

WILD BLUE THUNDER

The image features a group of approximately 15 soldiers in full combat gear, including helmets and tactical vests, standing in a loose formation on a flat, reflective surface. They are silhouetted against a bright, low sun that creates a strong lens flare and casts long, dark shadows across the ground. The background shows a vast, open landscape with distant mountains under a sky filled with soft, white clouds. The overall color palette is dominated by the warm oranges and yellows of the sunset, contrasting with the cool blues of the sky and the dark silhouettes of the soldiers.

A D O C U M E N T A R Y F E A T U R E

A person is seen from behind, sitting in a flight simulator cockpit. They are wearing a headset and looking out at a large, curved screen displaying a desert landscape with mountains and a small town. The cockpit's instrument panel is visible in the foreground, showing various gauges and digital displays. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the simulator screen.

“TEST PILOTS ARE NOT BORN TO THEIR TALENTS. THEY ARE PAINSTAKINGLY MADE.”



SYNOPSIS

WILD BLUE THUNDER is a feature documentary that embeds with the most competitive and talented pilots in the United States Air Force as they vie for one of the few coveted spots at the nation's elite USAF Test Pilot School. With high-octane thrills, dramatic personal stories and a dry "Chuck Yeager" sense of humor, we will witness their challenges, sacrifices and triumphs as they strive to outfly their peers and prove themselves to the academy's leaders.



Every year, 400 of the nation's top pilots and engineers compete to be invited to the US Air Force's most elite academy: The Test Pilot School at renowned Edwards Air Force Base on the edge of the Mojave Desert. It is arguably the most prestigious and advanced flight training program in the world.

And only 24 of them will make the cut.

WILD BLUE THUNDER follows a cohort of pilots as they compete for a invite to the institution. This intimate peek into a dramatic never-before-seen world showcases some of the nation's top flyers as they rise to the demands of the test while attempting to preserve their sanity and their sense of humor.

IT BEGINS

The Chief Test Pilot welcomes the incoming class. Many of these young men and women set their hearts on Test Pilot School back when they were teenagers when they first saw an F-16. Or when they saw “Top Gun.” Maybe they were hooked the moment they watched Chris Hadfield, another TEST PILOT SCHOOL alum, perform David Bowie’s Space Oddity while floating around the ISS.

One student says “As far back as the eighth grade I had a laser-sharp focus on what I wanted to do,” he said. “I wanted to go the Air Force Academy, become a test pilot and eventually be an astronaut.”

This dream has likely been percolating for some time in our heroes’ hearts. And now they will have the chance to live that dream at Edwards Air Force Base... if they don't blow it.



POTENTIAL CHARACTERS

In October, 50 pilot applicants will be selected from hundreds to undergo an intense evaluation process designed by Gray to weed out those that can't take it.

Of those, only 24 will be invited to Test Pilot School.

In October of 2023, our cameras captured a handful of the applicants at Edwards Air Force Base as they flew in from around the world for an in-person interview with the Commandant and a series of flight tests, often on aircraft they'd never before flown, and sometimes in desert wind conditions that might ground a take-off under normal circumstances. This footage provides an accurate snapshot of the kinds of characters and situations that occur in this world.

THE STUDENTS

We were able to interview a small sample of pilots at the October 2023 Evaluations, some of whom were accepted to the school. These characters are indicative of the pilots who apply each year in terms of their diversity of backgrounds, interests, home lives and personalities.



FTE's, CIZZOs & RIZZOs

Modern Flight Test is no longer just the cowboy flyboys of the Chuck Yeager years. As AI becomes more and more integrated into planes and those systems get smarter, Flight Test Engineers (FTEs), Control System Operators (CSOs or Cizzos) and Remote System Operators (RSOs or Rizzos) are a critical part of today's USAF Test Pilot School. Many of the engineers have never been in anything other than a commercial plane, but they will be paired with Pilots and required to endure the same maneuvers and speeds in order to get an intimate knowledge of the crafts. We plan to interview these candidates as well, and based on conversations with TPS staff we are confident there will be more storylines emerging from this pool of students.

