

**Duplicity**  
**by John Darnbrough**

Mars was looming large in the window of the NASA spacecraft Gemini. So called because of the two astronauts being twins whose mission it was to be the first humans to land on the red planet. They had left their mother Earth 9 months ago and their gestation period was nearly over. They would be born to Mars and answer the question posed by David Bowie 50 years earlier in 1971. NASA had planned this mission meticulously to make sure that the answer would be "Yes".

Previous missions had been to land rovers for gathering data and analysis of the planet, its atmosphere and how humans could live there in the short term. The Mars Orbiter was also in place mapping the surface of Mars from several miles above.

The two astronauts, David and Julia Walker were working their way through a procedure they'd rehearsed many times during their training on earth which would prepare their spacecraft for what NASA calls the "7 Minutes of Terror". This is the descent through the Martian atmosphere when all communication is lost and where the success of the mission will be decided and a life or death moment for the astronauts. That and the fact that communication between Gemini and Mission Control takes 14 minutes, the descent and landing will be over before NASA would find out whether the outcome was successful or not.

David and Julia, aged 32, had been selected as the crew following years of training amongst other candidates. They were favourites throughout the process, partly because of their abilities and experience as astronauts but having no other kin made them an obvious choice with the risk assessment team.

They had been raised by a close family friend when their parents had been killed in consecutive space shuttle disasters. Exploration was in their blood and despite the space flight jinx on their family so far, they didn't let it influence their own careers in this field. They had both had successful missions to the International Space Station already and believed that this far more dangerous mission was an opportunity not to be missed.

As David worked through the first stages of the descent procedure, his sister looked at him admirably. She had a free moment from her own duties so took the opportunity to take in where they were and what was about to happen. Her brother was tall with a look of the actor and comedian Jim Carrey. That's where the comparison ended. David was quite a serious character and didn't joke around. He didn't believe in luck he believed in numbers and facts. It made Julia smile. She was far more relaxed about life and had to really work hard to achieve what seemed to come so effortlessly to her brother.

When they were young she thought that twins were exactly the same but she soon found out how wrong she was when it came to natural talent between them. David had it all and she struggled to keep up, hanging onto his coattails.

David realised he was being watched and looked up at his sister. 'Huh?' 'What are you gaping at?'

'Just looking at my clever brother. Taking it all in.'

'Get some work done, this ain't a holiday' came the reply and he went back to his procedure list with a wry smile on his face.

Julia giggled, swished her long brown hair back and tied it into a pony tail from a hair band on her wrist before starting the next landing checks.

Back on Earth in Mission Control, flight director Karl Martinez was getting the go/no go decision from his flight controllers. CAPCOM was Go, EECOM was Go, FAO was Go, Surgeon was Go. All checks had been made Karl was ready to issue the order to commence the Entry, Descent and Landing stage.

'We are Go for Mars landing ladies and gentlemen, let's get this spacecraft on the ground in one piece. CAPCOM, send the go codes to Gemini'.

Karl leaned back in his chair to take a moment. He knew this was a stressful part of the mission so he closed his eyes for a moment, twisted his head from side to side and took a deep breath before sitting forwards again. 'I need coffee, someone get me coffee please'.

14 minutes later the Gemini crew received the go codes. David and Julia smiled at each other. All their years of preparation had come to this. Their place in history was right now and the events that would take place over the next few hours.

Julia paused to look out at the planet below. The amount of blackness was diminishing rapidly now as they closed in.

'Look at it David, it's beautiful'.

'It sure is'. He turned to his sister. 'So are you'.

The pair embraced each other. It was a final emotional gesture before the seriousness of the imminent 7 minute descent through the atmosphere.

They were ready now to move into the landing capsule. The procedures were complete for leaving the mother ship which would be detached shortly. They donned their space suits, collected their final pieces of equipment and crawled into the landing capsule closing a hatch door behind them.

The claustrophobic feeling was noticeable as they manoeuvred into the two seats in the conical landing capsule and made more evident now that they had helmets and thick suits on. Movement was tricky but everything was as expected.

The mother ship was detached and the capsule now sped towards the rusty glow below. Within a few minutes they were in the 7 minute window of entry through the Mars atmosphere. The ride became bumpier. David, Julia and Mission Control had done all they could.

Entry in 6 minutes.

A fireball flared from the curved edge of the capsule, the heat inside noticeable to the two astronauts and the brightness of the glow illuminating the instruments in front of them so much so that they seemed distorted.

Entry in 5 minutes.

Julia closed her eyes. She could hear the roar of the fireball outside sounding now like the cheers of a crowd. Mars was applauding their bravery but wouldn't give them any clues as to whether it would allow them through after all.

Entry in 4 minutes.

A bang from behind their heads jolted them forwards for a second. It was expected as pressure built up on their heat shield and rapidly released but was always going to catch them by surprise. It added

an extra beat to their hearts and they both had the feeling of dizziness, free fall and as though they'd just been propelled slightly forwards in time by a few seconds

Entry in 3 minutes.

David checked the clock on the instrument panel in front of them. He held up 3 gloved fingers in front of Julia's helmet visor in case she hadn't realised how far into the entry they were. She gave a thumbs up in return. They both felt that if anything was going to go wrong it would have happened by now.

Entry in 2 minutes.

The intensity in the capsule of vibration and heat had started to diminish due to the atmosphere slowing it over the last 5 minutes. This was a good sign to the astronauts.

Entry in 1 minute.

Julia prepared herself for the next sequence of events going over each one in her mind. One more minute and they would be through the Mars atmosphere and free falling towards the surface.

Another jolt as they broke through into the Martian air. The 7 minutes was over and they'd made it through the most dangerous part of the journey since lift off 9 months ago.

