

The Mercury 13: Paving the Way for Women in Space

During the early 1960s, there was an important group of American women pilots who dreamed of becoming astronauts. These women were known as the Mercury 13. Though their dreams were never realized, they blazed a trail for future female astronauts.

The early 1960s was a key period in the “Space Race.” The Space Race was a competition between the United States and the former Soviet Union to explore outer space. Both countries sent satellites into space for the first time in the late 1950s. Both countries also wanted to send humans into space. America’s first human spaceflight program was called Project Mercury.

During this time in American history, only military test pilots could become astronauts. Since women were not allowed to be military test pilots, they could not become astronauts. The seven Project Mercury astronauts were all men. They were known as the Mercury Seven.

Many women still wanted to become astronauts though. A scientist named Dr. William Lovelace believed that women could be astronauts just like men. Dr. Lovelace was the person who developed the astronaut tests for Project Mercury.

In 1960, he started the Woman in Space Program. He invited a female pilot to take the same difficult astronaut tests as the Project Mercury astronauts. Her name was Geraldyn “Jerrie” Cobb. She was a very experienced pilot even though she was not a military test pilot. Jerrie Cobb passed the same physical tests that the male astronauts passed. She even spent over nine hours in a cold-water isolation tank. That was longer than any of the male astronauts.

Dr. Lovelace and Jerrie Cobb invited other women pilots to take the same astronaut tests. Twelve of these women also passed the same challenging tests as the Mercury Seven astronauts. Jerrie Cobb and these women became known as the Mercury 13.

The women wanted to keep taking additional astronaut tests. Jerrie Cobb wrote letters to both President John F. Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson about the importance of the Woman in Space Program. She also testified before members of Congress about the female astronaut-testing program. But the Woman in Space Program was not an official government program. The Mercury 13 were not able to continue their testing.

None of the members of the Mercury 13 would ever become astronauts. However, their dreams and hard work inspired other women. In 1983, Dr. Sally Ride became the first American woman to travel to outer space. She flew on the STS-7 Space Shuttle mission on the shuttle called *Challenger*. She spent six days in space and orbited the Earth over 90 times. The Mercury 13 boldly paved the way for Dr. Ride’s historic journey into space.

Questions

1. Why couldn't women become astronauts in the early 1960s?
2. Who was Dr. William Lovelace?
3. How did the Mercury 13 prove that women could go into space?
4. What was one action Jerrie Cobb took to try and convince people to let women become astronauts?