
Mercury 13: Women That Reached The Stars

When we look at the starry night sky, it is in our nature to dream of what it like up there. Many astronauts are famous for their childhood dreams of going up into outer space. Most of us know some of their names, like Buzz Aldrin or Neil Armstrong. Some might also know that the first American woman in space was Sally Ride. But you have probably never heard of the mysterious Mercury 13 women. The true story about these 13 talented young women shows us the importance of reaching through the stars to make our dreams come true.

It was September of 1959. A female pilot named Jerrie Cobb received an offer from a team of NASA researchers. They wanted to find a suitable woman pilot to go through the testing criteria in order to become an astronaut. Jerrie knew that NASA had never tested a woman, and she was uneasy at first. But then she remembered her dream; her dream of being high in the air. What if she passed the tests? What if she went into space? Jerrie told the researchers to put her name down for testing. They told Jerrie that she had to go through the same three stages of tests that the male astronauts took: the medical, mental, and physical stages.

On February 14, 1960, Jerrie travelled to a classified research facility. She was not allowed to tell anyone that she was about to start phase one of the testing. In secret she became the first. The first woman to have the dozens of blood tests, more than a hundred x-rays, to have her lungs tested, and to have freezing cold water injected in her ears. She was rocked back and forth on a tilt table, most of the male astronauts passed out on this test, but Jerrie didn't even get dizzy.

In secret she was the first woman to be told by the NASA Medical Research Team that she had passed all 87 medical tests that the male Mercury astronauts had taken. It was time to let the world know about the existence of Jerrie's dream.

The next morning the amazing story of this talented young woman was all over the papers. Some people saw her strength and cheered Jerrie on, by telling her to go and lasso the moon. Others couldn't get past talking about her pretty features and blond hair, and then said that women could be used to clean and cook at the space stations.

Jerrie knew not to pay attention to the skeptics if she wanted to succeed in her goal, so she went on with the second phase of testing. Jerrie had to go through a mental exam. She was sent to a pitch- black isolation chamber and was not allowed to speak or ask how long she had been in there. Naturally she was scared in the dark emptiness, but she knew she couldn't chicken out when she was almost 2/3 of the way to her dream. With her steeled nerves she passed the mental exam with flying colors.

Then came final testing phase. The physical tests. It was arranged for Jerrie to spend a week with the Navy. The commander had Jerrie perform all the same tasks as the soldiers. Running for long distances, carrying heavy loads, working in a team, pushups, sit ups, pull ups. All of these Jerrie did with ease. Then came the wall. It was a six and a half foot tall wall, made with cement blocks. The task was to get past the wall, without going around it. The soldiers easily jumped over the wall. But Jerrie wasn't as tall as them. The first time she tried to jump the wall,

she didn't even come close. But with one heart, and one mind, she set her eyes on the obstacle stopping her, and ran towards the top. This time, she made it over. She had passed all three phases of the tests that the male astronauts took. Jerrie Cobb had every right to go into space.

By this point, the research team had scouted for 12 more exceptional women pilots begin the same tests as Jerrie. In total, the Mercury 13 women were: Jerrie Cobb, Myrtle Cagle, Wally Funk, Sarah Gorelick, Janey Hart, Jean Hixson, Rhea Hurrie, Gene Stumbough, Irene Levertom, Jerri Sloan, Bernice Steadman, Janet and Marion Dietrich. After two months, they had gotten a giant leap closer to their dreams. They had passed phase one and two of the testing.

Then one day the researchers called each of the women. They told them that NASA had canceled the funding for the final phase of testing and that none of them would be able to go to into space. All the women were shocked and disappointed. Jerrie and the others started asking questions about the abrupt decision and they soon found out that all of the testing results and NASA complaints were directly sent to the Vice President of the United States of America, Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson felt that putting a woman in space was going to make America look like a joke to the Soviet Union. He personally ended the tests with this single sentence that he faxed to NASA. "LET'S STOP THIS NOW!!!!!"

That small step from a man, attempted to make sure that the Mercury 13 women's giant leap came crashing down. The Vice President may be able to stop NASA, but no one can kill a dream. The Mercury 13 women kept their dream in their hearts and never gave up, they taught their children, and the girls around them to try their hardest to continue their legacy.

The Mercury Thirteen women's testing program ended in 1961. Sally Ride, America's first female astronaut went to space in 1983. It took twenty-two years for the stubbornness of society to admit that women deserve to venture into space. But now, if we look at the world around us, we can plainly see the outcome of the never ending dreams of the Mercury 13 women. Now, the inventions and research of women help keep our airplanes in flight, and our satellites in orbit. Now, Astronaut Peggy Whiston, from Iowa herself, holds the record for being the worlds' most experienced female astronaut, with 376 days in space. Right now, at this moment there are two women on board the International space station. Both of them are flight engineers and they are living examples of the undying dreams of Jerrie Cobb and countless others.

You, I, and everyone around us have all had dreams. Sometimes we may think that our dreams are foolish, insignificant, or will never come true. But the Mercury 13 women show us that we need to keep dreaming. We need to show the world that we can pass all the tests that they throw at us. We need to show the world that we can jump over every single wall. We need to remember Jerrie Cobb and fight for our place in society. We need to show the world, that no matter how many times we are knocked down, we will get up. And when we get up, our dreams will shoot for the stars. No matter how long it takes for them to reach there, we will keep dreaming.