

The Dope on Mars

Jack Sharkey



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Title: The Dope on Mars

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Illustrator: Wood

Release Date: October 8, 2008 [EBook #26843]

Language: English

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Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

THE DOPE **on Mars**



By JACK SHARKEY



Somebody had to get the human angle on this trip ... but what was humane about sending me?

Illustrated by WOOD

MY agent was the one who got me the job of going along to write up the first trip to Mars. He was always getting me things like that—appearances on TV shows, or mentions in writers' magazines. If he didn't sell much of my stuff, at least he sold *me*.

"It'll be the biggest break a writer ever got," he told me, two days before blastoff. "Oh, sure there'll be scientific reports on the trip, but the public doesn't want them; they want the *human* slant on things."

"But, Louie," I said weakly, "I'll probably be locked up for the whole trip. If there are fights or accidents, they won't tell *me* about them."

"Nonsense," said Louie, sipping carefully at a paper cup of scalding coffee. "It'll be just like the public going along vicariously. They'll *identify* with you."

"But, Louie," I said, wiping the dampness from my palms on the knees of my trousers as I sat there, "how'll I go about it? A story? An article? A *you-are-there* type of report? What?"

Louie shrugged. "So keep a diary. It'll be more intimate, like."

"But what if nothing happens?" I insisted hopelessly.

Louie smiled. "So you fake it."

I got up from the chair in his office and stepped to the door. "That's dishonest," I

pointed out.

"Creative is the word," Louie said.

So I went on the first trip to Mars. And I kept a diary. This is it. And it is honest. Honest it is.

October 1, 1960

THEY PICKED the launching date from the March, 1959, *New York Times*, which stated that this was the most likely time for launching. Trip time is supposed to take 260 days (that's one way), so we're aimed toward where Mars will be (had *better* be, or else).

There are five of us on board. A pilot, co-pilot, navigator and biochemist. And, of course, me. I've met all but the pilot (he's very busy today), and they seem friendly enough.

Dwight Kroger, the biochemist, is rather old to take the "rigors of the journey," as he puts it, but the government had a choice between sending a green scientist who could stand the trip or an accomplished man who would probably not survive, so they picked Kroger. We've blasted off, though, and he's still with us. He looks a damn sight better than I feel. He's kind of balding, and very iron-gray-haired and skinny, but his skin is tan as an Indian's, and right now he's telling jokes in the washroom with the co-pilot.

Jones (that's the co-pilot; I didn't quite catch his first name) is scarlet-faced, barrel-chested and gives the general appearance of belonging under the spreading chestnut tree, not in a metal bullet flinging itself out into airless space. Come to think of it, who *does* belong where we are?

The navigator's name is Lloyd Streeter, but I haven't seen his face yet. He has a little cubicle behind the pilot's compartment, with all kinds of maps and rulers and things. He keeps bent low over a welded-to-the-wall (they call it the bulkhead, for some reason or other) table, scratching away with a ballpoint pen on the maps, and now and then calling numbers over a microphone to the pilot. His hair is red and curly, and he looks as though he'd be tall if he ever gets to stand up. There are freckles on the backs of his hands, so I think he's probably got them on his face, too. So far, all he's said is, "Scram, I'm busy."

Kroger tells me that the pilot's name is Patrick Desmond, but that I can call him

Pat when I get to know him better. So far, he's still Captain Desmond to me. I haven't the vaguest idea what he looks like. He was already on board when I got here, with my typewriter and ream of paper, so we didn't meet.

My compartment is small but clean. I mean clean now. It wasn't during blastoff. The inertial gravities didn't bother me so much as the gyroscopic spin they put on the ship so we have a sort of artificial gravity to hold us against the curved floor. It's that constant whirly feeling that gets me. I get sick on merry-go-rounds, too.

They're having pork for dinner today. Not me.

October 2, 1960

FEELING MUCH better today. Kroger gave me a box of Dramamine pills. He says they'll help my stomach. So far, so good.

Lloyd came by, also. "You play chess?" he asked.

"A little," I admitted.

"How about a game sometime?"

"Sure," I said. "Do you have a board?"

He didn't.

Lloyd went away then, but the interview wasn't wasted. I learned that he *is* tall and *does* have a freckled face. Maybe we can build a chessboard. With my paper and his ballpoint pen and ruler, it should be easy. Don't know what we'll use for pieces, though.

