

AirSpace Bonus - Say My Name Again

Theme music in and under

Matt:

Today on AirSpace, we bring you a bit of bonus content that was originally part of our Naming Space Stuff episode. We just didn't have room for it. So here's a short about how NASA names spacecraft. Enjoy.

Music under

Emily:

So I could talk about geological features till the cows come home, but those aren't the only things in space.

Nick:

Now let's talk about another fun category of naming things in space, hardware, human launched spaceships and planetary explorer probes, and all of that fun stuff.

Emily:

Yeah. And I think this is a really fun one because it's only been kind of a recent phenomenon where NASA has really gone out into the community and tried to get help in naming a lot of its robots, most of the robots that it's been putting down on Mars. And it's been, I think, really exciting for students to help contribute to the naming of these really exciting space missions.

Matt:

Yeah. It really began with the Sojourner rover that went along with the Pathfinder lander. But, you know, if you go back to the earlier years of planetary spacecraft in the 1960s, you generally had a program name and then a number. The names were just sort of dictated by NASA administrators. And in the case of the planetary probes and the lunar probes, they were sort of given names that were tied to the idea of exploration, like Mariners were sort of named after that period of great ocean exploration and discovery. They were named after the idea of what we were actually doing, that this was a new age of exploration. And I think things have changed since then. Planetary exploration hasn't exactly become routine, but it makes sense, I think, that now we've moved to things that really have to do with what the thing is designed to do. So for example, Curiosity, its mission name is Mars Science Laboratory, right? Or Perseverance, its mission name is Mars 2020. Okay. That one's not a great example. But it did describe when it launched.

Emily:

It's very descriptive.

Matt:

Yeah. Yeah, but, And then these contests, aside from the Sojourner example, NASA has tended to choose names that have more to do with ideals, right? Or qualities. The idea of perseverance, of spirit,

of opportunity, of curiosity. These are things that define qualities that we believe are valuable and important.

Emily:

Well, and I think that human aspect makes it really different, right? Like, the robotic space craft, there's no human riding on Perseverance, but it's such a big mission and it's so innovative and it's so important to advancing our understanding of habitable environments. It was really important for NASA to the public to have a bit of a buy-in in terms of participating in that mission. And the naming contest, I think, is a really good way to do it, in the same way, especially in the early days of human exploration and human space flight, giving early, especially early astronauts, some ownership over their spacecraft, I think, is really important.

Musical transition

Nick:

When astronauts were first traveling into orbit and into deeper space, mostly they were test pilots and they had some fun with the names of their spacecraft. The Mercury astronauts, all of the Mercury spacecraft ended in seven, the names all ended in seven. There was Friendship 7 and there was Freedom 7 because of the seven Mercury astronauts. And the astronauts were by and large able to name their own spacecraft in that era.

But the NASA admins had some unpleasant surprises when it came to letting the astronauts name their spacecraft, and Gus Grissom, who was the second American in space, his spacecraft, Liberty Bell 7, sank after he landed in the ocean. The hatch popped prematurely, water came in, he escaped, and there was debate whether or not it was a flaw in the design of the spacecraft or whether or not he had accidentally blown the hatch. And he took umbrage with that. So his very next spacecraft, he named Molly Brown, as in The Unsinkable Molly Brown, which was a popular Broadway show at the time. And NASA asked him to change it because they thought that was a little bit too cheeky. And he said, "Great, I'm changing it to Titanic." And they thought that was probably even less of a good idea. So they let him keep Molly Brown.

But after that, they stopped letting astronauts name spacecraft for a while. And it wasn't until Apollo 9, when there were two human spacecraft operating independently at the same time, so they decided that having names for the ships would be a better communication practice. So they started having fun with them all over again, which is how we got Spider and Gumdrop for Apollo 9, followed by Charlie Brown and Snoopy for Apollo 10 and NASA getting nervous again and worrying that the most defining moment in human space exploration would be 'Houston, Tranquility Base here, Donald Duck has landed,' or something similarly silly. They asked the gang on Apollo 11 to be a little bit, little bit more circumspect in their naming, choose something a little bit more universal and regal if you will, which is how we got Eagle.

So Apollo and Mercury kind of following along than the tradition of the planets named after mythological deities. Apollo in particular was named by NASA Space Flight Programs Director, Abe Silverstein, because he thought Apollo riding his chariot across the sun was appropriate to the grand scale of the proposed program. Now, I don't want to imply that that was a hasty decision, but has anyone else always thought it strange that the moon program was named after a deity associated with the sun?

Matt:

Yeah. I mean, it doesn't make much sense when you think about it and what Apollo actually does in mythology. But then, there was a book that I read when I was first starting to study space history, which was called *Chariots for Apollo*, which was all about how the spacecraft were developed for the Apollo program. And then I started to think, oh, it kind of makes sense if you think about Apollo as being the God that actually had a chariot that could carry him through the sky to other places. And this is exactly what the Apollo program was trying to do was create a sky chariot in effect. Then I actually kind of started to think it was fitting. If you sort of leave out where Apollo was flying and instead focus on the fact that he was flying and was flying because he had a chariot.

Nick:

What should we call it this time around, do you think?

Emily:

Well, so this time, the missions returning humans to the moon are going to be part of the Artemis Program. And the Artemis Program is named after Artemis, the god of the moon, who is Apollo's sister. I feel like that's probably a little more appropriate. I would argue maybe even a way better name. But you know, sometimes hindsight's 20/20 and it takes you a whole human exploration program in order to get it right.

Nick:

All we can do is go back so that we can use the right name this time.

Emily:

All we can do is go back.

Theme music up and under

Matt:

AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. You can follow us on Twitter or Instagram @airspacepod. AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouada and distributed by PRX.

Theme music out