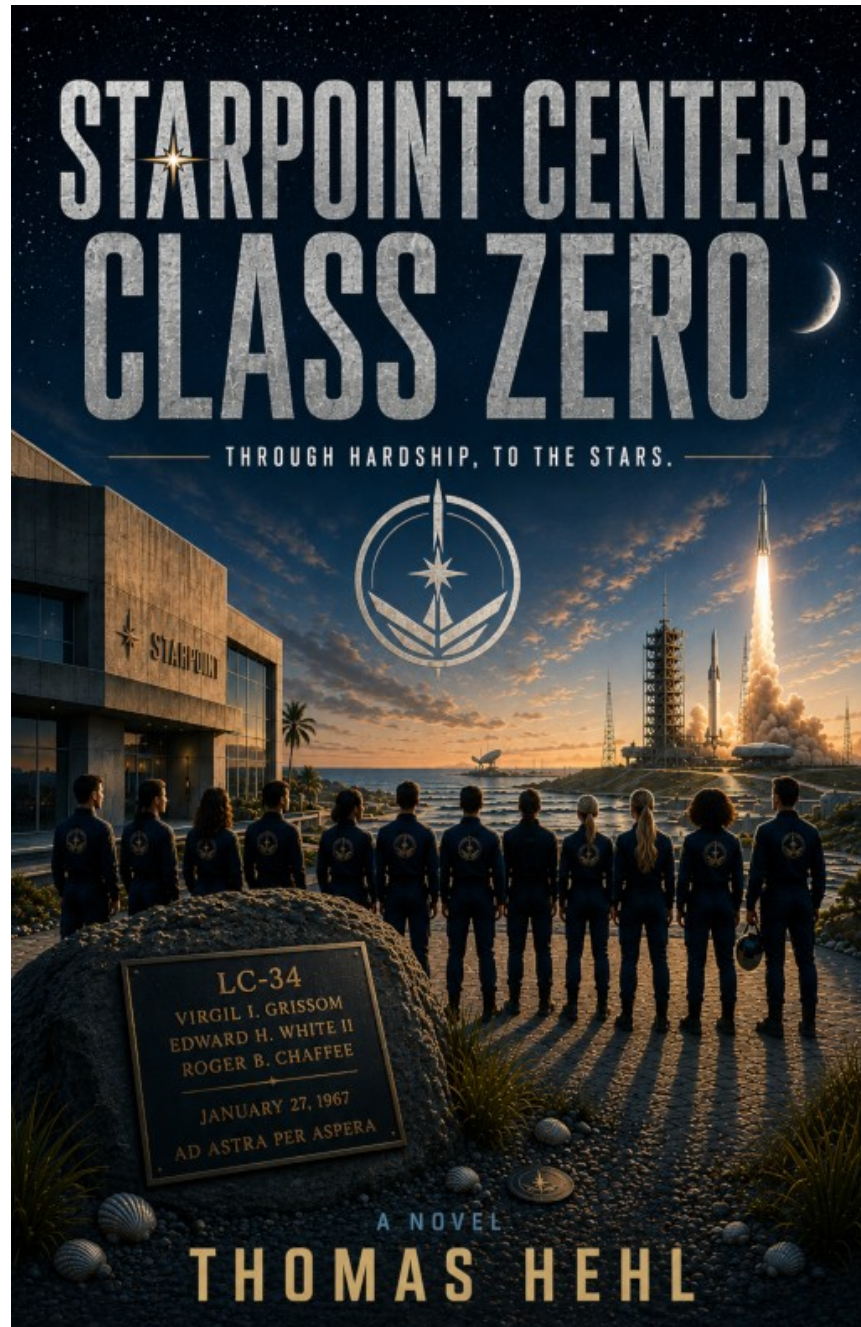


STARPOINT CENTER: CLASS ZERO

A NOVEL BY THOMAS HEHL



Published: 8/2/2026

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Twelve brilliant cadets enter humanity's first dedicated space-training academy, where surviving the program will require more than intelligence, talent, or ambition.

FIELD	INFORMATION
Title	Starpoint Center: Class Zero
Author	Thomas Hehl
Publisher	Heavyweight Press
Genre	Literary Science fiction / space academy fiction
Formats	Hardcover and ebook
ISBN	979-8-9974022-0-4
Page count	257
Retail price	Hardcover: \$24.99, Ebook: 4.99
Availability	Amazon.com
Website	https://heavyweightpress.com/book/starpoint-center-class-zero/
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BOOK DESCRIPTION

SHORT DESCRIPTION

In 2049, humanity has mastered the machinery of permanent spaceflight—but not the human cost. At Starpoint Center, twelve exceptional cadets become the first class trained to live and lead beyond Earth. Under the uncompromising direction of retired admiral James “Ironside” Caldwell, they face a program designed to expose every weakness before space can exploit it. Starpoint Center: Class Zero is a character-driven science-fiction novel about competence, sacrifice, and the transformation of talented individuals into a crew whose members can trust one another with their lives.