THE CHIEF TEST PILOT

BILL "EVIL" GRAY is the charismatic Chief Test Pilot of the USAF Test Pilot School. He might tell you how he got the call sign EVIL, but you'd have to buy him a beer first. And chances are, after observing him in his element, you might figure it out. Bill Gray graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1983 and became a test pilot in 1994. Now a civilian, EVIL has led the school for almost two decades and has no plans of leaving. With military pay, he's not in it for the money. EVIL is here because he can't imagine being anywhere else. He loves his work.

Bill wears his hair long now that he no longer has to sport a military cut, his wife likes it that way. He splits his time between Edwards, where he sleeps in his small office crowded amongst flight instruction manuals, awards and dense engineering texts during the week, avoiding a long commute to Santa Monica. His weekends are spent there with his equally impressive wife - a world away from the Mojave Desert - against the more cosmopolitan, civilized backdrop of a wealthy beach community. And EVIL is at home in both worlds.



Brilliant, busy and blunt with an excellent sense for comedic timing, EVIL doesn't mince words, and warns candidates that there's no such thing as work-life balance at TPS. And if the candidates aren't intimidated by his warnings, they will be by the impending flight test.

Under EVIL's leadership, the selection process has become even more competitive and demanding. As a pilot, not just skills will be tested in the air, but also guts. The current curriculum has been carefully curated under his tenured leadership and is designed to flush out candidates who aren't yet up to the challenge.

Around the school, he is respected, beloved and a little feared. His authority at Test Pilot School is unequivocal. That is, of course, as long as the current enlisted commandant's goals are aligned with his.



THE COMMANDANT

The Commandant is one of several enlisted roles at the school and thus they and their Vice Commandant continuously cycle out every two years or so, ever at the mercy of the military's assignment. The list of past commandants is impressive: Chuck Yeager, Buzz Aldrin and Jimmy Doolittle are legendary in both USAF and popular lore.

COL. MARYANN 'YETI' KARLEN has just been appointed to be the next Commandant at Test Pilot School. Col. Karlen will be the second woman to hold this command in the school's eighty year history. With a curriculum that must recalibrate every year to account for a rapidly evolving military landscape, she will have her work cut out for her. She is also a mother to two children under the ages of three, and balancing her career with her family will be an interesting storyline.

But YETI will only hold this post for a year or two, leaving EVIL to brace for yet another changing of the guard and navigating yet another strong, capable leader who may or may not share his vision for TPS. The meek don't rise to commandant, so this revolving character will present an interesting dynamic season to season for EVIL.



THE INSTRUCTORS

Civilian and enlisted instructors, all former USAF, and all TPS grads themselves, will round out the cast of WILD BLUE THUNDER. The instructors are charismatic with big personalities and will make excellent recurring characters. They understand the ins and outs of the school, the stakes, and - having been through the program themselves - are great mentors to the students currently battling their way through the curriculum.

Guest appearances also occur when former graduates appear for an impromptu flight. These men and women include test pilots who are currently working for Virgin Galactic, NASA, and other companies at the edge of next generation of flight.




WILD BLUE THUNDER



THE MOJAVE DESERT





FLIGHT is as important as our character arcs as our heroes - the students - experience frustration, celebration, sadness, elation, loss, love and ultimately pride - all against the brilliant, blazing backdrop of the Mojave.



