

AD ASTRA

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL SPACE SOCIETY

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1994



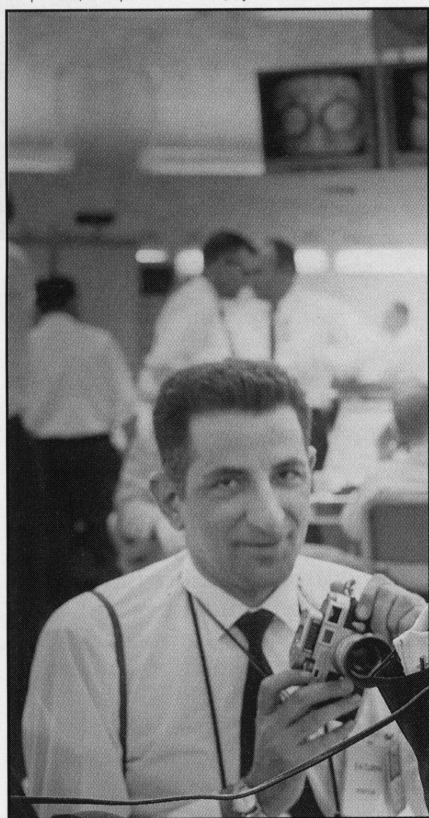
THE NEXT SPACE AGE

SHOOTING STAR

Bill Taub chronicled the early days of spaceflight through the camera's eye.

BY JOHN KROSS

All photos, except where noted, by Bill Taub/NASA.



The PBS series, *The Civil War*, made for riveting television. Despite knowing the ending, millions of TV viewers stayed glued to their set.

And yet in spite of its violent subject, the series could not rely on images of battle scenes—a consequence of the day's primitive cameras. Instead, *Civil War* photographers relied on faces around the campfire or soldiers at mess to create dramatic tension. Tension created not so much by an event, but by its anticipation or resolution. Although he would disagree, Bill Taub was a Matthew Brady-like figure of the Space Age. As NASA's first, and for a time, sole photographer, Taub rubbed shoulders with the great and near great. Armed with his 35 millimeter Leica cameras, he walked among giants, capturing on film some of the most indelible images of the Space Age.

Follow Virginia's tidewater coast south and you'll fly across the Langley Aeronautical Laboratory, the rookery for some of the nation's hottest airplanes and where Bill Taub spent much of his career. But for a man who spent his life surrounded by high flyers, Taub began his career working on a more sedate mode of transportation, the railroad, while his twin brother worked in the more lively environs of Langley. The folks at Langley must have liked what they saw in their edition of the Taub brothers, because, as Bill explains, "I received this telegram special delivery of

fering me a job as aircraft model maker." It was just the ticket for an airplane-crazy kid.

In those days Langley was part of the old National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), a kind of poor man's NASA. With World War II in full swing, however, aeronautical research was fast becoming the difference between life and death, and NACA was scrambling along with the aircraft industry to come up with aerial antidotes to swarms of Zeros and Messerschmidts. It was amidst this beehive of activity that Taub began his photographic career.

In between his model making, Taub did some pioneering work on high-speed electronic flashes. Though he took strictly engineering photographs, Taub shot with an artistic sensibility. Some of his work even caught the eye of *Fortune* magazine, especially his photographs of wind tunnels. They weren't engineering photos, of course, but sort of technologic objets d'art. "I created pictures with light and shadow," he remembers, "something with artistic flair."

Slowly Taub worked his way up to become Langley's official photographer, a position he retained when NACA was subsumed by its high-voltage successor, NASA. Still, at first, photography was a seat-of-the-pants operation. In fact, NASA headquarters didn't even have an official photographer. Taub remembers, "In the early days I had a station wagon and would drive up to Washington" with rolls of film in the trunk. photographs of sleek rockets motoring up

the turnpike courtesy of an aging jalopy

As Taub was making his photographic pilgrimages to headquarters, the space race continued to gain momentum. As it turned out, NASA needed someone to document its assault on the New Frontier. So Bill split his time between Langley and Project Mercury's Space Task Group, handing his photos over to the "voice of Mercury control," Col. Shorty Powers Powers, who became almost as much



Gordo Cooper's grin from inside *Faith 7* won Taub the 1963 "Picture of the Year" award from *Camera Magazine*.

have any training flights for us at that time." The jet fighter serving as a back-drop had to be borrowed from the Air Force. "That's a great picture," the first American in space says, "we didn't even have the same kind of flying suits, or helmets or boots. Everybody showed up with their own equipment." Shepard et al were riding roughshod across the New Frontier and Taub captured the giddy headlong rush on film. Finally in 1962 with Project Mercury in full swing, Taub became the agency's senior official photographer (also taking the helm as assistant audio-visual division chief).

