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Apollo Pilot

Donn Eisele

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Outward Odyssey
A People's History of Spaceflight

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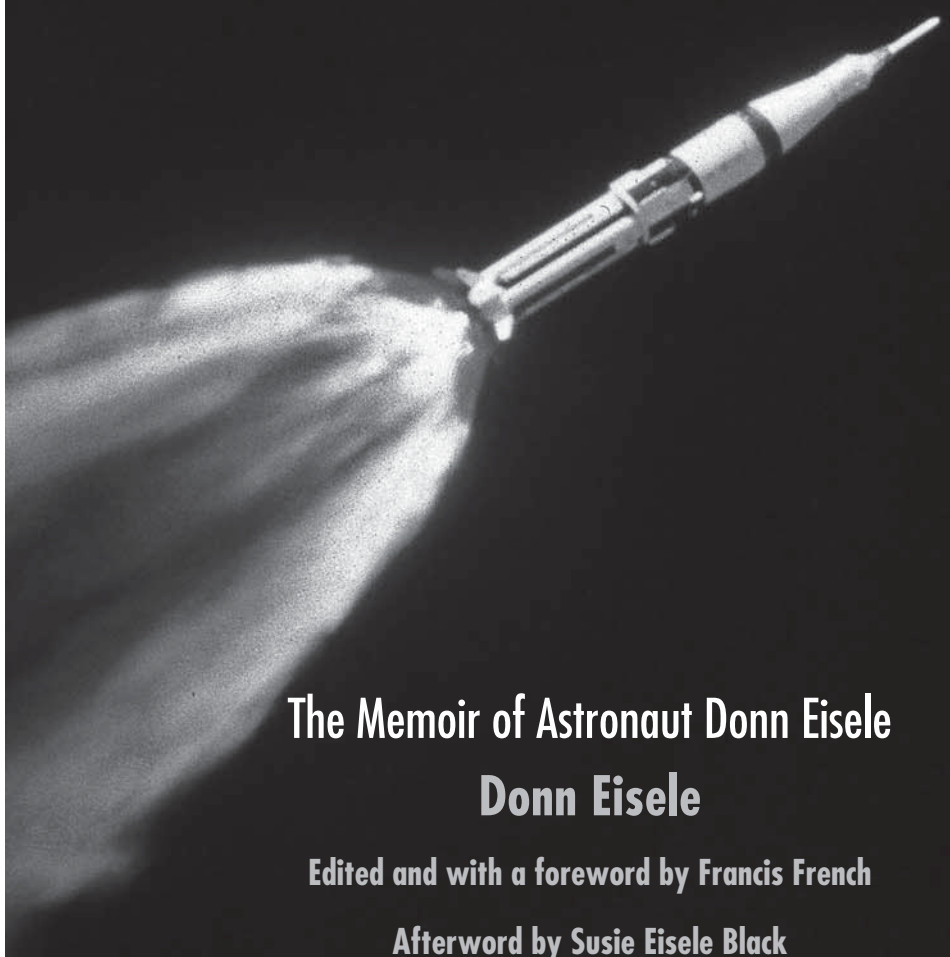
Apollo Pilot



The Memoir of Astronaut Donn Eisele

Donn Eisele

Edited and with a foreword by Francis French

Afterword by Susie Eisele Black

Historical overview by Amy Shira Teitel

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Foreword

Francis French

Donn Eisele was a curious conundrum. Voted most likely to succeed by his high school graduating class, he was seen as athletically gifted and academically very smart. Yet when interviewed during his Apollo years, his hometown colleagues said they never imagined Donn would do anything as adventurous as flying into space. He was a quiet, hard-working, well-liked guy. No one in Columbus, Ohio, seemed surprised that he had been a success in life. Nevertheless, a few had to look at old photos to confirm that they were talking about the right person. Donn Eisele didn't seem to leave a bad impression—rather, he breezed through many people's lives without leaving much of an impression at all.

Born in 1930 in Columbus, Ohio, the son of a newspaper printer, Eisele grew up in a very close, doting family. He hadn't planned to attend the Naval Academy, but he heard that his congressman was giving appointments on a competitive basis, and it might save his parents some money if the military paid his way through college. The day of the test, Eisele later admitted, was an excuse to be out of school. He felt he had only a slim chance of winning a spot in the prestigious academy, but to his surprise found the test easy.

