

Project Mercury: The First Americans in Space

Project Mercury was America's first human spaceflight program. The project was named after the Roman god of travelers — Mercury. The program began in 1958 and ended in 1963.

Project Mercury was an important part of the "Space Race." The Space Race was a space exploration competition between the United States and the former Soviet Union. The competition began in 1957 when the Soviet Union launched the first-ever satellite into space. The satellite was named *Sputnik 1*. One year later, the United States launched its first satellite into space. The U.S. satellite was named *Explorer 1*.

The United States and the Soviet Union also wanted to send humans into space. The Soviet Union was the first country to reach this goal. In 1961, they successfully launched the first human into outer space. The astronaut's name was Yuri Gagarin. His spaceflight was called *Vostok 1*. He flew around the earth one time.

The United States remained committed to its human spaceflight goal. Seven American astronauts were chosen for Project Mercury. These astronauts were known as the Mercury Seven. Only military test pilots were allowed to be astronauts. There were no female military test pilots at that time, so all of the Mercury Seven astronauts were men.

The Mercury Seven astronauts trained very hard for their space missions. They practiced how it would feel to be launched into space by powerful rockets. They practiced weightlessness. They also practiced how it would feel to be inside the small space capsule. Mercury space capsules had room for just one astronaut. The capsule was too small for the astronaut to move around. He had to stay in his seat the whole spaceflight.

The United States government conducted many test flights to make sure the astronauts would be safe. They even sent a monkey and two chimpanzees into space on some of the test flights. The monkey's name was Sam. The chimpanzees' names were Ham and Enos. All of the animals returned from space safely.

American astronaut Alan Shepard made the first Mercury spaceflight on May 5, 1961. He named his Mercury space capsule *Freedom 7*. The first spaceflight was a suborbital flight. This means the space capsule did not go high enough to enter Earth's orbit. The first spaceflight was also very short. It only lasted 15 minutes, but it was a major step for American space exploration.

On February 20, 1962, Mercury Seven astronaut John Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth. He orbited the Earth three times aboard the Mercury space capsule *Friendship 7*. Astronaut Gordon Cooper made the final Project Mercury spaceflight in 1963. He orbited the Earth 22 times in his space capsule named *Faith 7*.

Scientists learned many important lessons about spaceflight during Project Mercury. They gained knowledge about the effects of space on the human body. They learned how to modify the

Redstone and Atlas rockets that carried the capsules into space. They also developed improvements to space capsule design. All of this scientific knowledge would be used to launch America's second human spaceflight program — Project Gemini.

Questions

1. What was the “Space Race”?
2. Why did the U.S. government send animals into space?
3. How long did the first American human spaceflight last?
4. Do you think it is important to explore space? Why or why not?