Jones (I still haven't learned his first name) has been up with the pilot all day. He passed my room on the way to the galley (the kitchen) for a cup of dark brown coffee (they like it thick) and told me that we were almost past the Moon. I asked to look, but he said not yet; the instrument panel is Top Secret. They'd have to cover it so I could look out the viewing screen, and they still need it for steering or something.

I still haven't met the pilot.

October 3, 1960

WELL, I'VE met the pilot. He is kind of squat, with a vulturish neck and close-set jet-black eyes that make him look rather mean, but he was pleasant enough, and said I could call him Pat. I still don't know Jones' first name, though Pat spoke to him, and it sounded like Flants. That can't be right.

Also, I am one of the first five men in the history of the world to see the opposite side of the Moon, with a bluish blurred crescent beyond it that Pat said was the Earth. The back of the Moon isn't much different from the front. As to the space in front of the ship, well, it's all black with white dots in it, and none of the dots move, except in a circle that Pat says is a "torque" result from the gyroscopic spin we're in. Actually, he explained to me, the screen is supposed to keep the image of space locked into place no matter how much we spin. But there's some kind of a "drag." I told him I hoped it didn't mean we'd land on Mars upside down. He just stared at me.

I can't say I was too impressed with that 16 x 19 view of outer space. It's been done much better in the movies. There's just no awesomeness to it, no sense of depth or immensity. It's as impressive as a piece of velvet with salt sprinkled on it.

Lloyd and I made a chessboard out of a carton. Right now we're using buttons for men. He's one of these fast players who don't stop and think out their moves. And so far I haven't won a game.

It looks like a long trip.

October 4, 1960

I WON a game. Lloyd mistook my queen-button for my bishop-button and left his king in jeopardy, and I checkmated him next move. He said chess was a waste of time and he had important work to do and he went away.

I went to the galley for coffee and had a talk about moss with Kroger. He said there was a good chance of lichen on Mars, and I misunderstood and said, "A good chance of liking *what* on Mars?" and Kroger finished his coffee and went up front.

When I got back to my compartment, Lloyd had taken away the chessboard and all his buttons. He told me later he needed it to back up a star map.

Pat slept mostly all day in his compartment, and Jones sat and watched the screen revolve. There wasn't much to do, so I wrote a poem, sort of.

*Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With Martian rime, Venusian slime,
And a radioactive hoe.*

I showed it to Kroger. He says it may prove to be environmentally accurate, but that I should stick to prose.

October 5, 1960

LEARNED JONES' first name. He wrote something in the ship's log, and I saw his signature. His name is Fleance, like in "Macbeth." He prefers to be called Jones. Pat uses his first name as a gag. Some fun.

And only 255 days to go.

April 1, 1961

I'VE SKIPPED over the last 177 days or so, because there's nothing much new. I brought some books with me on the trip, books that I'd always meant to read and never had the time. So now I know all about *Vanity Fair*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *War and Peace*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Babbitt*.

They didn't take as long as I thought they would, except for *Vanity Fair*. It must have been a riot when it first came out. I mean, all those sly digs at the aristocracy, with copious interpolations by Mr. Thackeray in case you didn't get it when he'd pulled a particularly good gag. Some fun.

And only 78 days to go.

June 1, 1961

ONLY 17 DAYS to go. I saw Mars on the screen today. It seems to be descending from overhead, but Pat says that that's the "torque" doing it. Actually, it's we who are coming in sideways.

We've all grown beards, too. Pat said it was against regulations, but what the hell. We have a contest. Longest whiskers on landing gets a prize.

I asked Pat what the prize was and he told me to go to hell.

June 18, 1961

MARS HAS the whole screen filled. Looks like Death Valley. No sign of canals, but Pat says that's because of the dust storm down below. It's nice to have a "down below" again. We're going to land, so I have to go to my bunk. It's all foam rubber, nylon braid supports and magnesium tubing. Might as well be cement for all the good it did me at takeoff. Earth seems awfully far away.

