

*Even though we know how it ends,
the film conveys a quintessential Randian theme:
"striving for the best within us"*

Book by Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger

Screenplay by William Broyles Jr. and Al Reinert

Directed by Ron Howard

Tom Hanks ... Jim Lovell
Bill Paxton ... Fred Haise
Kevin Bacon ... Jack Swigert
Gary Sinise ... Ken Mattingly
Ed Harris ... Gene Kranz
Kathleen Quinlan ... Marilyn Lovell
Chris Ellis ... Deke Slayton
Joe Spano ... NASA Director
Clint Howard ... Sy Liebergot, EECOM White
Loren Dean ... John Aaron, EECOM Arthur

One of the best movies of all time, IMHO, in every conceivable way Apollo 13 is one of the top in my all time Top 10—which is, btw:

- The Natural
- Apollo 13, From the Earth to the Moon
- Lonesome Dove
- Lone Star
- Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within
- Crimes and Misdemeanors
- Dirty Dancing
- The Outlaw Josey Wales
- Hannah and Her Sisters
- Casablanca

So it's number 2 on a list of the best of equals. (Candidly, I made this list up a few years ago, and it might have to change along with me. For example, the followup 10-part docudrama that Hanks produced, *From the Earth to the Moon*, certainly belongs in the Top 10.)

Why the fascination?

Which I'm sure I share with millions if not billions of fellow human souls. Well, and I'm going out on a limb with this, I'll assert the movie is distinctly a "guy thing," an homage to Flash Gordon and the Space Pioneers where everyone else—ordinary men, women, and children—orbits in support of a central cluster of *heroic men*. It manifests a worldview that a lot of Boomer men had to wrestle with growing up... and to a large extent let go of through the consciousness-raising of the 1960s and 1970s.

Apollo 13 reminds us of the best qualities of that era that saw the rise and fall of the US government's adroitly romanticized space program—roughly 1961 with the flight of the Mercury (Freedom 7) rocket by Alan Shepard Jr. and the 1962 orbital flight of the Gemini spacecraft (Friendship 7) by John Glenn to the end of the Apollo program in 1975. There were some qualities of this period that weren't so benign, but the movie, aside from a pleasantly nostalgic sprinkling of TV, music, sports, and politics, cleaves generally unto its nailbiting plot.

As a teenager at the beginning of this period and a young adult at the end, I recall vividly how the astronauts were celebrated as modern Greek gods (Apollos!) taking on the forces of collectivist darkness. Shepard and Glenn, in particular, took over from Mantle and Mays as real men embodying what I wanted to become. Astronauts were the red-white-and-blue reality of John Wayne and Randolph Scott put together: strong, smart, brave, laconic, get-the-job-done icons who married hot—tho highly virtuous—babes who worshipped[1] them and saw supreme purpose in being their wives.[2] Fade to warm, radiant sunset.

If the CIA's assassination of JFK in 1963 was the "day the music died," the "successful failure" of Apollo 13 hastened the scattering of our star-spangled space band to the wind. After all, run by government, NASA

suffered the banes of expensive bureaucracy. We began to question whether a command-based military structure, even with heavy corporate footing, was the best way to get Joe and Jane meaningfully *out there*.

Thus in hindsight, the real Apollo 13 shows us the limits of power, what can happen when some small something or someone in a hypercomplex mechanism screws up. Apollo 13 even faintly suggests the need to socialize the process of space exploration/exploitation so the pursuit does not stay forever the domain of heroic men. At the same time the movie Apollo 13 is a breathtaking adventure of people most of us, male or female, are simply madly in love with across the board:

Commander Lovell (Tom Hanks) and his wife Marilyn (Kathleen Quinlan) form the center of the NASA community in those days focused on little else but going back to the moon for useful purposes. Bill Haise (Bill Paxton) pilots the Lunar Module; Ken Mattingly (Gary Sinise) is originally scheduled to fly the Command Module but is bumped for medical reasons; Jack Swigert (Kevin Bacon) is the bumper. These three men—Lovell, Haise, and Swigert—face the very real prospect of death in space, being up a moonbeam without a paddle, so to speak.

The story builds around the emergency that crippled the flight of Apollo 13, two days after its launch on Wednesday, April 11, 1970—yes, that makes it Friday the 13th. Also featured prominently in the crisis-resolution movie are Flight Director Gene Kranz (Ed Harris) and the young engineer who sticks to his guns, John Aaron (Loren Dean). These actors along with other actors playing the often chain-smoking minions staffing the control room bring the movie to life. There aren't enough superlatives to credit the Ed Harris performance.

All the way around, from author-hero Lovell, screenwriter, producer Brian Grazer, director Howard, special effects wizards, settings designers and builders, actors, composers and musicians... to the janitors Windexing the computer screens: there isn't a single false step.

Another thought I've had in the multiple times I watched the film is just how well it works as documentary. The journalistic events were exactly what happened; Apollo 13 becomes as a time capsule as well as high drama. (Personally, I get a special charge out of the street and home settings in Houston, not to mention the sonic booms that jet aircraft were allowed to generate near populated areas back in the day.)

I hope my review generates some discussion, because I think the world presented so favorably in Apollo 13 is essentially a male chauvinist one. Ironically, I believe most people, men and women, today wonder "if that world was chauvinistic, why didn't we make the most of it?"

[1] Paraphrasing Ayn Rand, she has stated the essence of romantic love for women is properly what she calls hero worship: fulfillment consists of sexual and emotional surrender to a man "who has earned it."

[2] One of the most touching segments of *From the Earth to the Moon* delves into the deep problems many of the astronauts' wives had in their relationships. Divorce was commonplace, unhappiness rampant; I recall one of the wives committed suicide. This segment serves as eloquent counterpoint to nostalgia for any idealizations of male-dominance; still I think an honest discussion of the deeper implications and imperatives of human gender is vital to a successful human future, and I believe Apollo 13 oddly enough provides perfect fodder for fruitful conversation along these lines.

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Apollo 13 | Tom Hanks, Ron Howard | *The best within us* | *Heroes*