Eisele had always been fascinated by flying, too, but didn't think he would ever pilot an aircraft. He hadn't imagined himself in the military as a youth, and he knew that learning to fly as a civilian was very expensive. He imagined a possible career in aeronautical engineering, as he was attracted to the technical side of aviation, but instead fell into an impressive flying career almost by accident.

Donn Eisele's story was one that intrigued me when I coauthored the space history book *In the Shadow of the Moon*. Eisele's fellow *Apollo 7* astronauts Wally Schirra and Walt Cunningham had become extremely help-

ful colleagues by then, and it would have been easy to write about *Apollo 7* from their viewpoint. Yet both had already written books about their space careers. Eisele, having passed away so young, twenty years before my book was published, was the untold story. He was the forgotten member of the crew, obscure enough that many space buffs were unsure how to spell his first name and pronounce his last name. Other astronauts didn't talk about him much either. Yet his story turned out to be a fascinating one. I was fortunate to be able to interview Wally Schirra, Gordon Cooper, Walt Cunningham, and Ed Mitchell—all the astronauts who trained with Eisele for space missions—along with many of his other colleagues, and as I did, the story grew ever more fascinating.

I learned, for instance, that fellow astronaut Tom Stafford seemed to have played a major role in all of Eisele's decisions once they both graduated from the Naval Academy and joined the air force. Stafford appears to have been the one to pull Eisele into both test pilot school and the astronaut corps. Once at NASA, Eisele came under the leadership of Wally Schirra, who had commanded Stafford's first spaceflight. Stafford served as backup commander for *Apollo 7*, and Eisele in turn served on the backup crew for *Apollo 10*, a flight to the moon that Stafford commanded. A person with an immense amount of respect and influence in the astronaut corps, Tom Stafford was an incredibly valuable ally for Eisele in his career leading up to *Apollo 7*.

Many who knew him well also recalled Eisele as somewhat forgetful and absent-minded in his personal life during his NASA training years. His wife Harriet sometimes had to run forgotten items out to him at the airstrip before he departed on another long round of testing or training elsewhere in the country. Yet with the untroubled demeanor also came an inner calm and patience that many noticed and appreciated.

An only child who lost both of his parents not long after he entered the space program, Donn was a self-admitted loner. Yet he had a goofy, lighthearted side that many recall fondly. Numerous stories from his contemporaries tell of him singing at social events, doing intentionally corny impersonations, or racing one of his children around the backyard while carrying another on his back. It seems he delighted in impersonating other entertainers when at parties, with a talent for mimicry that many enjoyed.

Selected for what was planned to be a relatively low-key mission—the

second manned flight of Apollo, a mission that would largely repeat the first—Eisele was soon given a much weightier duty to perform. When the crew of the first Apollo mission died inside their spacecraft during ground testing in 1967, Eisele, along with Walt Cunningham and Wally Schirra, was tasked with preparing for the flight that would take America back into space. It was not just a case of flying after a major disaster—it had to be done soon, as time was running out for the Apollo program to achieve its ambition of landing astronauts on the moon by the end of the 1960s.

It was a difficult time for both Donn and Harriet. Both recounted at the time how reporters and people on the street continually referred to the *Apollo 1* fire when talking with them about Donn's upcoming flight. Like most people with military experience, Donn Eisele did not obsess about disaster, preferring instead to honor his lost colleagues by pressing on, learning the lessons of why they died while ensuring that such a tragedy was never repeated.

Having served on the prime crew for *Apollo 2*, then backup for *Apollo 1*, and now prime crew for the first manned flight, *Apollo 7*, Donn felt like he had been training with Wally and Walt forever by the time October 1968 rolled around and it was time to fly. For the very first time, three Americans would fly in space together. While NASA's earlier two-person Gemini flights had often paired an experienced astronaut with a rookie who had a similar background, for this mission the dynamics within the crew would be more complex. The crew was a diverse bunch, but highly motivated people such as astronauts knew how to work together well for the sake of the mission.

