch. I'd been in the Air Force when I was young, not as a pilot, but as an airborne radar technician in Goose Bay, Labrador, during the cold war. We were one of the first lines of defense. We'd work on the ground, meet with the aircraft, speak to the pilots, see what was going on with the equipment, pull it into the shop. Then we'd have these alerts; we'd have to go out at night and load missiles. These astronauts were big people at the time.

YEAGER: Some of my friends played extras, such as Korky Kevorkian, a pilot and fruit farmer from Reedley, California. I played a bartender.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: We started looking around for someone who could play Yeager. Then my wife, Rose, and I went to a poetry reading in San Francisco and Sam Shepard was reading. Rose poked me and said, "There's your guy." I said, "For what?" She said, "Yeager." Sam had a cowboy quality to him. He was Gary Cooper.

SAM SHEPARD (CHUCK YEAGER): Phil offered the part to me a few times, and I refused. I felt like it was ridiculous to play a living person. I knew Chuck and I didn't feel like I was him at all.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: I tracked Sam down at the Chateau Marmont in LA and slid the script under his door.

SHEPARD: He kept hounding me about it. And I did like Phil a lot, and I liked a lot of the actors I'd known through theater and stuff, like Ed Harris and Freddie Ward. So I thought, well, maybe it wouldn't hurt to do it.

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Dennis Quaid as Gordon Cooper Everett Collection

III.

Make It Like They Did in the Old Days.

Kaufman wanted his audience to feel the adrenaline rush that early test pilots experienced as they chased the sound barrier, as well as the violence inherent in breaking free from, and reentering, Earth's atmosphere.

GEOFFREY KIRKLAND (PRODUCTION DESIGNER): Phil got this amazing collection of research from NASA and the Navy. He set up a library in his trailer.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: Research went on in every area, all through the movie. When the actors showed up, each of them got a book that we had prepared with 30 to 40 pages on each character every damn thing we could find.

PETER KAUFMAN: I'd go to the Soviet embassy in San Francisco with a copy of the book, and they would give me footage of Star City. They were really helpful, the Russians. And we got footage from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and the Air Force that hadn't been widely seen.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: We combined the great NASA footage with pieces that were built on the set. We were pioneering in that kind of insertion of actors into historical events. For example, we combined footage of the real Alan Shepard being loaded into the capsule with Scott Glenn doing it on the stage. We had Scott Glenn shaking hands with Kennedy; they did the same thing in *Forrest Gump* and made a big thing out of spending a million dollars to do it. We did that in one afternoon.

KIRKLAND: One day we went to the model shops to see the first shots of the supersonic jet. We had a production team out there, a whole unit unto themselves. They'd been working for six months, making these amazing models. Every little rivet had a little bit of grime. They'd built a shop, gotten a motion control camera.

GUTIERREZ: We called our motion control system the Cruciflex, because that's sort of how we felt about it. It controlled camera movements with a computer so that a camera could precisely repeat movements. It featured a Fries Mitchell 35-mm camera mounted on a boom arm, placed at right angles to a vertical shaft. The mechanical system moved a camera along the x, y, and z axes. It allowed it to move in multiple directions. The cross-shaped configuration was in turn positioned on a

moving turntable, which enabled the whole apparatus to swing around as it traveled down the track. The Cruciflex allowed the camera to pan 360 degrees, roll 360 degrees three times, and pitch approximately 200 degrees. You could shoot one element say, the X-1 in front of a blue screen and the camera would travel toward the model, giving the impression that the X-1 was moving toward the camera.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: We discovered that the motion control effects George was doing on Star Wars didn't create the grittier effect we wanted.

CALEB DESCHANEL: Getting to outer space can be violent.

GUTIERREZ: Make it like they did in the old days became our marching orders. So I opened the window and had my director of photography go stand downstairs with his back to the wall and a handheld camera looking up toward the sky. On the street, crew people were holding a large parachute to catch the plane that I was going to throw out the window. Our model of the X-1 was 4 and a half feet long and cost \$6,000. The model makers were holding their breath. The next day we showed Phil the footage and he loved it.