June 19, 1961

WELL, WE'RE DOWN. We have to wear gas masks with oxygen hook-ups. Kroger says the air is breathable, but thin, and it has too much dust in it to be any fun to inhale. He's all for going out and looking for lichen, but Pat says he's got to set up camp, then get instructions from Earth. So we just have to wait. The air is very cold, but the Sun is hot as hell when it hits you. The sky is a blinding pink, or maybe more of a pale fuchsia. Kroger says it's the dust. The sand underfoot is kind of rose-colored, and not really gritty. The particles are round and smooth.

No lichen so far. Kroger says maybe in the canals, if there are any canals. Lloyd wants to play chess again.

Jones won the beard contest. Pat gave him a cigar he'd smuggled on board (no smoking was allowed on the ship), and Jones threw it away. He doesn't smoke.

June 20, 1961

GOT LOST TODAY. Pat told me not to go too far from camp, so, when I took a stroll, I made sure every so often that I could still see the rocket behind me. Walked for maybe an hour; then the oxygen gauge got past the halfway mark, so I started back toward the rocket. After maybe ten steps, the rocket disappeared. One minute it was standing there, tall and silvery, the next instant it was gone.

Turned on my radio pack and got hold of Pat. Told him what happened, and he told Kroger. Kroger said I had been following a mirage, to step back a bit. I did, and I could see the ship again. Kroger said to try and walk toward where the ship seemed to be, even when it wasn't in view, and meantime they'd come out after me in the jeep, following my footprints.

Started walking back, and the ship vanished again. It reappeared, disappeared, but I kept going. Finally saw the real ship, and Lloyd and Jones waving their arms at me. They were shouting through their masks, but I couldn't hear them. The air is too thin to carry sound well.

All at once, something gleamed in their hands, and they started shooting at me with their rifles. That's when I heard the noise behind me. I was too scared to turn around, but finally Jones and Lloyd came running over, and I got up enough nerve to look. There was nothing there, but on the sand, paralleling mine, were footprints. At least I think they were footprints. Twice as long as mine, and three times as wide, but kind of featureless because the sand's loose and dry. They doubled back on themselves, spaced considerably farther apart.

"What was it?" I asked Lloyd when he got to me.

"Damned if I know," he said. "It was red and scaly, and I think it had a tail. It was two heads taller than you." He shuddered. "Ran off when we fired."

"Where," said Jones, "are Pat and Kroger?"

I didn't know. I hadn't seen them, nor the jeep, on my trip back. So we followed the wheel tracks for a while, and they veered off from my trail and followed another, very much like the one that had been paralleling mine when Jones and Lloyd had taken a shot at the scaly thing.

"We'd better get them on the radio," said Jones, turning back toward the ship.

There wasn't anything on the radio but static.

Pat and Kroger haven't come back yet, either.

June 21, 1961

WE'RE NOT alone here. More of the scaly things have come toward the camp, but a few rifle shots send them away. They hop like kangaroos when they're

startled. Their attitudes aren't menacing, but their appearance is. And Jones says, "Who knows what's 'menacing' in an alien?"

We're going to look for Kroger and Pat today. Jones says we'd better before another windstorm blows away the jeep tracks. Fortunately, the jeep has a leaky oil pan, so we always have the smears to follow, unless they get covered up, too. We're taking extra oxygen, shells, and rifles. Food, too, of course. And we're locking up the ship.

IT'S LATER, now. We found the jeep, but no Kroger or Pat. Lots of those big tracks nearby. We're taking the jeep to follow the aliens' tracks. There's some moss around here, on reddish brown rocks that stick up through the sand, just on the shady side, though. Kroger must be happy to have found his lichen.

The trail ended at the brink of a deep crevice in the ground. Seems to be an earthquake-type split in solid rock, with the sand sifting over this and the far edge like pink silk cataracts. The bottom is in the shade and can't be seen. The crack seems to extend to our left and right as far as we can look.

There looks like a trail down the inside of the crevice, but the Sun's setting, so we're waiting till tomorrow to go down.

Going down was Jones' idea, not mine.

June 22, 1961

WELL, WE'RE at the bottom, and there's water here, a shallow stream about thirty feet wide that runs along the center of the canal (we've decided we're in a canal). No sign of Pat or Kroger yet, but the sand here is hard-packed and damp, and there are normal-size footprints mingled with the alien ones, sharp and clear. The aliens seem to have six or seven toes. It varies from print to print. And they're barefoot, too, or else they have the damndest-looking shoes in creation.