Schirra, one of the original Mercury astronauts chosen in 1959, had already declared that this would be his last flight, which gave him the freedom to be as opinionated as he wished. Many people noted that he seemed to have a different personality than in the prior decade, when he'd been considered jovial and wisecracking. The *Apollo 1* tragedy had changed his outlook. He was also increasingly feeling that the space business had devoured enough of his time and energy. Schirra felt that NASA was not the same organization that he had joined a decade earlier. He saw too many bureaucratic hurdles forming. He was ready to leave, but before doing so he brought a serious and demanding tone to the mission preparations. He resisted many changes to the spacecraft design, believing that

individual engineers were not fully appreciating how one small change could affect many other systems in the complex spacecraft. Schirra was determined there would be no problems with this flight, and was equally resolute that preparations would go exactly his way. He was often blunt and ruffled many feathers.

It was an understandable response given the deaths of the prior crew, but Eisele noted that many in the Apollo team felt put out by the single-mindedness with which Schirra got his way. Schirra was a naval aviator, and he felt it was important to remind people that naval commanders were in charge of their vessels. Mission Control could advise and suggest, but ultimately he would decide. He felt that the flight controllers, generally younger than him, had much less experience than he did with complex engineering systems. Eisele and Cunningham, subordinate to their commander, had little choice but to follow his lead. Cunningham later reflected that, with a strong personality such as Schirra in command, it was not surprising that Eisele was heavily influenced by him.

Eisele's easygoing style was an asset, as he could breeze through clashes and disagreements easier than most. He often became the calming referee between pilots and managers. However, he often found himself agreeing with some of Schirra's complaints, and later reflected that some officials soon wrote the crew off as troublemakers for raising awkward questions. Despite their differing personalities, the crew seemed to bond well; one person noted that by the time of the flight, Donn's laugh was identical to Wally's.

Walt Cunningham, unlike Schirra and Eisele, had never been a test pilot, but instead brought an impressive science background to the crew. After flying fighter jets in the Marine Corps, he gained a doctorate in physics from UCLA while also working for the RAND Corporation on space-related projects. Always a candid, opinionated person, Cunningham later reflected that his personality did not help his career once he joined NASA and hoped for a spaceflight assignment. He was too obstinate, he admitted, to play that game well. Deke Slayton, who made the crew selections, considered him more of a scientist than an aviator, something that also did not work in his favor.

Schirra was impressed by Cunningham's thorough knowledge of the spacecraft systems, and Cunningham had great respect for his commander in return—especially his innate flying skills. Yet he also chafed against

Schirra's insistence on being in charge even when, as it seemed to Cunningham, there were many occasions when no one cared.

Despite serving on the *Apollo 10* backup crew, Donn Eisele never flew in space again after *Apollo 7*. Opinions vary on why. Some say that disagreements with Mission Control during the flight made NASA officials wary of flying any of the crew again. There were seemingly innocuous items such as Schirra not wishing to test the in-flight television circuit until he was ready, and choosing not to wear a space helmet on reentry out of concern that he would not be able to clear his ears with a bad head cold and changing cabin pressure. The crew devised a system to secure their heads in their couches without helmets, and they successfully tested the television once Schirra was satisfied with the circuit test. Nevertheless, these small disagreements seem to have left many on the ground with bad feelings about the crew.

Others say that Donn's decision to divorce Harriet and remarry very shortly afterward broke an unspoken code about the all-American, apple-pie image that astronauts were supposed to portray. By the time of his divorce in the late 1960s, much of America had moved on from such issues. But as the first astronaut to divorce, Eisele was a test case that did not go well.

It is unfortunate that these perceptions now cloud the outstanding work that Donn Eisele performed in space. As a pilot on the first test flight of NASA's most complex spacecraft at that time, Eisele had to test one of its most vital elements—the guidance and navigation system that would allow the astronauts to know where they were, and how to get home. The next mission would use this system to navigate all the way to the moon and back. Eisele not only thoroughly tested it, he also uncovered numerous places where procedures could be improved. Without this work, missions such as *Apollo 11* could not have flown. Wally Schirra certainly seemed pleased with his colleague's work and the way Eisele double-checked him in orbit, explaining in the postflight technical debriefings that "this is the way two aviators or pilots work. You learn to work together in a pilot/copilot relationship, and I think Donn and I have spent enough time on these systems together where we could overlap, and that was good."