CALEB DESCHANEL: We used rear projection on the scenes where Yeager was trying to break the sound barrier. Phil used footage from an experimental filmmaker, Jordan Belson, who created images of moving lights that streak by you to give a representation of what it was like to get to that point just beyond something that anybody had ever done before.

PETER KAUFMAN: Belson worked in a little apartment in San Francisco. I don't think anyone from the production went in. He did all of his effects in a little light box with smoke. He'd bring his footage in. We'd all be amazed.

GUTIERREZ: We did various kinds of shaky-cam movement to give it a sense of urgency. We attached a vibrator to the lens or a power drill to the camera mount to make it all move like crazy.

CALEB DESCHANEL: At one point I shook the camera so hard, I gave my operator a black eye.

RANDY THOM (SOUND RERECORDING MIXER): I went to Twentynine Palms Marine base to record the sound of a bomb detonating for the plane crashes. There was a test range where planes would drop bombs. Occasionally one of them wouldn't explode. So there was this ordnance team that would defuse the bomb or explode it. I had to sign several reams of paper saying my family wouldn't sue if I got hurt.

SHEPARD: We had a model of the X-1 in the hangar. We had these rigs that shook the hell out of us. It wasn't a simulator. It was much more primitive. It was like a milk shake apparatus.

CALEB DESCHANEL: When Yeager goes up to break the sound barrier, you look down and you see the desert beneath; we had giant sheets of butcher paper with desert scenes painted on them and somebody was pulling the paper very slowly underneath the model so it would feel like you were at 20,000 feet with the Earth moving below.

GUTIERREZ: There were some pyrotechnicians creating clouds on the ground. They had a PT boat camouflage fogger on the back of a truck. We used vaporized mineral oil to create 150-foot-high clouds on the ground. You could shut a freeway with

those.

CHARTOFF: Today it would be CGI.

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CALEB DESCHANEL: There were these wonderful guys who built these models that were really beautifully detailed. These guys loved their planes. At one point when the guy was flying the X-1, he landed it too hard. It burst into pieces. He was a burly guy who had built this thing. He went over to it and picked it up. He was in tears.

KIRKLAND: The B-29 we had was the only one left in the country. It belonged to the Confederate Air Force.

THOM: I was driven out in the middle of a desert. The jeep stopped at a certain point and I stood there on a little knoll, and a hundred yards away this guy was working on something. I walked 50 yards closer, nervous. I didn't want to surprise the guy he was sitting on a bomb like Slim Pickens in Dr. Strangelove. He yelled to me, Son, if I was you, I'd either come over here where I am, or I'd get another 100 yards away. Because this thing might go off. And if it does go off, it could kill ya. But if it doesn't kill ya, you'd probably wish it had. We marched about 100 yards away and got down behind a hill. He detonated and I recorded.

GUTIERREZ: Some of the reentry shots of the Mercury capsule, the close-ups, were shot on a stage with a 4-foot-tall model.

HARRIS: I knew that capsule inside and out. I knew what all the gauges were and everything. You're just using your imagination. Like a kid, you know, climbing under a bunch of blankets pretending you're going to the moon.

KIRKLAND: We shot the sequence where Gus Grissom bails from his capsule in Half Moon Bay, within sight of Mavericks.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: The question was, and is, did Grissom blow the hatch and screw the pooch, putting himself in danger, or did it go off like he claimed? I would like to believe it went off accidentally.

KIRKLAND: You think of the Pacific as being calm, but it can be ugly. We had barges anchored 15 times to Christmas, but they still moved. We needed to be able to submerge the capsule and bring it back up to do another shot. We couldn't put it on a crane because you'd see the crane. We installed pipes underneath you'd take the air out and it would sink, and then you'd put the air in and it would resurface.

WARD: I had a wet suit on under my flight suit, in pretty cold water. And then they picked me up, dangling by a rescue noose. It's a tragic scene. You see Gus Grissom hanging there: almost totally defeated, like a dead fish on the end of a line, and then coming up toward the whirling helicopter blades, being pulled in.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: It was very dangerous. What a testament to Fred. Fred almost died in the water.

WARD: Grissom actually died in a prelaunch test. I heard the recording of the incident.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: Gus was a fucking hero.

IV.

We Really Had the Run of the Place.

