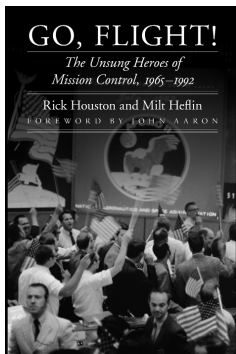


BOOK REVIEW

GO, FLIGHT! THE UNSUNG HEROES OF MISSION CONTROL, 1965-1992



By Rick Houston and Milt Heflin

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Go, Flight!, a new history of NASA's Mission Control, is part of . . ." This new history of NASA's Mission Control is part of a University of Nebraska Press series in space history called "Outward Odyssey: A People's History of Spaceflight." Co-authored by Milt Heflin, a NASA employee and former flight director, and Rick Houston, an accomplished journalist and author (whose surname coincidentally functioned as a synonym for Mission Control itself), this readable volume compiles true tales of NASA's flight controllers in the Apollo program.

Like the flight controllers that they write about, Houston and Heflin have mastered immense amounts of information, telling a clear and compelling story of the dozens of people, tasks, and challenges that defined the Mission Operations Control Room (MOCR) on the third floor at a NASA building in Texas, at the site later known as the Johnson Space Center. This history of Mission Control is, at some level, a wide-ranging collective biography. Chris Kraft, Gene Kranz, and Glenn Lunney are well-known names. But Houston and Heflin also offer compelling accounts of less-recognized but significant figures such as John "Star" Llewellyn, a colorful and memorable character. *Go, Flight!* carefully includes dozens of names, recording their contributions to the history of spaceflight. In addition to handling a large cast of historic figures, the authors also explain the bewildering array of acronyms associated with Mission Control and the Staff Support Rooms (SSRs). Heflin and Houston recount insider stories of how flight controllers solved problems, relying on an exacting knowledge of the details of spacecraft, flight systems, and mission rules.

All of these elements—the people, the training, and the technical expertise—came together on the third-floor MOCR, the iconic room in Houston, Texas, which serves both as the primary setting of this volume and as a sort of character in this history. *Go, Flight!* does not really explore the origins of Mission Control in the Mercury Control Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida except in comparison with the facilities and team assembled at NASA's new facilities in Clear Lake, Texas, in 1965. Houston and Heflin also highlight the values and cul-

ture of the flight controllers themselves. The long-form text of Gene Kranz's dictum—that flight controllers be tough and competent—serves as a dedication of sorts (in addition to the longer foreword by NASA flight controller John Aaron).

The chapters lay out the story of Mission Control, beginning with the Gemini missions first staffed from the new MOCR through the tragedy of the *Apollo 1* fire and the successes of *Apollo 8*, *9*, and *10*. In the heart of the book, the familiar stories of *Apollo 11*'s first lunar landing, *Apollo 12*'s lightning strikes, and the *Apollo 13* rescue receive fresh attention as told, compellingly, through the point of view of the MOCR. A subsequent chapter covers *Apollo 14* through *17*, including how Ed Fendell used the color television camera to track the last lunar module taking off from the lunar surface. The penultimate chapter addresses the changes that came to the MOCR through the increased diversity of the flight controllers in the Space Shuttle era, the tragedy of the loss of *Challenger* in 1986, and the changeover of the third floor MOCR to supporting Department of Defense missions. The final chapter considers the broader legacy of Mission Control.

The resulting story is an enthusiastic history intended to add new information to published histories of human spaceflight that have focused on astronauts, programs, and in-flight experiences. As such, *Go, Flight!* promises to have ongoing utility for space historians. As the generation that lived through the golden age of spaceflight leaves us, the interviews that Houston and Heflin blended into this story will become primary sources in their own right.

There are a few gaps. By the middle of the book, I looked (unsuccessfully) for a reference list of abbreviations used. Even readers well-versed in NASA's alphabet soup of initials may lose track of specific acronyms in the midst of complex stories. Likewise, the narrative description of Mission Control laid out in Chapter 1 would have benefitted from a diagram, especially given how many of the stories in the later chapters rely upon the layout and relative position of flight controllers at particular consoles. Finally, the book omits the explanation of how Mission Control teams took color names beginning with Chris Kraft (Red), John Hodge (Blue) and Gene Kranz (White). *Go, Flight!* refers to Mission Control teams by their colors but overlooks its origin story as well as the tradition of retiring colors as a sign of respect after a flight director leaves.

These are small omissions, however, in a book that will be a great read both for fans for spaceflight and for scholars interested in a social history of Mission Control.

Margaret A. Weitekamp, Curator
National Air and Space Museum
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC