APRIL 12, 1961

THIS WEEK IN TIME

YURI GAGARIN - FIRST HUMAN IN SPACE

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"I SEE EARTH. IT IS SO BEAUTIFUL."

The alarm clock rang at 5:30 in the morning at the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. Twenty-seven-year-old Yuri Gagarin woke knowing that by day's end, he would either be dead or the most famous person on Earth. No human had ever left the planet before. No one knew if a person could even survive in space.

Soviet scientists had spent years preparing for this moment. They had sent dogs into orbit, including the famous Laika and the successful mission of Belka and Strelka who returned safely. But a human was different. What would happen to Gagarin's body in zero gravity? Would his blood flow properly? Could his heart function? Would he be able to swallow food or water? These were questions that could only be answered by trying.

The capsule Gagarin would ride in was called Vostok 1. It was a small metal sphere, barely bigger than a large beach ball inside, with no way to steer and no emergency escape system. If something went wrong during launch, there would be no rescue. The spacecraft would be entirely controlled from the ground. Gagarin would be a passenger, not a pilot.

At 9:07 in the morning, the rocket engines ignited. Gagarin felt the tremendous force pushing him back into his seat as the rocket accelerated. Within minutes, he was travelling at 28,000 kilometres per hour. Then, suddenly, the engines cut off and silence filled the capsule. He was weightless. Through his small window, Gagarin saw something no human had ever witnessed: Earth as a blue sphere against the black void of space.

The flight was not without problems. The spacecraft spun more than expected during re-entry, reaching dangerous speeds. The service module failed to separate cleanly, causing the capsule to tumble wildly. Gagarin experienced forces ten times normal gravity, crushing him into his seat. The heat outside reached 3,000 degrees Celsius as friction with the atmosphere created a glowing fireball around his craft.

At seven kilometres above ground, Gagarin ejected from the capsule as planned and parachuted separately to Earth. He landed in a field near the village of Smelovka, startling a farmer and her granddaughter who were planting potatoes. Still wearing his bright orange spacesuit and white helmet, Gagarin must have looked like a creature from another world.

Gagarin's successful flight changed everything. It proved humans could survive in space and sparked a race that would eventually put people on the Moon. The young Soviet pilot became an instant global hero, celebrated in countries around the world. Tragically, he would die just seven years later in a jet training accident, never flying to space again. But those 108 minutes made him immortal, the first human to leave our planet and see it whole.

MISSION FACTS:

- Duration: 108 minutes
- Maximum altitude: 327 kilometres
- Speed: 28,000 km/h
- Orbits: 1 complete orbit of Earth
- Capsule diameter: 2.3 metres

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Literal Questions (finding information directly in the text)

1. What time did Yuri Gagarin wake up on the morning of his space flight?
2. How long did Gagarin's flight last?
3. What was the name of Gagarin's spacecraft?
4. Where did Gagarin land after his flight?
5. What animals had the Soviets sent into space before Gagarin?

Inferential Questions (reading between the lines)

1. Why do you think the article says Gagarin would either be "dead or the most famous person on Earth" by day's end?
2. Why were scientists unsure if a human could survive in space, even though they had successfully sent dogs?
3. The text says Gagarin was "a passenger, not a pilot." What does this tell us about how much control he had over his mission?
4. Why might the farmer and her granddaughter have been startled when Gagarin landed in their field?
5. What does the author mean when they say those "108 minutes made him immortal"?

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Gagarin had no way to control his spacecraft and no escape system. Would you have volunteered for this mission? Explain your reasoning.
2. The article mentions several things that went wrong during the flight. Why do you think the Soviet government still considered the mission a success?
3. How do you think space travel today is different from Gagarin's flight in 1961?
4. Why was it important for humans to go to space? What have we learned from space exploration?

Creative/Personal Response Questions

1. Imagine you are Gagarin looking out the window at Earth for the first time. Write a paragraph describing what you see and how you feel.
2. If you could interview Yuri Gagarin, what three questions would you ask him?
3. Design a medal or monument to honour Gagarin's achievement. Draw it and explain what the symbols mean.
4. Compare Gagarin's 108-minute flight to modern space missions. Research how long astronauts stay in space today.

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