Placed in a management position within NASA far away from the action in Houston, Donn Eisele retired from NASA and the air force in 1972. His second marriage, to Susie, was a very happy and successful one that lasted until the day he died, at the relatively young age of fifty-seven. While

other astronauts of the Apollo era have remained in the public consciousness through public appearances and writing memoirs, Donn Eisele's name faded into relative obscurity.

Some time after the publication of *In the Shadow of the Moon*, I was a guest at the home of Susie Eisele Black and her husband, Bob, in Florida. Susie encouraged me to look through a closet full of boxes containing many items that belonged to her late husband, including numerous objects he had used in space on *Apollo 7*. While looking through the files, I came across a stack of translucent onionskin paper. Leafing through the pages, I realized I had stumbled across a number of typewritten drafts by Donn of an unpublished memoir.

There were at least five different drafts, written in differing styles. Some stopped abruptly in mid-sentence, and in others it was clear by the page numbers that parts were forever missing. A few had faded so much that the only way to read them was to scan them and, like a forensic detective, create a negative image of the page so that individual words could be carefully teased back from oblivion. In reading it all, however, it was clear that there was enough remaining to construct a memoir of Donn Eisele's NASA years up to and including his *Apollo 7* flight.

It is difficult to say from the drafts alone exactly when Eisele wrote them. Little hints about the number of years since Apollo events suggest much was probably written within the 1973–76 time frame. Susie recalls Donn working on drafts in 1971–72, and beginning again in 1974 after returning from serving in Thailand. This would explain not only the freshness of many of his recollections but also much of the apparent anger Eisele still felt toward a number of people he had worked with. These were years when Donn Eisele had just left NASA, believing he had been frozen out of a second spaceflight, and he clearly felt he had some scores to settle on paper. While he also gives a lot of praise, he is unsparing when it comes to criticizing some managers and fellow astronauts. He also does not hold back when it comes to the illicit activities of his colleagues away from home.

Three things should be noted when reading the drafts. It can never be known what final form Donn Eisele would have settled on. Pages are missing, and he may have chosen to add to, tone down, or rewrite some of his personal observations in subsequent drafts. The meaning of some words, such as "retarded" to describe a much-loved child with Down syndrome,

has changed over the decades. At the time, that was a term still frequently used by doctors. Susie also explained to me that "Donn and Wally used to say 'Oh, sob' all the time. It was a standard saying of the two of them. It means whining, or crying, just like 'boohoo.'"

It should also be noted that the in-flight conversations quoted do not match the actual flight transcripts. Rather, I am assuming that Eisele is portraying the atmosphere of the conversations during *Apollo 7*, and his general impressions of the mood of the flight.

The force and candor of some of his opinions and observations made me reconsider whether to work on his drafts for publication. However, I decided I needed to set those concerns against a wider picture. The Apollo program will forever be one of the greatest achievements of humanity. There are those who say that, in future centuries, it may be one of the only things the twentieth century is remembered for. There can also only ever be one first Apollo flight: and on that first Command Module spacecraft, one Command Module pilot. I decided that it was not really up to me. If historians stumbled across, say, a sixteenth-century diary of one of the voyagers accompanying Ferdinand Magellan on the first circumnavigation of the earth, what might they do? I decided the need to share for the sake of history would outweigh concerns about the specific content.

Besides, Eisele's candid account reveals his views of disagreements in management style and mission command, as well as the personal lives of the astronauts, that other histories gloss over. Not everyone involved in Apollo will agree with Donn Eisele's viewpoints. In fact, many will not. But that does not make his thoughts any less interesting to read. As Donn Eisele himself states in the following chapters, "We were insolent, high-handed, and Machiavellian at times. Call it paranoia, call it smart—it got the job done. We had a great flight. Anything less might have meant the end of the program. And I'd rather be called a shithead and live through it than have everybody remember what a nice guy I was."

(And just so you know—it is pronounced "Eyes-Lee" . . .)