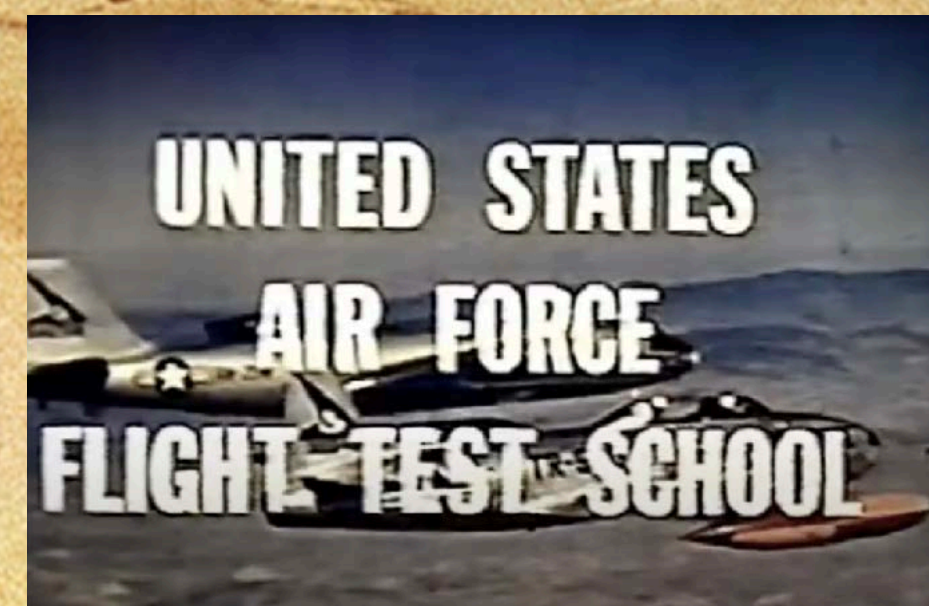
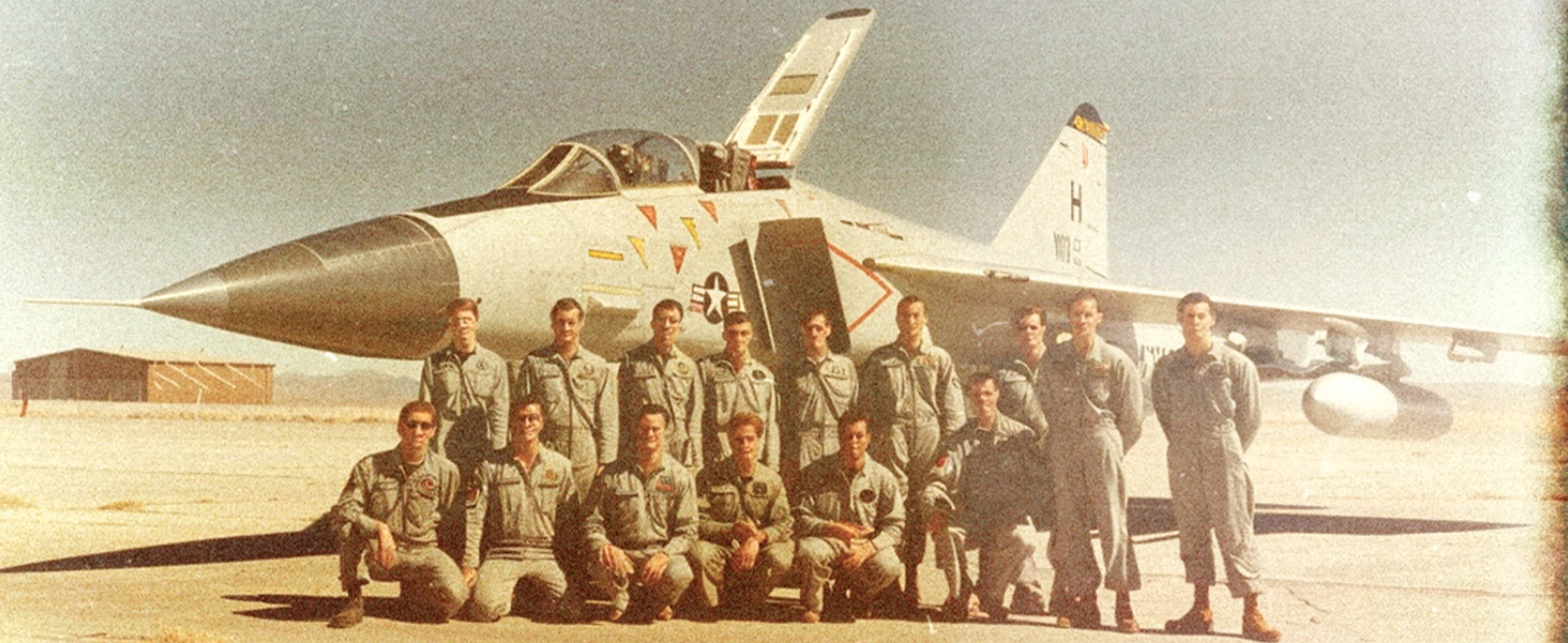
There is always an edge, a place where “a wing and a prayer” holds operational truth. Most of us avoid this edge with every bit of planning we have. But then there are those other guys, those guys who fly the crazy flights.