Really though, what Taub was doing couldn't be described in bureaucratese, because there wasn't any precedent for it. Certainly there had been official military and civilian photographers, even great war artists, but Taub's role had never existed before. He was a self-described company man assigned to cover a technological tour de force for a world-wide audience. And the audience was important be-

Most of the press was usually safely corralled behind rope lines. Taub, on the other hand, had a front row seat, able to go just about anywhere. He eventually became an accepted courtier within the band of true brothers. It wasn't always so, particularly at first. "We had problems with publicity at the outset," Alan Shepard explains, "after all, basically we were engineers and test pilots with that type of background, and were involved with an exciting new type of flying machine."



Taub turned technological tours de force into objets d'art with his photos of Langley's enormous wind tunnels.

a celebrity as the Mercury astronauts themselves, would cull through Bill's raw film deciding which glossies to release to a waiting world.

It's hard to recapture the frenetic energy of those times, the manic heady feeling. More often than not, Bill was in the vortex of a whirlwind, surrounded by the swirl of events. He was with John Kennedy at Rice Stadium when on a hot Texas day the young president stared at 50,000 expectant faces and proclaimed, "We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard."

By that time in September 1962, the Mercury astronauts had been the subject of adulatory press coverage for years. So Bill lined Glenn, Grissom, Shepard, and the rest in front of a spare TF-102 to pose for a class picture.

They may have been girding themselves for a battle for the heavens, but as Alan Shepard recalls, "NASA did not

cause technological prowess was a metaphor designed to win hearts and minds in the Cold War.

The stakes of the game were enormous and everyone knew it, not least the official photographer. "We worked as a team," Taub emphasizes. The "we" included Taub himself who enthusiastically enlisted in the crusade. "We were all dedicated people," he explains, "no one had to tell me where to go—I knew where to go." Still, Taub knew the boundaries. Don't interfere! His Leica cameras were quiet (some are still in use at NASA today) and he was unobtrusive. He took candid photographs from inside the fishbowl but "never took a picture that was embarrassing or compromising," he says. There was no room for paparazzi in the crusade. Besides, says Taub, with "Shepard and some of the others, all you had to do was do it once [betray their trust] and you were gone," excommunicated. They needn't have worried—Taub was a true believer.

Eventually, though Shepard admits, "My thoughts and feelings towards Bill changed as the years went by. We realized that he was a member of the family and wouldn't do anything to the detriment of us or the program. I really think he tried to portray us in a positive fashion. Bill was documenting. He wasn't editorializing as many photographers and reporters are wont to do."

Taub was around during the long boring hours in simulators and as crews suited up prior to launch. Despite some "tunnel vision," on launch day, Shepard recalls Bill fluttering around the periphery clicking his shutter. The tension may have been excruciating to the rest of America stoked to a fever pitch by the networks, but inside the crucible? "They were all test pilots," Taub maintains. That says it all. You only have to look at the faces of his astro subjects to comprehend what he meant.

The public, at least, was transfixed by the spectacle, and Taub covered the

homage paid to space heroes, including New York's ticker tape parade for John Glenn after his orbital flight. From Bill's perspective, Glenn's parade provided its own sense of high drama mixed with elements of farce. The original plan was for Bill to take up position in the car directly in front of Glenn's open sedan, photographing the conquering hero as he wound his way through Manhattan's ticker tape. Unfortunately his plan ran afoul of the New York Police Department. The car in front of Glenn's happened to belong to the chief of police who vetoed any photographer hitching a ride, official or not. So thanks to New York's finest, the back of John Glenn's head was well documented (as was Annie Glenn's and Lyndon Johnson's). Taub did get some measure of revenge covering Glenn's 17-minute address to a joint session of Congress from the floor of the House, while the rest of the ladies and gentlemen of the press were penned up in the galleries.