The constant shower of sand near the cliff walls is annoying, but it's sandless (shower-wise) near the stream, so we're following the footprints along the bank. Also, the air's better down here. Still thin, but not so bad as on the surface. We're going without masks to save oxygen for the return trip (Jones assures me there'll *be* a return trip), and the air's only a little bit sandy, but handkerchiefs over nose and mouth solve this.

We look like desperadoes, what with the rifles and covered faces. I said as much to Lloyd and he told me to shut up. Moss all over the cliff walls. Swell luck for Kroger.

WE'VE FOUND Kroger and Pat, with the help of the aliens. Or maybe I should call them the Martians. Either way, it's better than what Jones calls them.

They took away our rifles and brought us right to Kroger and Pat, without our even asking. Jones is mad at the way they got the rifles so easily. When we came upon them (a group of maybe ten, huddling behind a boulder in ambush), he fired, but the shots either bounced off their scales or stuck in their thick hides. Anyway, they took the rifles away and threw them into the stream, and picked us all up and took us into a hole in the cliff wall. The hole went on practically forever, but it didn't get dark. Kroger tells me that there are phosphorescent bacteria living in the mold on the walls. The air has a fresh-dug-grave smell, but it's richer in oxygen than even at the stream.

We're in a small cave that is just off a bigger cave where lots of tunnels come together. I can't remember which one we came in through, and neither can anyone else. Jones asked me what the hell I kept writing in the diary for, did I want to make it a gift to Martian archeologists? But I said where there's life there's hope, and now he won't talk to me. I congratulated Kroger on the lichen I'd seen, but he just said a short and unscientific word and went to sleep.

There's a Martian guarding the entrance to our cave. I don't know what they intend to do with us. Feed us, I hope. So far, they've just left us here, and we're out of rations.

Kroger tried talking to the guard once, but he (or it) made a whistling kind of sound and flashed a mouthful of teeth. Kroger says the teeth are in multiple rows, like a tiger shark's. I'd rather he hadn't told me.

June 23, 1961, I think

WE'RE EITHER in a docket or a zoo. I can't tell which. There's a rather square platform surrounded on all four sides by running water, maybe twenty feet across, and we're on it. Martians keep coming to the far edge of the water and looking at us and whistling at each other. A little Martian came near the edge of the water and a larger Martian whistled like crazy and dragged it away.

"Water must be dangerous to them," said Kroger.

"We shoulda brought water pistols," Jones muttered.

Pat said maybe we can swim to safety. Kroger told Pat he was crazy, that the little island we're on here underground is bordered by a fast river that goes into the planet. We'd end up drowned in some grotto in the heart of the planet, says Kroger.

"What the hell," says Pat, "it's better than starving."

It is not.

June 24, 1961, probably

I'M HUNGRY. So is everybody else. Right now I could eat a dinner raw, in a centrifuge, and keep it down. A Martian threw a stone at Jones today, and Jones threw one back at him and broke off a couple of scales. The Martian whistled furiously and went away. When the crowd thinned out, same as it did yesterday (must be some sort of sleeping cycle here), Kroger talked Lloyd into swimming across the river and getting the red scales. Lloyd started at the upstream part of the current, and was about a hundred yards below this underground island before he made the far side. Sure is a swift current.

But he got the scales, walked very far upstream of us, and swam back with them. The stream sides are steep, like in a fjord, and we had to lift him out of the swirling cold water, with the scales gripped in his fist. Or what was left of the scales. They had melted down in the water and left his hand all sticky.

Kroger took the gummy things, studied them in the uncertain light, then tasted them and grinned.

The Martians are made of sugar.

LATER, SAME DAY. Kroger said that the Martian metabolism must be like Terran (Earth-type) metabolism, only with no pancreas to make insulin. They store their energy on the *outside* of their bodies, in the form of scales. He's watched them more closely and seen that they have long rubbery tubes for tongues, and that they now and then suck up water from the stream while they're watching us, being careful not to get their lips (all sugar, of course) wet. He

guesses that their "blood" must be almost pure water, and that it washes away (from the inside, of course) the sugar they need for energy.

