

THE KÁRMÁN LINE: THREE WWII
AVIATORS IN SPACE

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By a strict criterion—they flew military aircraft in WWII, later personally exceeded 100 km altitude—only three individuals qualify: John Glenn, Joseph Walker, Vladimir Komarov. Three careers spanning fabric-and-piston to hypersonic flight into outer space, with no training pipeline ever designed to bridge the interval.

Musing on history today. . . WWII aviators who crossed the Kármán line form a very small, very sharp set. These are men whose working lives spanned fabric-covered airplanes to hypersonic research aircraft, piston engines to orbital mechanics, and the tactical improvisation of 1940s air war to the unforgiving bookkeeping of physics-first spaceflight. By a strict criterion that they actually flew military aircraft in World War II and later personally exceeded 100 km altitude, the internationally recognized boundary of space, only three individuals qualify.

John Glenn served as a U.S. Marine Corps fighter pilot in World War II and Korea, flying combat missions in the Pacific. In 1962, aboard Mercury-Atlas 6, he became the first American to orbit Earth, crossing the Kármán line as a matter of orbital geometry, not ceremony. Thirty six years later, he flew again on STS-95, becoming the oldest human to reach orbit. Glenn's career arc runs from propellers and flak to digital fly-by-wire and microgravity experiments, an interval no training pipeline was ever designed to span.

Joseph A. Walker flew with the U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II and later became one of the central pilots of the X-15 program. In 1963 he twice flew the X-15 above 100 km, crossing the Kármán line in a small winged aircraft (half the size of an F15) without orbital insertion, without rescue margins, and without rhetorical inflation. He remains unique in this set: the only WWII aviator to enter space and return on wings alone, piloting a trajectory that

was all analog, no computers. To a dead stick landing.

Vladimir Komarov entered Soviet military aviation in the closing phase of World War II and went on to become a test pilot. He later flew on Voskhod-1 in 1964 and commanded Soyuz-1 in 1967, becoming the only confirmed Soviet WWII aviator to reach orbit and cross the Kármán line. His death during the Soyuz-1 reentry failure stands as a reminder that spaceflight, stripped of slogans, is an engineering discipline that collects its debts in full.

Total: three human beings. No definitional games, no honorary wings, no institutional blur. Just altitude, history, and men with machines pushed hard and high.

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