Before all the celebration, though, no one knew if John Glenn's mission would have such a happy ending. There was that little matter of a sensor staring mission controllers in the face indicating that *Friendship 7's* heat shield had come loose. During Glenn's nerve-wrenching re-entry, Taub took what remains one of the most moving photographs of the space age. Earlier on launch day, Dr. William Douglas, the astronaut's chief physician, had ridden in the pad with Glenn. Now with *Friendship 7* engulfed in a re-entry fireball, Douglas stood up in Mission Control dripping with tension

From the deck of the recovery ship, *Kearsarge*, Taub photographed Gordo Cooper flashing a neon grin from inside the confines of his Mercury capsule. Taub also received the ultimate accolade from his peers as only the second recipient of the National Space Club Press Award (Edward R. Murrow was the first). Explaining his success he says, "When you photograph people, they make the picture. It's a combination of many factors. I knew when to move in and when to move out. I learned to shoot story-telling pictures." And arguably Taub had the most compelling story of the century to tell. "I looked for the twinkle in the eye, the curl of the lip, the spark of an expression in my subjects."

His subjects ranged from the chief executive on down, including the New Frontier's chief architect. "You could tell Kennedy was impressed and excited. You could see it," Taub remembers. He covered Kennedy's tour of the Cape (Cape Carnival to some Taub says) and snapped one of the last official photographs of the president at the White House. From there Kennedy flew to Texas later that day. However, Taub saves his most lavish praise for Werner von Braun. "He was the greatest man I ever photographed," he says. NASA's glory days administrator, James Webb, is another hero in Taub's pantheon. "Webb assembled the right team at the right time," a matchless assembly of talent.

In some ways Taub still seems psychologically attached

Taub captured the sorrows as well as the joys of the space program. Here President Johnson pays his respects to Gus Grissom's father at Arlington Cemetery.



to say a silent prayer. Taub captured the scene on film. "He was a gentleman and still is," is Taub's verdict.

Taub covered quite a bit of territory photographing the New Frontier, exposing almost as much film along the way. "I carried the same four Leicas from the first to the last," he says, "from before Shepard took off to Apollo-Soyuz. Those cameras probably flew a couple million miles with me," no doubt screaming for relief all the way. A hundred rolls of film a mission was not unusual. "I covered the launch, pre-launch and every recovery they could get me to," he says.

From rude experience, he concludes that recovery assignments were the worst—certainly no day at the beach. "Carrying all that camera equipment in heavy seas from one end of the ship to the other, well I didn't like it." What Bill didn't like is euphemistically called "stomach awareness."

Still, Taub did some of his best work on a heaving deck, including Camera Magazine's 1963 "Picture of the Year"

The Apollo 11 crew's world tour (and Taub's) raced through 24 countries in 45 days, and included a visit with Queen Elizabeth.



to the NASA team, hesitant to name drop. Yet, that's an impossible task because the names and faces and history are intertwined. Some, like Ed White, never lived to tell the tale. Sturdy and athletic, White was the first American to walk in space. Surely he would have been among the first Moon walkers. On the ground Taub recalls, "quite a personality, one of the best to work with." But White's charmed life was snuffed out in the Apollo fire along with Gus Grissom's and Roger Chaffee's. On that terrible day, Taub scrambled up to the White Room perched alongside the charred Apollo capsule "as soon as they opened it up." It was too late to save the crew so he used his camera to document the horrific results of the fire, making certain that "every roll of film" was personally handed to NASA security.

The loss of Apollo 1's crew sent a tidal wave of shock through NASA and reverberations throughout the country. How could such luminous lives be extinguished? These men

seemed immortal, so vital, almost indestructible. Bill covered the sad denouement at Arlington Cemetery, photographing Lyndon Johnson, Betty Grissom and folded flags.

It was almost two years before Americans flew in space again, but it was as if a giant spring had been wound. In quick succession Taub photographed the events surrounding the maiden flight of Apollo 7 and Apollo 8's Christmas odyssey to the moon. That was followed by the Lunar module's workout during Apollo 9. By the spring of 1969 only 15 kilometers or so separated America from its goal, as Gene Cernan and Tom Stafford skimmed across Lunar mountains in the dress rehearsal. Finally, the stage was set and as usual, Bill was in the wings. As Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Mike Collins suited up on a hot July day, Bill preserved the scene on film. Armstrong looks preoccupied in these photographs. On film Mike Collins pensively stares behind his fishbowl helmet. Yet despite his thousand yard stare, Bill describes Collins as "the loosest one" and a "real jewel."

Cape Kennedy was crawling with reporters in July 1969 (there were 3,500 registered reporters), all craning their necks to cover the "big show." It was a measure of the significance of Apollo 11 that the networks at the time (all three of them) put on hold their daily dose of soap operas to cover the main event. Despite a hiccup in their computer, Armstrong and Aldrin did, of course, walk on the Moon until the wee hours of the morning, slept fitfully and then headed home having planted the flag. Riding on Pacific swells and waiting on the carrier *Hornet* was NASA's official photographer. Like John Glenn before them, the crew of Apollo 11 was showered with ticker tape. This time, though, Taub made sure he led the parade.

