

Offered Title: To the Moon, part 2

As a distraction from, or maybe just an offshoot of the Cold War, the space race between the US and Soviet Union (USSR) was heating up during our Mercury program. The Soviet's Vostok program stayed ahead of the Mercury program, setting the record for longest time in orbit.

On September 12, 1962 President Kennedy threw down the challenge directly in his "we choose to go to the Moon" speech, denying the Soviets the choice of a Space Station or Moon landing race. Once given the green light, NASA put the peddle to the metal. Would this be our opportunity to catch up?

Gemini was NASA's transitional step toward a lunar landing. Now we had a two person craft. The goals were to rendezvous and dock with another space craft, perform Extra Vehicular Activities (EVA), change orbital positions (altitude), and spend enough time in orbit to equal a lunar round-trip.

Due to delays, just before Gemini I was launched, the Soviets new Voskhod program managed to beat us with the first EVA. The cosmonauts also flew their Voskhod in shirt sleeves, another first. Flying in shirt sleeves however was not due to planning but to cramped quarters that prevented two cosmonauts from wearing space suits in the capsule at the same time.

The Voskhod vehicle was too limiting so the Soviets had to turn to their shelved Soyuz space station vehicle to pursue their lunar landing hopes. It took about two years to make the Soyuz craft ready. Could we take advantage?

In the meantime, President Kennedy proposed a joint lunar program with the USSR. This would ease tensions between the US and Soviet Union and save both countries money. After first rejecting the idea, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev warmed up to it. The idea was abandoned however after President Kennedy's assassination as Khrushchev did not trust Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson.

The Gemini program progressed and accomplished their goals, finally gaining a lead on the Soviet program.

The Soviet lunar exploration program ramped up under new Premier Leonid Brezhnev (he forced Khrushchev out) and stepped up the Soyuz-based space craft development. Their aggressive plans included lunar circumpolar flights (Zond) in 1967 and a lunar landing (N1/L3) in 1968. Unlike the planned three astronaut Apollo program, the Soviet lunar program utilized two cosmonauts.

The Apollo program, our final configuration for lunar exploration, came on-line and NASA was aggressively pushing test limits. The three astronaut Apollo I was a ground-based test capsule and scheduled for its first test on January 27, 1967. On that day, the same day the US and Soviet Union signed the Outer Space Treaty, disaster struck. Astronauts Virgil "Gus" Grissom, Ed White, and Roger Chaffee died in a spark induced fire inside the capsule.

What's in the Sky?

July 15; after sunset; southeast: Saturn and a nearly full Moon rise together in Sagittarius

July 16; pre-dawn; southwest: Saturn and a nearly full Moon are close