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# Calculated Risk: The Supersonic Life And Times Of Gus Grissom



## Synopsis

Unlike other American astronauts, Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom never had the chance to publish his memoirs—save for an account of his role in the Gemini program—before the tragic launch pad fire on January 27, 1967, which took his life and those of Edward White and Roger Chaffee. The international prestige of winning the Moon Race cannot be understated, and Grissom played a pivotal and enduring role in securing that legacy for the United States. Indeed, Grissom was first and foremost a Cold Warrior, a member of the first group of Mercury astronauts whose goal it was to beat the Soviet Union to the moon. Drawing on extensive interviews with fellow astronauts, NASA engineers, family members, and friends of Gus Grissom, George Leopold delivers a comprehensive survey of Grissom's life that places his career in the context of the Cold War and the history of human spaceflight. *Calculated Risk: The Supersonic Life and Times of Gus Grissom* adds significantly to our understanding of that tumultuous period in American history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"On July 21, 1961, in the middle of a family vacation, my parents stopped to let me watch Gus Grissom's historic fifteen-minute mission in Liberty Bell 7, the second manned Project Mercury flight. At thirteen, I was already very excited about space exploration. I could only imagine that someday I might follow in the footsteps of my hero who was born at the opposite end of the state from my northern Indiana home. Gus Grissom came from a rural, hardworking background just like me, and my later path mirrored his as I earned mechanical engineering degrees from Purdue

University and went on to fly with the US Air Force and then NASA. We both pursued bold dreams. Through grit and determination, Grissom rose from the pastoral Midwest to achieve those dreams, his life ending tragically while Gus was still in his prime. George Leopold's well-researched and inspiring biography of Grissom details an imperfect man willing to risk his life for a chance to explore the unknown. This book is a must-read for every space enthusiast." (Jerry Ross, Astronaut, Author of *Spacewalker: My Journey in Space and Faith as NASA's Record-Setting Frequent Flyer* 2016-04-06)

Gus Grissom was one of the original seven astronauts. A few of us can still remember the impact they had on our nation, and the pride we took in their extraordinary and exciting achievements. They lifted us all and made us proud to be an American. Gus Grissom radiated a quiet, determined competence in all that he did. He understood and accepted the danger of his job but also knew its immense value to our knowledge and understanding of the planet we all inhabit. This readable and compelling biography superbly relates the life of this proud son of Indiana and America. (Lee H. Hamilton, former Indiana congressman, vice chairman of the 9/11 Commission and Distinguished Scholar with the School of Global and International Studies at Indiana University. 2016-04-06)

"Author George Leopold chronicles Grissom's entire life, from his childhood in Mitchell, Indiana, through his military career to his years with NASA. Because no one had written a comprehensive and balanced biography, this book fills a literary and historical void." (Rich Gotshall, *The Daily Journal*, Indianapolis, Indiana 2016-05-27)

George Leopold's *Calculated Risk: The Supersonic Life and Times of Gus Grissom* rescues its subject's reputation by presenting his life and career in full. The book is fascinating and haunting, and its impressive research exonerates Grissom from the charge of being a hapless astronaut who, in his peers' parlance, "screwed the pooch." It's thrillingly told, taking readers into the cosmos with Grissom, conveying the sense of wonder and danger that accompanied these early voyages. (*The Wall Street Journal* 2016-07-16)

"To say that *Calculated Risk* is a good read is an understatement. It's a bookshelf-must for every engineer and NASA buff." (Chuck Murray, *Design News* 2016-08-01)

"...highlights a career, and a life, of someone willing to take risks to achieve great things...provides insights into one of the astronauts who was there at the beginning of the Space Age...an exceptional read." (*Spaceflight Insider*)

During the 1960s, the Cold War was fought on many fronts and fields of battle—nuclear weapon technology, Cuba and other geopolitical hotspots, the Olympic Games, to name a few—but the race to space may have meant the most to Russian and American egos, and astronaut Gus Grissom played a leading role until his death by fire on a Cape Canaveral launch pad in 1967. An engineer and test pilot, Grissom fully understood the risks and complexity of space flight, and his expertise assured his involvement in all facets of the Gemini

program, including the design decisions that cost his life. Through interviews with dozens of Grissom's NASA coworkers, friends, and family, this highly recommended biography offers an astronaut's-eye view of early spaceflight and Cold War intrigue. (Matt Sutherland, Foreword Reviews 2016-08-31)

George Leopold is a veteran technology journalist and science writer who has covered the nexus between technology and policy for over thirty years. Leopold has written extensively about U.S. manned spaceflight, including the Apollo and space shuttle programs. His work has appeared in the New York Times, the New Scientist, and a variety of other science and technology publications. He resides in Reston, Virginia.

