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FRED HAISE: THE LUNAR MODULE PILOT OF APOLLO 13

Abstract

Fred Haise, Jr. has earned a leading place in space history. His most significant contribution came during a mission that failed to meet its planned objectives, in which his unique inputs as Lunar Module Pilot arguably became even more vital than they would have been in an actual lunar landing. From as much as 240,000 miles away from Houston, during the latter 87 hours of the 142 hour and 54 minute Apollo 13 mission in April 1970, Haise led Mission Commander James Lovell, Jr. and Command Module Pilot John “Jack” Swigert, Jr. in taking their lifeboat and tugboat Aquarius to its performance limits despite his own severe illness. Haise did so as the foremost LM operator with knowledge honed through long days at Grumman’s headquarters in Bethpage, New York. “Most of us [in Mission Control] considered Fred Haise to be the best Lunar Module pilot we had worked with,” Flight Controller Jerry Bostick recalled. “Haise knew his ship intimately,” Alan Shepard and Deke Slayton concluded, offering specific examples of how Haise’s encyclopedic knowledge of the LM in general, and his LM-7 Aquarius in particular, enabled critical improvisations for Apollo 13. The extent to which Grummanites were personally attached to Haise, and strove to save their friend, offered intangible but meaningful impetus. Haise never pursued the publicity, fame, or wealth that was readily available to an astronaut of his stature, or the political career that was repeatedly offered to him as the only Apollo astronaut from Mississippi. Instead, Haise sought to serve the higher mission of the teams to which he belonged. In characteristic fashion, as Astronaut Office head Deke Slayton reflected, “Good old Fred Haise was willing to stay on as backup commander” for Apollo 16, and serve in Mission Control for Apollo 14, even though it was not optimal for his assignment to a future prime crew and Apollo 19 was cancelled even before he could be officially named its commander. The apogee of Haise’s contributions in space thus lies in the “successful failure” of Apollo 13, and his entry in the historical record merits considerable elaboration. To offer an unprecedented account of a major figure in space on an unprecedented mission and how it relates to his personal and professional life on Earth, this paper draws on the author’s interviews with Haise, as well as a thorough examination of his autobiography and related materials, public statements, and archives.