I asked him where the sugar came from, and he said probably their bodies isolated carbon from something (he thought it might be the moss) and combined it with the hydrogen and oxygen in the water (even *I* knew the formula for water) to make sugar, a common carbohydrate.

Like plants, on Earth, he said. Except, instead of using special cells on leaves to form carbohydrates with the help of sunpower, as Earth plants do in photosynthesis (Kroger spelled that word for me), they used the *shape* of the scales like prisms, to isolate the spectra (another Kroger word) necessary to form the sugar.

"I don't get it," I said politely, when he'd finished his spiel.

"Simple," he said, as though he were addressing me by name. "They have a twofold reason to fear water. One: by complete solvency in that medium, they lose all energy and die. Two: even partial sprinkling alters the shape of the scales, and they are unable to use sunpower to form more sugar, and still die, if a bit slower."

"Oh," I said, taking it down verbatim. "So now what do we do?"

"We remove our boots," said Kroger, sitting on the ground and doing so, "and then we cross this stream, fill the boots with water, and *spray* our way to freedom."

"Which tunnel do we take?" asked Pat, his eyes aglow at the thought of escape.

Kroger shrugged. "We'll have to chance taking any that seem to slope upward. In any event, we can always follow it back and start again."

"I dunno," said Jones. "Remember those *teeth* of theirs. They must be for biting something more substantial than moss, Kroger."

"We'll risk it," said Pat. "It's better to go down fighting than to die of starvation."

The hell it is.

June 24, 1961, for sure

THE MARTIANS have coal mines. *That's* what they use those teeth for. We passed through one and surprised a lot of them chewing gritty hunks of anthracite out of the walls. They came running at us, whistling with those tubelike tongues, and drooling dry coal dust, but Pat swung one of his boots in an arc that splashed all over the ground in front of them, and they turned tail (literally) and clattered off down another tunnel, sounding like a locomotive whistle gone berserk.

We made the surface in another hour, back in the canal, and were lucky enough to find our own trail to follow toward the place above which the jeep still waited.

Jones got the rifles out of the stream (the Martians had probably thought they were beyond recovery there) and we found the jeep. It was nearly buried in sand, but we got it cleaned off and running, and got back to the ship quickly. First thing we did on arriving was to break out the stores and have a celebration feast just outside the door of the ship.

It was pork again, and I got sick.

June 25, 1961

WE'RE GOING BACK. Pat says that a week is all we were allowed to stay and that it's urgent to return and tell what we've learned about Mars (we know there are Martians, and they're made of sugar).

"Why," I said, "can't we just tell it on the radio?"

"Because," said Pat, "if we tell them now, by the time we get back we'll be yesterday's news. This way we may be lucky and get a parade."

"Maybe even money," said Kroger, whose mind wasn't always on science.

"But they'll ask why we didn't radio the info, sir," said Jones uneasily.

"The radio," said Pat, nodding to Lloyd, "was unfortunately broken shortly after landing."

Lloyd blinked, then nodded back and walked around the rocket. I heard a crunching sound and the shattering of glass, not unlike the noise made when one drives a rifle butt through a radio.

Well, it's time for takeoff.

THIS TIME it wasn't so bad. I thought I was getting my space-legs, but Pat says there's less gravity on Mars, so escape velocity didn't have to be so fast, hence a smoother (relatively) trip on our shock-absorbing bunks.

Lloyd wants to play chess again. I'll be careful not to win this time. However, if I don't win, maybe this time *I'll* be the one to quit.

Kroger is busy in his cramped lab space trying to classify the little moss he was able to gather, and Jones and Pat are up front watching the white specks revolve on that black velvet again.

Guess I'll take a nap.

June 26, 1961

HELL'S BELLS. Kroger says there are two baby Martians loose on board ship. Pat told him he was nuts, but there are certain signs he's right. Like the missing charcoal in the air-filtration-and-reclaiming (AFAR) system. And the water gauges are going down. But the clincher is those two sugar crystals Lloyd had grabbed up when we were in that zoo. They're gone.

Pat has declared a state of emergency. Quick thinking, that's Pat. Lloyd, before he remembered and turned scarlet, suggested we radio Earth for instructions. We can't.

Here we are, somewhere in a void headed for Earth, with enough air and water left for maybe three days—if the Martians don't take any more.