Fred Ward played Gus Grissom, who would later die in the launchpad fire of Apollo 1. Gus was a fucking hero, Kaufman says. Dan Winters

Kaufman and his crew resisted cutting-edge special effects, preferring to make the film as realistic as possible. But that quest for authenticity led to some setbacks.

WINKLER: We had trouble getting permission from the Pentagon and NASA to use their facilities. John Glenn was a senior senator and didn't like the way he was depicted. They were talking about him running for president. He tried to stop the government from giving us cooperation. He went to the Pentagon and told them not to give us permission.

CHARTOFF: A month before we began, NASA withdrew their permission for us to shoot at their facilities. It was a disaster. I flew to Washington and met with the head of NASA. I called John Glenn's office and arranged a meeting with them, as well. At NASA, I went in and argued that pulling our access wasn't fair—we're American citizens and should have the right to use the facility, and no one individual should be able to stop us. That was the only argument I could think of. The guy said, 'Call me back tomorrow morning, 10 o'clock, I'll give you an answer.' I had an appointment at noon the next day with John Glenn. The next morning I called NASA. They said, 'We have no right to deprive you of use of our facilities, you've got them.' Then I called John Glenn's office and canceled my appointment.

CALEB DESCHANEL: When we were at Edwards Air Force Base, we really had the run of the place. We'd be right along the runways. Some pilots would get ticked off because we were too close. But Yeager was with us a lot of the time. One pilot landed and was like, 'Who the hell are you?! What's going on?! Who's in charge?!' Finally Chuck Yeager turns around, and the guy's face suddenly fell. He said, 'Oh, General, I'm really sorry, I didn't realize that you were with these guys. You could do anything you wanted at Edwards as long as Yeager was around.'

SHEARER: Late in the process we were called up to the Bay Area for the shoot on the aircraft carrier.

2 The USS Coral Sea, a 45,000 ton aircraft carrier, was decommissioned in 1990.

WARD: The USS Coral Sea.2

CALEB DESCHANEL: They gave us two lectures. Both of them had to do with not getting killed. These huge cables catch the planes when they land. Every once in a while they go snap. If you're there when they snap, they just cut you in half.

GOLDBLUM: Of course, I feel at home at sea because I was a whaler before I became an actor. No, that's not true. I'd hardly

been at sea. I'm not really seafaring.

SHEARER: We were going to be going out through the Golden Gate and spending the night. Jeff and I are taken down to where we're going to be bunking. It's cramped. There's water on the floor. We looked at each other and said, Gee, I don't know about this.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: Harry and Jeff were a little grumpy. So Peter and I took them back to my apartment. The Jeff Goldblum version of The Headless Horseman was on TV. Harry started doing riffs on Jeff. Then they were doing riffs on each other. In the early morning Harry was doing yoga in my living room. And then we got back to the set.

SHEARER: The script had me throwing up on the aircraft carrier. I had real qualms about it. I thought, man, it's going to look so fake. I didn't want to be busted with that: Yeah, the movie was great, but man, Shearer throwing up, ooh.

CALEB DESCHANEL: We sent Dennis Quaid up with a test pilot. He had a Nagra recorder in the cockpit. Phil leans over to the pilot and says, Give him an exciting ride. So they go up and come back down 20 minutes later, and Dennis is green. The sound guy goes in to get his Nagra, and Dennis had thrown up all over it. In the dailies, you see Dennis smiling, and then the pilot starts doing barrel rolls, and Dennis disappears from the frame. We asked Dennis about it and he said, Oh, I had my script on the floor and I was just checking my lines. It was total bullshit.

V.

We Didn't Fly Those Planes, We Wore Them.

Yeager's spirit of daredevilry infected the film and the cast. That, combined with shooting on active military bases, occasionally made for dangerous shooting conditions.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: Chuck Yeager's voice is the voice of the right stuff. Levon Helm had that voice that Tom Wolfe ascribed to Chuck Yeager, that sort of West Virginia drawl that Sam didn't have. That's why I had Levon as the narrator of the movie.

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SHEPARD: I m not a Method actor. I just go for it. I could have cared less about the sound barrier. I was trying to capture something about the man. Something about his independence, something about his arrogance, something about his humility and his courage.