They test the edge so the rest of us know where it is.

THE RIGHT STUFF

All of the United States' first generation of fighter jets were subjected to testing at Edwards Air Force Base. Chuck Yeager set a new speed record for an aircraft in 1947, by flying faster than sound. It was here where we watched the first landing of the Space Shuttle.

The Air Force Test Pilot School was established in 1944, and is regarded as the center of the aerospace testing universe. The training is rigorous and relentless, but if you can make it without washing out, not even the sky is the limit. NASA has trained 101 Test Pilot School graduates into astronauts since its inception in 1961. And a new generation of engineers, pilots and astronauts are literally redefining space travel with missions for NASA, SpaceX, Virgin Galactic and Boom.



HARD DRIVEN

The portrayal of Flight Test Schools in Hollywood is alluring and glamorous. They got a few things right. The bonds that form are tight and long lasting. The candidates are cream of the crop. Top physical form. Wicked smart. Funny.

“Some of the smartest, most capable, motivated, and disciplined people I’ve encountered anywhere. And generally fun to be around too.”

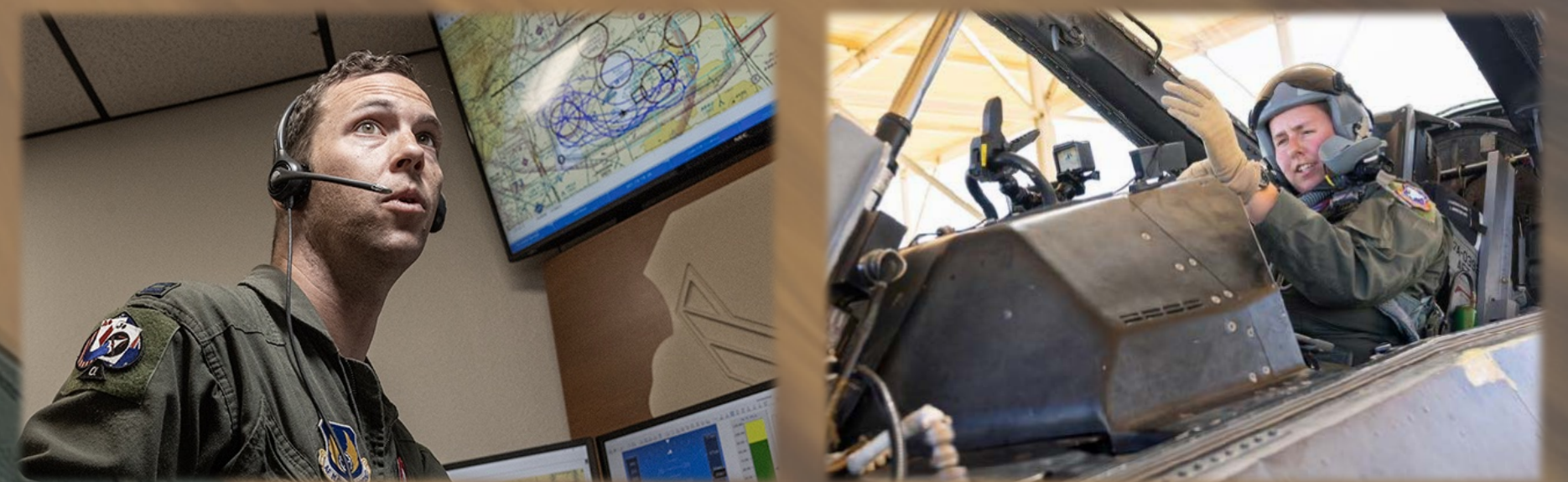
But Test Pilot School is not just a sexy montage with a driving soundtrack. This film includes all of that, and then unpacks that montage - digging into the characters and their backstories, and discovering what truly moves them.