David and Julia grabbed each other's hands and shook them. They could just see half of each other's face with their heads turned in the constrictive helmets.

They felt the parachute deploy which slowed them even more in their descent. Next the heat shield was jettisoned and guidance kicked in to work out where they were in relation to the ground.

As they neared the ground, boosters ignited and the Sky Crane lowered Julia and David in their inner pod towards the ground.

This was how all their equipment and Mars accommodation had been landed ahead of them over the last year before their arrival. Now the guidance system locked onto a beacon on the surface and steered them towards their landing site.

Swirls of dust appeared outside of the pod as they neared the ground and then as gentle as an elevator hitting the ground floor they were on the Mars terrain.

A clanking noise meant they had been unhooked from the Sky Crane which now propelled itself away.

Now silence ensued as the twins sat there daring to believe where they were.

As Julia and David hit the ground, NASA had no data yet to even know they'd made it. The next transmission they expected to get was that the parachute had deployed but that would be 14 minutes after it had actually happened.

The atmosphere was tense in the control room and the flight controllers nervously fidgeted waiting for some data.

It didn't arrive exactly when expected. Mission controls predicted 7 minutes of terror had gained an additional 1 minute of terror. No signal, no data.

Karl stared at the monitor in front of him. He had rehearsed this scenario but was never really prepared to have to execute it. He could see his own reflection in the display screen almost framing him as the man who lost Mars. He wondered which press release he'd be dispatching.

He snapped out of his staring as he heard a flight controller shout 'Parachute deployed'. A cheer went up in the control room and Karl punched the air as his spirit lifted and his fears diminished. Then something unexpected came from the same flight controller. 'We have a Parachute deployed signal again Sir'.

The people in the room were puzzled as to whether this was a data error, a repeat signal by mistake or some other reason. They looked at each other to see if anyone could offer an explanation.

'Let's monitor the situation please' Karl insisted. 'No guess work people'

'Heat shield jettison confirmed'.

No cheer this time just focused concentration from everyone in the room on their computer monitors and a concerned silence.

'Heat shield jettison signal again sir'.

A low murmur had begun from the people in the room as they tried to understand why they were receiving double confirmations.

The Mars Orbiter was on standby to sweep the landing site and send back close up imagery for analysis if required. Karl decided to get it positioned just in case. 'Prepare Orbiter reconnaissance'.

The signals from each stage of the landing continued to arrive in pairs, one slightly after the other. 'Touchdown confirmed and Sky Crane away' announced the flight controller but no-one felt they could react yet now until they had received that signal again. Sure enough it came shortly after the first.

Some people were quietly celebrating but this signal doubling had unnerved them because it wasn't expected and had never happened when previously landing hardware on the planet.

'Ok everybody let's stay cool' said Karl calmly who was now on his feet and waving his arms up and down slightly to re-enforce his words.

'We'll get some imagery from the orbiter and see what we've got on the ground up there'.

There would be a 20 minute wait as the orbiter got into position, photographed the site and transmitted the image back to earth.

The mission control flight controllers gathered around the large wall mounted monitor to watch the imagery develop as it came through. The image was grainy at first and then some parts of it started to become recognizable.

'That's the main accommodation block' said one of them pointing to the top right.

'I can see the solar panel matrix' said another pointing to the bottom left.

The excitement in the room grew as something near the bottom right became clearer and then a cheer filled the room as they all recognized the shape of the landing pod.

People were jumping up and down, shaking hands, patting on backs. Some were in tears and being hugged by colleagues and the room was at its noisiest yet.

Only Karl seemed to be still staring at the monitor with a puzzled look on his face as its image sharpened even more. The Gemini pod was now clearly visible in the image, but there was something else.

In the top left of the high definition image was a blurred segment. There wasn't supposed to be anything in that area of the site but although blurred, Karl could see that there was something with

light and shadow and of around the same size as the Gemini pod. It was the only area in the whole photograph that was blurred.

By now other people in the room had picked up on this and the noise level dropped again. Celebration had turned to curiosity.

Karl requested another image from 5 minutes later. It too began to materialize on the screen. Now, outside the Gemini Pod, the top of two people wearing space helmets could be seen and from the position of their bodies they were facing the blurred anomaly. As this image sharpened, the area in the top left remained blurred.

Karl requested that the orbiter camera be rotated 180 degrees for the next set of images in case of a lens malfunction. This was actioned and they awaited the additional images. As they came through, the Gemini Pod was now top left and still clear. The bottom right now had the blurred anomaly and the two astronaut figures had moved several feet towards it.

David helped Julia step out of their Gemini Pod onto the Martian surface. They could see their accommodation block and beyond that the rusty ground stretched for many miles to the horizon line.

They gazed around their new world in disbelief that they were really there and marvelled at the light that they were bathed in which no other human had experienced. As they took in their surroundings they were drawn to an object that they weren't expecting to see.

Neither of them could recall anything about a copy of their Gemini Pod being sent ahead of them and what would the reason be anyway they thought.

David and Julia looked at each other and then back at this replica.

The red sand around the base of it was disturbed just like that around their own that they had just climbed out of.

They slowly walked towards it to try and understand why it was there.

Back in mission control the onlookers watched each image appear in sequence. They could see the astronauts getting closer to the anomaly on each shot before they became blurred within it too.

On the last shot received before the orbiter had moved out of position, the blurred area was now showing as high definition but there was nothing there apart from red dust and rocks.

No communication was ever received from the two astronauts.

When the next Mars rover was sent a few years later it landed near to the Gemini site and beamed back pictures of the scene.

The Gemini pod was empty and there was no sign of David and Julia. Only some foot prints that stopped several meters away from the landing spot.

'Is there Life on Mars?' – David Bowie (1971)