CALEB DESCHANEL: Sam Shepard doesn't fly; he drives everywhere he goes.

SHEPARD: I grew up in the country. A lot of country people don't like to fly, they don't like leaving the ground, but I went up with Yeager in a Piper Cub. I figured if I died while flying with the greatest pilot in the world, it would be OK.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: Yeager was like the unseen father that Sam is always looking for in his plays.

SHEPARD: When I first met Chuck, he had an old Ford pickup. Out there by Edwards it's very flat, and all the streets are perpendicular to each other; he would get up to about 85 miles an hour with his cruise control, and he would hit these intersections without touching the brake. Every once in a while you'd see a car coming from a distance and it was heading right where you were heading, but Chuck would not put the brake on. He would just keep going.

BARBARA HERSHEY (GLENNIS YEAGER): Chuck was so warm and incredibly generous. He even started calling me Glennis, which really meant a lot to me. One of the terrible things about the poor wives of the test pilots was that, when they said good-bye to their husbands in the morning, they didn't know if they'd see them again that night. I would look at photos of these women and they all looked like they'd been snowed in for the winter.

YEAGER: Barbara Hershey was the spittin' image of Glennis.

HERSHEY: I asked Chuck, Is Glennis going to come to shooting? And he said, Oh no, no, no, she is never going to come to Edwards again. And I asked him, Did it ever get to her, this terrible waiting? And he said, What do you mean? I said, Well, did she ever get emotional? And he said, Oh no, no, no, not emotional. She d throw things, but she wouldn t get emotional.

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SHEPARD: I asked Chuck what it was like to be an ace pilot, and he said, Well, by the time I was 12 years old, I'd already killed 26 black bears. He had no fear.

HERSHEY: He said, We didn't fly those planes, we wore them.

WOLFE: Yeager is the same wherever you put him: at a card table, at the edge of space, or at a podium. He's just Chuck Yeager. He's a totally confident man.

CALEB DESCHANEL: I went up in an F-100, an old two-seater jet, with a test pilot for Lockheed. There were times we would pull out of a dive and I'd actually lose my vision. Everything became sort of a dark reddish brown and then I'd go blind.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: We were shooting at Van Nuys and somehow Caleb and I found ourselves sitting with Dennis in a little airplane. Suddenly we noticed Dennis was talking to the control tower and the plane was moving! We said, What the [censored]'s going on here!? Dennis had learned how to fly during the shoot, and suddenly he takes off. Caleb and I were terrified.

KIRKLAND: I think it's the single most dangerous filming environment I've ever been in.

CALEB DESCHANEL: We put a camera in a wingtip gas tank on an F-104 to get some shots. And then other shots we did with a guy named Art Scholl, a really wonderful pilot who could do incredible maneuvers. Unfortunately, he died doing footage on Top Gun.

SHEPARD: We didn't have many accidents. One guy unfortunately got killed doing the parachute drop. The chute just didn't open.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: We didn't use any of those shots. We were all stunned. It was so connected with the theme of the movie, how dangerous all of this stuff was.

VI.

You Can't Get That Many Great Guys Together and Not Have a Little Bit of Fun.

As shooting rolled on, the actors inherited the astronauts' spirit of swaggering camaraderie.

HARRIS: Tosca Caf  , a bar in North Beach, was the main hangout. We made some history there.

MARY JO DESCHANEL: The owner, Jeanette, was a friend of Phil's. He wanted it to be kind of like Pancho's, the bar in the movie where the test pilots hang out.

SHEPARD: After shooting all day out in the desert, I'd play pool with Yeager at Tosca.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: Scott Glenn looked like Alan Shepard; he had that flinty, tough-as-nails, competitive attitude. All the actors carried that attitude with them off camera, all through the movie. They lived in character for a long time.

SHEPARD: Eddie and me were big buddies and we liked liquor a little bit more than we should have. And yeah, we got into some fights in that bar. There was somebody sitting between us who was bad-mouthing Jeanette. And we pushed him and pulled him off the stool. And eventually you know, I don't know, we fought.