THRILLING

Regardless of how prepared a test pilot is, the flights are still dangerous. After all, these are tests that are often designed to push the limits of an airplane. Sometimes it flies really well, sometimes really, really bad.

One of the instructors tells us he's "had a handful of life-threatening incidents occur, though not in the air. Most of the close calls have happened on the ground."

In flight testing that suggests more airplanes are lost during ordinary testing than while performing dangerous maneuvers. "Sometimes, it seems we let our guard down during the 'routine tests' and that's when accidents happen."





"I always think about the control room as a sports event," a student tell us. "You do all of this preparation, build up and practice. Now, it's time to put the headset on and keep the aircrew safe."

"Sometimes things just surprise the heck out of you," Gray says. "Sometimes things just go completely nuts and you need to keep your head on your shoulders. You need to deal."

"There are times when we are doing things with an airplane that have never been done before," says a student. "Our simulators can't accurately simulate everything – we have an idea about what it should look like, but it is all new."



In order to achieve their dream, our candidates will have incredible obstacles to overcome.
They will need to have the right stuff, for real.





We meet our candidates at their current bases, where they are the cream of the crop. We see them IN FLIGHT and get a sense of their area of expertise. We also get a taste of their personalities outside of the cockpit. What do they like to do when they are not flying? What are their romantic entanglements or familial responsibilities?



They arrive at Edwards, excited and a little terrified to be at the cusp of their dream. There they encounter one of the films' main heroes, Chief Test Pilot BILL "EVIL" GRAY who reminds them that washing out of Test Pilot School will effectively end their careers.

Are they still up to the challenge?

After the evaluation flights, we will be with the instructors while they are deliberating. Which candidates are out? And which ones have the right stuff?



In the end, some of our favorite students will have earned acceptance into an elite class at a legendary school and embark on a new chapter. While some other favorites will need to dust off and consider trying out again next year, reminding themselves that even Jim Lovell was rejected along his path to becoming Commander of the Apollo Mission.



THE SERIES

If the feature is successful, Wild Blue Thunder can seamlessly expand into a limited series that follows the accepted class through the intense, relentless and thrilling TPS program.

POSSIBLE STORYLINES:

- **Students will fly dozens of different planes** during their year at the school. **Many they have never flown before.** A large portion of **each episode would be in the air, and episodes would focus on mastering different crafts or maneuvers.**
- **EVIL's backstory** and devotion to TPS as a retired officer and civilian will wear his hat how he damn well pleases. His teaching aesthetic, his personal life and his relationship with the base command.
- The **Current Commandant**, her goals for TPS and the dynamics of her relationship with EVIL. **She will be juggling the high stress position with being a mother to two babies.** Great drama here.
- **The accepted class uproots their lives and move to the middle of nowhere.** Will their personal relationships survive?
- **Friendships will develop** as will **friendly and some not so friendly rivalries.**
- The class will travel to foreign bases and cities when they **train with one of TPS' many allies.** Amazing opportunities to capture work and play at those locations.
- **Compelling characters and storylines will emerge in the other INSTRUCTORS lives and the FLIGHT CREWS** who maintain the aircraft. Every year, private companies try to lure away the highly sought after civilian instructors. Who will stay and who may go?
- The students will face **in-flight and written tests WEEKLY that will push them to their edges. Will anyone wash out?**
- **The season ends with graduation and awards** perhaps following students as they put in their NASA applications or get recruited to other exciting career paths.

TIMELINE





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