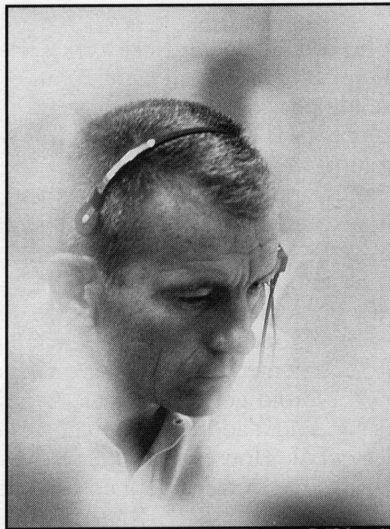
Of course, the tenure of the times had changed by 1969, love beads and Woodstock and all. Even veteran cold warrior Richard Nixon had scripted his toll call to the Moon to include sentiments about "one priceless moment" where "all the peoples on this Earth are truly one." And in case there was any doubt, tacked onto the Lunar lander was the plaque that proclaimed, "We came in peace for all mankind."

While the "brotherhood of man" may have been stretching the truth a bit, Kennedy remained prophetic in at least one respect: By any measure Apollo was an impressive achievement, a public relations dream. The image makers knew a good thing when they saw it and sent the Moonmen on a whirlwind tour around the world—24 countries in 45 days—with Taub tagging along. Bill photographed the Lunar trio with presidents and potentates, including the Queen of England and the Pope. At 10 Downing Street, British prime minister Howard Wilson turned the tables and played tourist. "Wilson took me by the arm," recalls Taub and dragooned him into snapping photographic mementos for his grandchildren.

Anticlimactically, Apollo's crusade ended closer to home in 1975 amid handshakes and vows of eternal friendship with Soviet spacemen—the last Apollo spacecraft saved from a museum to perform a space-bound duet of détente. Taub retired about the same time, leaving his Leicas behind. Through the lens, he had captured the story of a lifetime, preserving on film the endeavors of individuals who built and rode flying machines in a grand gamble for the heavens. Looking back he says, "It was the greatest experience of my life." ☆

John Kross is a frequent contributor to Ad Astra

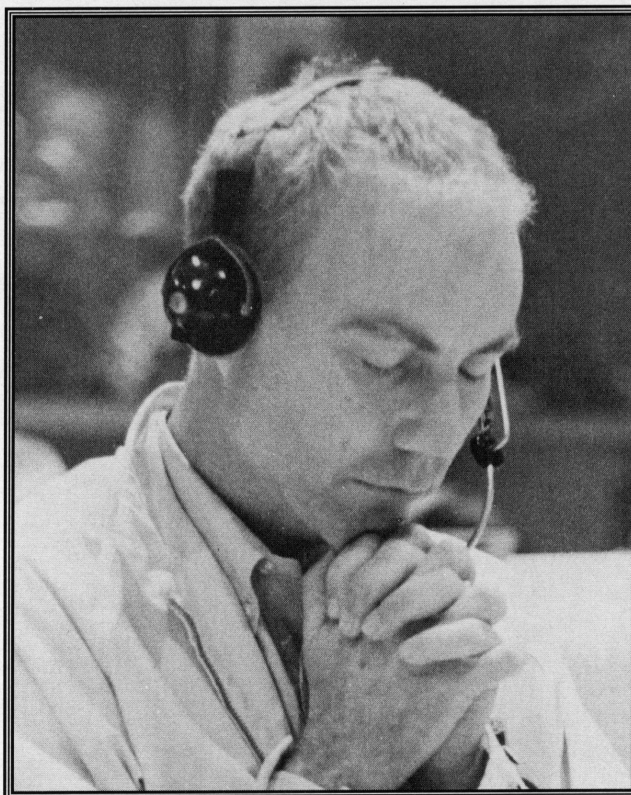
Deke Slayton in Mission Control during the Gemini 4 flight.