This book reflects creditable work by the author to research and report on the life of an astronaut who did not have the chance to tell his own story. It includes information of interest to anyone who studies the amazing story of the race to the moon. Unfortunately, the telling of the story is plagued by rambling and repetitive prose, poorly edited at best. The presentation is convoluted, and the paragraphs often seem to have been written in isolation from one another and assembled at random. Many points, such as Gus "playing the hand he was dealt" are repeated often enough to numb the reader. The author also seems compelled to include a dramatic conclusion, praising Grissom or deriding NASA or North American, at regular intervals. A few misleading if not erroneous technical points diminish trust in the narrative. For readers seeking to explore every aspect of the Apollo program or the lives of the astronauts, this book deserves a place on the reading list. More casual readers, or those seeking clear discussions of the technical aspects, will likely find better written histories more rewarding.

There are few books for which I take the time to write a review. "Calculated Risk: The Supersonic Life and Times of Gus Grissom" is an outstanding work - so much so in my opinion that I want to post this review. Some have made some complaints about the repetitive nature of some passages. That is true and is enough to justify a less than perfect score for it, but does not allow for fractional star deductions and I just cannot subtract a full star for such a well-researched and fascinating book. Having read countless books on the history of the space program over the past 40 years, I can well see the high level of research the author performed. At about the half way point of the book, I felt a bit of a let down knowing this read would soon come to an end. It's on my re-read list. Some nitpicking... page 151 refers to Alan Shepard's attempt to get one more orbital Mercury mission

flown as having been labeled "Mercury Mark II" which is not correct. That name was briefly used to identify what became Project Gemini. Shepard's spacecraft would have been named "Freedom 7 II," and in fact, the spacecraft is on display at the Udvar-Hazy annex of the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum with that name painted on it. Page 158 refers to the Saturn I rocket John F. Kennedy saw on his last visit to Cape Canaveral as over 200 feet tall. It was not, but rather somewhere around 180 give or take a few feet. The uprated version dubbed the Saturn IB was over 200 feet tall. Page 159 says the bubbletop for JFK's limo was bulletproof, but indeed it was not. Page 186 states Mike Collins retrieved an instrument package from the Gemini 10 docking target, but in fact it was from Gemini 8's docking target with which they also rendezvoused. Page 192 refers to Neil Armstrong's "untried spacesuit" which is misleading. The spacesuit design was thoroughly tested in ground tests and on Apollo 9 during EVA activities. (Of course it had not been used on the lunar surface until Armstrong stepped out of the LM.) Lastly, I disagree with the author's assessment that Apollo 8 was almost more of a "stunt." It, too, was a calculated risk, but one that furthered the Apollo program and served as another stepping stone to the first lunar landing several months later. Because the other tens of thousands of words were so interesting, I deduct only a half a star for the minor faults. If you have interest in the history of the space race this is a must read book!

As other reviewers have commented, this book needs much tighter editing. The first few chapters are unnecessarily long and repetitive. The basic story is good, and certainly Gus Grissom is a real hero who deserves a good biography. The author makes a sound argument regarding how Grissom was wrongly blamed for the Mercury Liberty Bell 7 sinking; the evidence for inadequate design and testing is compelling. Then he repeats and repeats the same point.

Anyone who grew up in the 1960s remembers watching the early US manned space shots on small black-and-white TVs at home and at school. Those were exciting times when our Mercury astronaut corps risked everything to gain a toehold in space, broadcast live to your living room or kitchen. Gus Grissom was a member of that corps. He was the second US astronaut to fly into space and the first commander of a 2-man Gemini mission, launched on top of a converted war weapon. He had incredible good luck in his life, but he also had two incredibly bad incidents when his luck turned. The first was when the hatch of his Mercury capsule prematurely blew off, sending his spacecraft to the bottom of the ocean and nearly drowning him. Grissom fought back against the negative effects of that incident to become the first Gemini commander and he was instrumental in the design of that spacecraft, as astronauts were allowed to be in those days. He was also the commander of the first

Apollo mission, Apollo 1. That's where his luck completely ran out and he and his crew died in a horrible fire while running a "routine" test on the launch pad. George Leopold's "Calculated Risk: The Supersonic Life and Times of Gus Grissom" is a detailed biography of Grissom's life, laced with the technical details that only an engineer can deeply appreciate. The space program was and continues to be a heady mix of really smart people, on-the-bleeding-edge flight hardware, and raw guts. All of these are ever present in Leopold's book. If you would like to deeply understand the earliest parts of the space program, from inception to the Apollo 1 fire, from Grissom's perspective, then this is your book. If you liked the fictionalized account by Tom Wolfe, "The Right Stuff," then you really need to read this book as a fact-based antidote to some really incorrect "facts."

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