



# A S T R O S P I E S

1 X 60 HD



International

# ASTROSPIES

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## CONTACT

Tom Koch, Director  
WGBH International  
One Guest Street  
Boston, Ma 02135 USA

TEL 617-300-3893  
FAX 617-779-7900

tom\_koch@wgbh.org  
wgbhinternational.org

Millions remember the countdowns, launches, splashdowns, and parades as the US raced the Soviet Union to the moon in the 1960s. Few know that both superpowers ran parallel covert space programs to launch military astronauts on spying missions, and even fewer know what became of the military astronauts they trained. Highly classified for decades, these top-secret missions might easily have triggered a shooting war in orbit.

In the US, the Air Force-run program was officially known as the Manned Orbiting Laboratory. The public was informed only that the project involved placing military astronauts in space to conduct scientific research. But in reality, as the MOL pilots themselves tell NOVA for the first time, their actual mission was far different. In fact, MOL was designed to be an orbiting spy station, with two astronauts operating an array of intelligence-gathering instruments, including a telescope capable of resolving objects on the ground as small as three inches. In never-before-seen footage, *Astrospies* shows a mock-up of MOL's interior as well as astronauts training for different phases of the mission.

The film interviews several of the unsung MOL astronauts, who speak openly for the first time about their years of training for the classified program. Although virtually unknown at the time, many in the MOL program went on to distinguished careers. A number flew aboard the space shuttle, including Henry "Hank" Hartsfield, who served as a shuttle pilot and spacecraft commander. Richard Truly, another MOL veteran and shuttle astronaut, went on to become Administrator of NASA. Robert Herres served as the first Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And James Abrahamson headed President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, also known as the "Star Wars" antimissile system.

So secret was MOL that much of the information surrounding it is still classified, and astronauts are even reluctant to talk about it today. "We did have a joke in the program," reminisces Richard Truly, "that one day, there was going to be a little article back on page 50 of a newspaper that said, 'an unidentified spacecraft launched from an unidentified launch pad with unidentified astronauts to do an unidentified mission.' That's the way it was."

Not to be outwitted, the Soviets guessed the hidden purpose of MOL and designed a similar manned spy station called Almaz, three of which were launched in the 1970s. NOVA was given unprecedented access to a restricted Russian space facility, where a cosmonaut demonstrates the reconnaissance systems on a fully intact, never-launched Almaz ship.

With a cannon designed to destroy hostile satellites—or attack American astrospies—Almaz may have been the only manned spacecraft ever equipped for space war. And when the cannon was test-fired, it marked the first shot on a potential battlefield of the future.

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## CREDITS

*Senior Executive Producer:* Paula S. Apsell  
*Producer:* C. Scott Willis and James Bamford  
*Director:* C. Scott Willis  
*Writer:* James Bamford

A NOVA Production by C. Scott Films LLC for WGBH Boston

*Photo Credit:* NARA



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