FULL DESCRIPTION

Humanity has entered a new era of permanent spaceflight. Stations orbit Earth, people have walked on Mars, and new propulsion technology is bringing the planets closer together. But building the ships is only half the challenge. Someone must prepare the people who will live and lead beyond Earth.

Starpoint Center was created for that purpose.

Chosen from thousands of applicants, twelve gifted young people arrive at Cape Canaveral as the first class of a new kind of training academy. They are pilots, engineers, scientists, strategists, and explorers. Each has the talent to reach space. Whether they possess the judgment, resilience, and humility to survive there remains an open question.

Presiding over the program is Rear Admiral James “Ironsides” Caldwell, a veteran spacer who has survived four encounters with death—and buried colleagues who were not as fortunate. He knows that in space, a small oversight can become a catastrophe. Starpoint must uncover every weakness before the vacuum does.

The cadets face simulated disasters, punishing physical trials, medical uncertainty, and decisions for which no textbook can prepare them. Yet their greatest challenge may be learning that individual excellence is not enough. In an environment where every life depends upon the crew, trust must be earned, responsibility cannot be avoided, and success belongs to the team.

Set against the legacy of Apollo 1, *Starpoint Center: Class Zero* is a character-driven science-fiction novel about the human systems behind exploration—and the courage, discipline, and sacrifice required to build a future among the stars.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Thomas Hehl is a master software architect whose career designing complex systems shaped his fascination with leadership, teamwork, and organizations that perform under pressure. He is also a Bible teacher, bringing a thoughtful appreciation for character, purpose, and service to his writing. Fascinated by the space program, he still hopes to reach orbit one day.

An Ohio native, Thomas makes his home in Lexington, Kentucky, with his wife, Wendy. Starpoint Center: Class Zero is his debut novel.

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

I began by wondering what would happen if you brought together a group of brilliant young people from across the country and around the world. Each of them had always been the smartest person in the room. Then they would suddenly be thrust together and given a single purpose: preparing humanity to face the Big Black.

I turned the idea over and over, looking at it from every side. Then one night, while sitting in my chair, I saw a little old astronaut—the first full-time spacer to reach retirement age. He was rattling around in his office when he said, “I have buried seventeen colleagues. I am building a school so that there will be a generation prepared to face the frontier.”

In that moment, Starpoint Center was born.

The cadets needed more than skills, they needed the character to prevent “the look of surprise” when something goes wrong. This school was designed to fill that need.

The cadets would need more than intelligence and technical skill. They would need the judgment to recognize trouble, the humility to rely on one another, and the character to accept responsibility when something went wrong. Caldwell would build a school designed to eliminate what he called “the look of surprise”—the fatal moment when reality becomes something no one was prepared to face.

Starpoint Center: Class Zero is the story of twelve talented individuals learning that excellence is not enough. To face the frontier, they must become a crew.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR A SHORT INTERVIEW

For a ten- to fifteen-minute interview, six to eight of these should be perfect:

1. Give us the elevator pitch for *Starpoint Center: Class Zero*.
2. What is Starpoint Center, and why does the world of 2049 need it?
3. Where did the original idea for the novel come from?
4. Why did you focus on training and preparation rather than beginning with a mission in space?
5. What does the designation “Class Zero” mean?
6. The book follows twelve cadets. How did you make such a large cast distinct and memorable?
7. Which character surprised you most while you were writing?
8. How has your career as a software architect influenced the way you portray Starpoint as an organization?
9. What do you think qualities such as competence, humility, and leadership look like under extreme pressure?
10. How realistic is the science and spaceflight technology in the novel?
11. What does the Starpoint motto, “Through hardship, to the stars,” mean within the story?
12. What do you hope readers will carry with them after finishing the book?
13. Who is the ideal reader for *Starpoint Center: Class Zero*?
14. Is this the beginning of a series?

15. Where can listeners find the book and learn more about you?

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 1

On his first day at Starpoint Center, cadet Charlie “Bird” Parker discovers the place—and the history—that defines the institution’s purpose.

