

My Five Seconds of Fame on the Big Screen



By LCDR Curtis Jerry Smothers, (USN-Ret)

The movie about America's early space program, *The Right Stuff*, won four Oscars way back in 1983. It starred Sam Shepard, Scott Glenn, Ed Harris, with a minor supporting part by Fred Ward as Gus Grissom and (for five seconds) yours truly (as seen on the photograph of Fred Ward's left).

I was the Administrative Officer on the USS CORAL SEA (CV-43) at the time. Our ship was sailing off the California coast and the moviemakers chose the CORAL SEA flight deck for the scene where Grissom landed by helicopter after being picked up from his capsule that had parachuted to Earth.

Minding My Own Business--Until I Was Discovered...

I was in my office below decks at the time when our public affairs supervisor grabbed me. "Come on! We need a couple of officers for extras."

So I went to the flight deck and my acting debut consisted of walking with Fred Ward past the camera. The officer on the Ward's right is Mike Twyman, our Ship's Secretary at the time.

Miserable, Windy Conditions on the Flight Deck

I remember that there was more than one take and there was a chilly wind blowing across the deck. The actor was supposed to have just been pulled from the water, so the assistant had to keep soaking Ward's face with a spray bottle right before each scene. Ward was cold and miserable. I just grinned and did what I was told.

Scene Memorialized Grissom's "Screwing the Pooch"

Actually, the movie was pretty good. My big entrance is on the carrier flight deck after Gus Grissom panics and blows the capsule hatch prematurely. The capsule nearly sank and Grissom almost drowned. His precipitous actions caused him to be somewhat ostracized by the NASA

community, and his wife wails, "But I wanted to meet Jackie Kennedy!" They had to settle for a presentation by Werner Von Braun in a toned-down and humiliating ceremony.

Saw Myself on the Big Screen!

Six months later I went to see the movie on the big screen. Lo and behold, there I was big as life, grinning like a Cheshire Cat as I walked towards and mugged for the camera in full-color cinemascope--for all of about 4 seconds.

No Autographs, Please

I went on to serve out the rest of my career and retired a few years later. People still stop me on the street and ask, "Hey! Wasn't that you in the carrier deck scene in *The Right Stuff*?"

That's actually an exaggeration. What they do ask me is am I related to the Smothers Brothers. (No, I am not.)