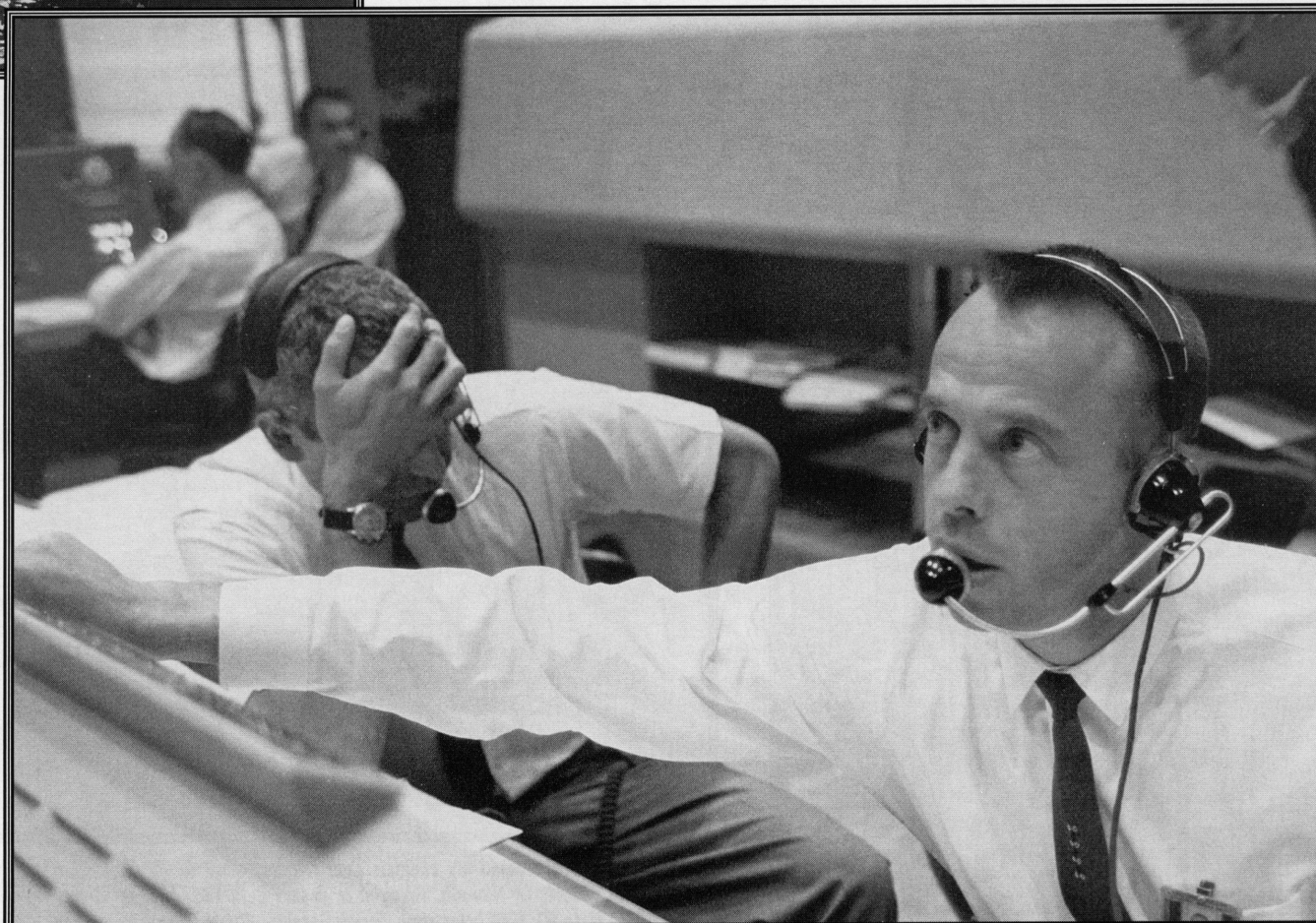
Taub didn't always get a front seat, as was the case during New York's ticker-tape parade for John Glenn.



The secret to building a transonic wind tunnel—slots in the throat of the test section. Taub's photograph was marked "Top Secret" for a number of years.



Dr. William Douglas prays during *Friendship 7's* re-entry.



Capcom Alan Shepard's eyes reflect the concern felt by all in Mission Control during John Glenn's flight.



Photo: Technicolor

Bill Taub with "the greatest man I ever photographed," Wernher von Braun.



Alan Shepard signals liftoff as John Glenn begins his ascent into space and the history books.



Taub accompanied his subjects everywhere, even to survival exercises in the deserts of Nevada. Arrayed in desert garb they fashioned themselves are (L to R): Neil Armstrong, Frank Borman, Charles Conrad, Jim Lovell, Jim McDivitt, Elliot See, Tom Stafford, Ed White, John Young and Deke Slayton.



John Glenn gives a thumbs-up during pre-launch activities.



The Apollo 11 astronauts were lost in a sea of confetti as their motorcade wound through the streets of Seoul, South Korea.



von Braun watches the screens in the Saturn blockhouse as his creation, the Saturn 1, roars into space.