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Walking out the door he came in, he started walking toward the low-slung building with the obstacle course. He heard a car approach behind him and turned around. A woman with long dark hair climbed out of the airport shuttle with her bag in tow. She moved like someone who had never once tripped over anything in her life.

He turned back toward the obstacle course building. It had a sign that said simply, “Physical Training Facility.” He started toward it when, behind it, he saw a crushed shell walkway lined on both sides with saw palmettos and cabbage palms, cutting through salt marsh and open scrub.

He headed toward the walkway to see where this went.

After a few minutes, he saw the path seemed to be heading toward a large elevated concrete pad. As he approached, he saw a large bronze plaque on the side. The plaque read:

LAUNCH COMPLEX 34

Friday, 27 January 1967

1831 Hours

Dedicated to the living memory of the crew of the Apollo 1

U.S.A.F. Lt. Colonel Virgil I. Grissom

U.S.A.F. Lt. Colonel Edward H. White, II

U.S.N. Lt. Commander Roger B. Chaffee

**They gave their lives in service to their country in the ongoing
exploration of humankind's final frontier. Remember them not for how
they died but for those ideals for which they lived.**

So this is where it happened. As he walked around, he saw a smaller plaque that read:

IN MEMORY

OF

THOSE WHO MADE THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

SO OTHERS COULD REACH THE STARS

AD ASTRA PER ASPERA

(A ROUGH ROAD LEADS TO THE STARS)

GOD SPEED TO THE CREW

OF

APOLLO 1

He stood there for a long time. He was not sure how long. The sun was getting low and the light off the water had gone golden. As he stood in it and thought about Grissom and White and Chaffee and about what it meant that they were thirty-eight and thirty-six and thirty-one years old. Younger than his father. He thought about the pad being closed for a year and

seven months after the fire and about the people who came back and reopened it anyway and about what that required of a person.

He thought about his trumpet under the bed. He thought about the jazz musicians he had grown up listening to, the ones his parents had named him for — the ones who kept discovering new ways through the music. He thought about what it meant to improvise in a cockpit. He thought about what it meant to improvise here, at the beginning of something that had never existed before, with the other students who had also always been the smartest one in the room.

The sun was getting low on the horizon. He'd lost track of time. He hustled back to get ready for orientation.

* * *

He went to orientation with the eleven other strangers who were, apparently, his new life. After each of the instructors spoke about their departments and the schedule, the commandant took the podium.

Bird read rooms instinctively. Twelve cadets arranged in seats with the self-consciousness of people who were aware of being observed and were trying to look like they weren't. He cataloged them quickly and without appearing to: the woman from the back corner of the shuttle, dark hair, reading the room the same way he was — he clocked this and felt a small surprise at being clocked in return. A man in the back with crystal blue eyes and the deliberate stillness of someone who had already decided to be somewhere else and was only physically present. A man with cowboy boots who sat with the unhurried ease of someone who had learned patience from something larger than himself — a landscape, maybe, or a tradition. And the one they were calling Torch, who sat with his jaw set and his eyes forward with the controlled hunger of someone who had been preparing for this room his entire life and was not going to waste a second of it.

Ironsides took the podium. The room changed. Bird had been in rooms with powerful people before — his father knew the county commissioner, the state senator had come to Riverside once for a campaign event — but this was different. The power in those rooms had come from position. The power in this room came from something else, something that Bird, who had a musician's ear for the real note, the one underneath the performed one, recognized.

“For those who don't know who I am, they call me ‘Ironsides.’ I built this place for one reason.

“I was in a habitat module in orbit when the breach alarm sounded. I'll never forget the look of surprise on the engineer's face. I'll never forget the look on

his parents' faces when I met them at the funeral after I spent nineteen days awaiting rescue with their son's body tethered to the bulkhead so it wouldn't drift.

"I have lived longer than any other active spacer. I made it to retirement. I'd like to say that I'm still here because of sheer willpower, or because of my skills, but, while each played a role, so did sheer luck.

"I built this place because I never wanted to see that look on anyone's face ever again. We are here to prepare you. We are here to turn you into spacers. We are here to turn over Earth's future.

"But do not fool yourself. You will be working in the most lethal environment imaginable. It is as if space will hunt you, looking for the slightest weakness to turn to its advantage.

"If we do our jobs right, you will never have that look of surprise on your face. If we really do our jobs right, maybe we can lessen the role luck plays in helping you survive. You are the first to accept the challenge of Starpoint Center. To prepare to live among the stars."

He had spoken for four minutes. No one fidgeted.

After Caldwell left the podium, Bird stayed in his seat.

No one moved.

Not immediately.