HARRIS: Lance Henriksen and I were at the Holiday Inn at Fisherman's Wharf. I had a couple beers and I got on a luggage cart. I was skateboarding on it or scooting it out through the front doors. It went off a curb and I went flying, smacked my face on the ground. I had a major black eye and had to do a scene where I was in my room at night. And so Caleb had to do a thing where the moon's coming through a window lighting up one side of my face and the other side of my face is totally in the darkness, because I was really banged up.

CALEB DESCHANEL: Ed shows up, and I'm like, what am I going to do? The set was built, and I actually had to have them reverse it so I could have the light coming in from another side so you couldn't see his black eye.

HARRIS: Phil suggested maybe I was drinking too much. I think he was probably right.

SHEPARD: You can't get that many great guys together and not have a little bit of fun.

VII.

Can a Movie Help Make a President?

Director Philip Kaufman: I really wanted the film to be sold as about the right stuff : men in leather jackets, the cowboy thing. Dan Winters

The film's October 1983 release happened to coincide with the presidential candidacy of John Glenn, which presented both an opportunity and a challenge.

CHARTOFF: I was in New York and called Tom Wolfe and said I wanted to meet. And he said, Come on over to the house for breakfast. At 8:30 in the morning Tom was dressed in his whites. We were eating grapefruits. He managed to get the slices out without soiling himself. And I said, Tom, we think we're going to change the ending a little bit. Yours felt a little bit rushed. I couldn't have said that to any writer but I could to him, because we had this long relationship. He said, Well, after working on the book for years, my wife said to me that if I didn't finish the book in a month she was going to divorce me.

WOLFE: The Right Stuff was going to be a book that went from the Mercury program in the early '60s to the Apollo space mission in 1975. I had just finished the Mercury section and I was starting on Gemini, and my wife came in and said, I've got great news for you. I said, What's that? She said, You finished the book! I had to write three books to finance this reporting stint.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: I was very fussy about nobody seeing the movie before it premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. There were one or two prints of it. We were setting up for the screening and some friends went on a White House tour. As they were passing through, they saw some film cans with The Right Stuff stenciled on. Reagan had gotten a copy, secretly.

HARRIS: There was a big picture of me on the cover of Newsweek: Can a Movie Help Make a President? It gave a much different impression of what the movie was about.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: The movie suffered from that approach. I really wanted the film to be sold as about the right stuff : men in leather jackets, their connection to the cowboy thing. But somebody somewhere at the studio wanted to go back to that magazine-story approach. The movie should have been marketed as tougher and more mysterious than that magazine cover.

PETER KAUFMAN: With the help of Dolby technicians, we helped create new standards for the use of Dolby sound.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: When the rockets took off, the theater would rumble. I looked down the row at the premier and Kissinger was sitting there and I said, I want to see those chins vibrating. When the rockets launched, I went up in the projection room and I said, Louder. I went back down and the whole fucking theater was shaking. The chins were vibrating.

CALEB DESCHANEL: Phil wanted the movie to be really visceral. He always said that he wanted to pass out vomit bags at the screenings. He really wanted people to have the experience of what it was like in the X-1 cockpit or the Friendship capsule.

LADD: The film is a classic, but I think of it as a box office flop at the same time.

3 Best film editing, best sound, best sound effects editing, and best music (original score).

WINKLER: We won four Oscars.³ But we thought it would be a really, really big moneymaker. It wasn't.

LUCAS: The pivotal movie before The Right Stuff was 2001; that was like floating down a river. The Right Stuff had more of a documentary edge. It's seamless the standard until Gravity.

SHEARER: It's a stunning piece of work.

MARK KELLY (ASTRONAUT): I read the book in eighth or ninth grade and saw the movie as a sophomore in college. I've seen it a dozen times. It got me excited about the space program. I ended up flying four times on the space shuttle over a period of 10 years. And I certainly remember the first time, at about Mach 15, as we rolled heads up I looked over my right shoulder, and that's when I saw Earth as a whole planet for the first time. That's a pretty amazing thing to see.

PHILIP KAUFMAN: The last line an actor says is Dennis Quaid's. He's going up after he's launched, total grace under pressure. The sun is coming through the window now, he says. Oh Lord, what a heavenly light.