



Project Mercury - America's First Manned Missions -

The dynamic Project Mercury, which put America's first voyagers into space, is considered by many to be one of the most significant periods of scientific and technological advances in our nation's history. The program which ran from 1958 – 1963 marked the rigorous early years of the "Space Race" as the United States and Soviet Union battled in a quest to be the first to land on the moon.

Project Mercury began on October 7, 1958 just one year and three days after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, the first-ever artificial satellite to be put into orbit. Unlike early satellite missions that were not manned, the main goal of the Mercury Program was to put humans into space.

The project began by selecting the first human voyagers to fly the missions; they were to be called *astronauts*. Chosen by National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in April 1959, the group was called the Original Seven or Astronaut Group 1. They were introduced in civilian dress, deliberately to project an air of being average Americans. In reality, they were all trained military test pilots, college educated, most as engineers, in superior health physically and psychologically, with a focus on their purpose and they possessed charming personalities. In short time, with growing curiosity about their risky undertaking, the astronauts quickly gained celebrity status and elite standing with the public. Soon, the first adventurers became affectionately known as the Mercury Seven.

The original Mercury Seven astronauts were Scott Carpenter; L. Gordon Cooper, Jr.; John H. Glenn, Jr.; Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom; Walter M. Schirra, Jr.; Alan B. Shepard, Jr.; and Donald K. "Deke" Slayton, who hailed from Sparta, Wisconsin, located north of Wisconsin Dells. The Mercury Seven served with NASA on manned missions from 1961 to 1963 and were chronicled in the book and movie "*The Right Stuff*."

As a tribute to the Mercury program, Tommy Bartlett Exploratory has an exact replica of a Mercury Space Capsule, the compartment that carried the first astronauts into space. Built with precise NASA blueprints and specifications, the capsule is fairly compact, only 6-feet 10-inches long and 6-feet 2½-inches in diameter. The capsule's main function was to shield astronauts from the elements of space, particularly the extreme heat experienced during re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere. The cramped, cone-shaped Mercury Capsule could carry only one man and featured a thick heat shield on the bottom of the craft that could withstand 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit upon re-entry. The capsule would fall to Earth, a parachute helping slow its speed, before it splashed down into the ocean where NASA scientists and the U.S. Navy would come to rescue its pilot.

There were 25 Mercury missions in all, with 19 of them being unmanned. The six manned Mercury flights began with Alan Shepard's suborbital flight on May 5, 1961. Perhaps the most famous mission was that of John Glenn, who first orbited the Earth on February 20, 1962. The final Project Mercury mission was on May 15, 1963 with Gordon Cooper's flight.

During Project Mercury's nearly five-year run, the mission's three main objectives were achieved: to orbit a manned spacecraft around Earth, to investigate man's ability to function in space and to recover both man and spacecraft safely. With this complete success these early explorers helped blaze a trail to the moon and forever earned a spot in the hearts of many as some of the most bold and brave Americans of all time.

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Historical details were compiled from the following sources, which contain additional information:

http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/mercury/index.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercury_Seven

<https://airandspace.si.edu/exhibitions/apollo-to-the-moon/online/early-steps/humans-in-space.cfm>

<http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/198106/mercury-spacecraft/>

<http://astronautscholarship.org/>

<http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/htmlbios/slayton.html>