Kroger is thrilled that he is learning something, maybe, about Martian reproductive processes. When he told Pat, Pat put it to a vote whether or not to jettison Kroger through the airlock. However, it was decided that responsibility was pretty well divided. Lloyd had gotten the crystals, Kroger had only studied them, and Jones had brought them aboard.

So Kroger stays, but meanwhile the air is getting worse. Pat suggested Kroger put us all into a state of suspended animation till landing time, eight months away. Kroger said, "How?"

June 27, 1961

AIR IS FOUL and I'm very thirsty. Kroger says that at least—when the Martians get bigger—they'll have to show themselves. Pat says what do we do *then*? We can't afford the water we need to melt them down. Besides, the melted crystals might *all* turn into little Martians.

Jones says he'll go down spitting.

Pat says why not dismantle interior of rocket to find out where they're holing up? Fine idea.

How do you dismantle riveted metal plates?

June 28, 1961

THE AFAR SYSTEM is no more and the water gauges are still dropping. Kroger suggests baking bread, then slicing it, then toasting it till it turns to carbon, and we can use the carbon in the AFAR system.

We'll have to try it, I guess.

THE MARTIANS ate the bread. Jones came forward to tell us the loaves were cooling, and when he got back they were gone. However, he did find a few of the red crystals on the galley deck (floor). They're good-sized crystals, too. Which means so are the Martians.

Kroger says the Martians must be intelligent, otherwise they couldn't have guessed at the carbohydrates present in the bread after a lifelong diet of anthracite. Pat says let's jettison Kroger.

This time the vote went against Kroger, but he got a last-minute reprieve by suggesting the crystals be pulverized and mixed with sulphuric acid. He says this'll produce carbon.

I certainly hope so.

So does Kroger.

BRIEF REPRIEVE for us. The acid-sugar combination not only produces carbon but water vapor, and the gauge has gone up a notch. That means that we

have a quart of water in the tanks for drinking. However, the air's a bit better, and we voted to let Kroger stay inside the rocket.

Meantime, we have to catch those Martians.

June 29, 1961

WORSE AND WORSE. Lloyd caught one of the Martians in the firing chamber. We had to flood the chamber with acid to subdue the creature, which carbonized nicely. So now we have plenty of air and water again, but besides having another Martian still on the loose, we now don't have enough acid left in the fuel tanks to make a landing.

Pat says at least our vector will carry us to Earth and we can die on our home planet, which is better than perishing in space.

The hell it is.

March 3, 1962

EARTH IN SIGHT. The other Martian is still with us. He's where we can't get at him without blow-torches, but he can't get at the carbon in the AFAR system, either, which is a help. However, his tail is prehensile, and now and then it snakes out through an air duct and yanks food right off the table from under our noses.

Kroger says watch out. We are made of carbohydrates, too. I'd rather not have known.

March 4, 1962

EARTH FILLS the screen in the control room. Pat says if we're lucky, he might be able to use the bit of fuel we have left to set us in a descending spiral into one of the oceans. The rocket is tighter than a submarine, he insists, and it will float till we're rescued, if the plates don't crack under the impact.

We all agreed to try it. Not that we thought it had a good chance of working, but none of us had a better idea.

I GUESS you know the rest of the story, about how that destroyer spotted us and got us and my diary aboard, and towed the rocket to San Francisco. News of the "captured Martian" leaked out, and we all became nine-day wonders until the dismantling of the rocket.

Kroger says he must have dissolved in the water, and wonders what *that* would do. There are about a thousand of those crystal-scales on a Martian.

So last week we found out, when those red-scaled things began clambering out of the sea on every coastal region on Earth. Kroger tried to explain to me about salinity osmosis and hydrostatic pressure and crystalline life, but in no time at all he lost me.

The point is, bullets won't stop these things, and wherever a crystal falls, a new Martian springs up in a few weeks. It looks like the five of us have abetted an invasion from Mars.

Needless to say, we're no longer heroes.

I haven't heard from Pat or Lloyd for a week. Jones was picked up attacking a candy factory yesterday, and Kroger and I were allowed to sign on for the flight to Venus scheduled within the next few days—because of our experience.

Kroger says there's only enough fuel for a one-way trip. I don't care. I've always wanted to travel with the President.

—JACK SHARKEY

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