The Mercury 13: Setting the Story Straight

By James Oberg
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The NASA fact sheet (March 25, 2005) by Elaine Marconi, NASA KSC, correctly identifies study leader as Dr. W.R. Lovelace, who “helped develop the tests for NASA’s male astronauts”—but he was not a NASA employee. It states that “thirteen women were chosen for future training,” but by Lovelace’s team, not by NASA. And that statement implies that the women had up to that time received no training, just the prospect of future training with hoped-for NASA approval that never came. Further details are in an essay titled “Lovelace’s Woman in Space Program” (August 17, 2005) by NASA Chief Historian Steven Dick. There, the program is correctly described as “Lovelace’s”, and as a “short-lived, privately-funded project.” The US Air Force was initially interested, but provided no funding.

A little further checking might have uncovered a hard-hitting critique by Roger Launius, a space historian at the National Air & Space Museum in Washington and former NASA Chief Historian, of one of the recent “secret NASA women’s space program” books, Promised the Moon by Stephanie Nolen. He had this assessment of the controversy: “I am perplexed by the misrepresentation that is presented about [Nolen’s] book by the publisher in its advertising copy. There was never a NASA program, clandestine or otherwise, to bring women into the astronaut corps in the late 1950s and early 1960s. We can debate whether or not NASA leaders should have been open to appointing women astronauts, but the reality was that such an expansion of the astronaut corps never even crossed their minds at the time.”

Launius elaborated on the sequence of events: “Some [of the women] believed that the further testing represented the first step allowing them to become astronauts, although there was never any intent of this on the part of NASA officials. Indeed, Mercury project managers were unaware of these tests... When NASA officials learned about Lovelace’s attempts for further tests from the Navy, which Lovelace had asked to undertake these tests at Pensacola, they told Navy flight surgeons that this was not a NASA project. The Navy then canceled the tests.”

For perspective, Launius concluded, “In hindsight, one may criticize NASA leaders for not expanding the astronaut corps to women but there is no documentation whatsoever to suggest that there was even a consideration of doing so at the time. Perhaps John Glenn said it best when he remarked in recent years that the agency was reflective of its times. It is important to note, I think, that the first astronauts selected after the completion of Project Apollo—the class of 1978—did include women and other minorities, and therefore reflected the social changes experienced in the nation as a result of the women’s movement.”

James Oberg (www.jamesoberg.com) is a 22-year veteran of NASA mission control. He is now a writer and consultant in Houston.

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Twenty years ago Wednesday, Sally Ride became the first American woman in space, on board the shuttle Challenger.

That milestone was preceded by a secret program in 1961 to test women pilots for space flight.

NPR's Melissa Block talks with Martha Ackmann, a senior lecturer of Women's Studies at Mount Holyoke College and author of a book about the program to put women into orbit, *The Mercury 13: The Untold Story of 13 American Women and the Dream of Space Flight*.

Out of a pool of women selected to undergo trials, 13 women endured and passed the battery of grueling physical and psychological tests — the same tests the original Mercury 7 male astronauts underwent at the Lovelace Foundation in Albuquerque, N.M.

In some cases, the women scored better on the tests than their male counterparts.

The names of the women pilots and would-be astronauts — among them, Jerrie Cobb, Wally Funk, Myrtle Cagle, Bernice "B" Steadman — are largely lost to history.

The testing program was halted and eventually scrapped, in large part, Ackmann writes, because of a pervasive 'boy's club' attitude at NASA.

Ackmann writes of dedication and sacrifice of the women in the "space race" with the Soviet Union (The Soviet Union launched the first woman into space in 1963).

But the book is also an indictment of the sexist attitudes that kept the women from becoming astronauts — even though some of the candidates were among the most accomplished pilots of their time, male or female.