

Subject: Early women's space medical screening veterans to be honored -- CAUTION on media spin
Date: Monday, May 07, 2007 11:41 AM

Jim Oberg advises:

0. This is a 'hot button' politically charged topic -- let me try to stick to the theme of accuracy, context, and perspective. No offense meant to anyone, hereafter.
1. The University of Wisconsin in Oshkosh has organized a ceremony at graduation on May 12 to honor women who took part in spaceflight medical screening in 1960-1961. The university's web site has a special page on this activity: <http://www.uwosh.edu/mercury13/>
2. Be careful. The page and the press coverage contain numerous distortions and falsifications of history, arguably for a straightforward propaganda agenda. See examples at <http://www.mercury13.com/> and in the book that started it all, Martha Ackerman's "The Mercury 13: The True Story of Thirteen Women and the Dream of Space Flight" http://www.amazon.com/Mercury-13-Story-Thirteen-Flight/dp/0375758933/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1/104-8006223-5334305?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1178551237&sr=1-1, Also, there was Stephanie Nolen's "Promised the Moon: The Untold Story of the First Women in the Space Race"; Margaret Weitekamp's "Right Stuff, Wrong Sex: America's First Women in Space Program (Gender Relations in the American Experience)", and Pamela Freni's "Space for Women: A History of Women With the Right Stuff".
3. Reality check. The tests were never part of a NASA program. There never was any 'training' for space flight. Secrecy, if any, was shallow and brief -- the theme was widely discussed and debated in public in 1962-3. No flight program was ever 'canceled', nor were the women ever 'rejected'. See paras 16, 17, and 18 for documentation from the National Air & Space Museum's chief space historian.
4. Sadly, this garble -- and fictionalization -- may detract from what the women's project (later dubbed the 'Mercury-13' group) actually accomplished in advancing the cause of U.S. gender-neutral access to spaceflight opportunities
5. The hype also confuses the question of which approach -- the US path or the Soviet/Russian 'stunt' path -- led to proper contemporary policies and practices regarding women in space. The Russians went for the 'stunts', but the symbolism was hollow [even if widely successful among impressionable people], and the current reality for women in the Russian space program is grim.
6. One of America's early women astronauts, a long-time friend and colleague of mine, has emailed me this perspective on what she sees as the importance of the 1960-1. She wrote: "We should be less concerned about what the press is making of it, and more impressed on how well they did on the tests. Dr. Lovelace believed that women could pass the physicals when many did not--- and he showed they could. When I first expressed an interest in becoming an astronaut in 1960's, I was also told that I probably couldn't pass either the physical or psychological exams. I couldn't even find a doctor who would perform similar exams so I would know for myself."
7. Her advice: "Let us applaud what they did in their flying careers before being invited to participate in the Lovelace tests, and for the path they helped to pave for the women who did fly. I am grateful."
8. But I've got to be a little more concerned than my friend is about "what the press is making of it"

because that's what I do -- review press coverage of space themes for adherence to accuracy and context. When reality is modified, spun, cherry-picked and button-pushed, the public does not get an accurate picture. And while that may be useful to specific parties in the public discourse, it fails standards of accuracy.

9. My comments on the University of Wisconsin (Oshkosh) website <http://www.uwosh.edu/mercury13/>

9A. "In the early days of the Space Race, 25 women were asked to train in secret as astronauts." FALSE. Some women were asked by Dr. Lovelace, independent of NASA, to undergo physical screening similar to that used for the Mercury astronauts. There was no "training" for space flight. There was no significant "secret" about it -- their activities, their names, and the controversy of changing existing astronaut requirements so women could be admitted, were all well publicized in 1962-1963.

9B. "In summer of 1961, just before leaving for the next phase of training at the Naval Aviation Center in Pensacola, Fla., the women received telegrams telling them not to come. Due to the prejudices of the times, the project was canceled." FALSE -- there was no "next phase of training", only some additional medical screening sponsored by Dr. Lovelace, who had reserved time on the Pensacola facilities but could not come up with funding for their use [these were tightly scheduled facilities that were allocated to various projects that could pay for them]. There was no existing project to GET canceled -- the lack of any budget shows there never HAD been a formal program beyond Lovelace's professional interest. Conjuring up 'prejudices of the times' is political propaganda, not legitimate history.

10. This morning's major Associated Press story by Todd Richmond can be seen at <http://www.nwfdailynews.com/article/4590>. On some links the headline is an accurate "13 American women would-be astronauts to be honored by the University of Wisconsin", but on others (e.g., ABC News) they are falsely referred to as "First women astronaut trainees".

10A. AP: "The 13, who trained in secret in the early 1960s, had their dreams dashed when they were told NASA wasn't interested in their training, just days before the group was to leave for spaceflight simulation tests in Pensacola, Fla." FALSE [see 9A and 9B above] -- the group never 'trained', it wasn't 'in secret'.

10B. AP: "The 13 female pilots were initially part of the United States' effort to catch up to the Soviet space program, which launched the first man, Yuri Gagarin, into space in April 1961. But NASA pulled the plug in the 11th hour." FALSE. The pilots were part of medical screening tests organized by a private medical clinic that also did astronaut screening, pilot screening, and other medical testing for various US government pilot programs, but there was no 'program' that they were part of. There never was any 'plug' to be 'pulled'.

10C: AP: "In 1963, Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space. The first American woman to enter space, Sally Ride, didn't launch until 1983."

CONTEXT: The naked gimmickry of the Tereshkova mission was widely suspected even back then and has been confirmed by subsequent space history. Once new categories of space fliers were made possible by bigger spacecraft, and once women overcame U.S. military bureaucratic bars to entering key training programs, they rapidly flowed through the pipelines into astronaut service [lowering such gender bars probably WAS significantly accelerated by the Soviet stunt]. Today there have been

dozens of American (and other Western nationalities) in space, but only three Russians ever -- Tereshkova, plus a Soviet AF Marshall's daughter for a stunt 'first woman's spacewalk', and the wife of a cosmonaut who became deputy director of the Russian spaceship factory... nobody else, ever and little prospects.... See <http://www.jamesoberg.com/tereshkova.pdf>

11. A related story by Dallas Star-Telegram staff writer Adrienne Nettles appeared a few days ago (<http://www.star-telegram.com/407/story/86937.html>). It contained many of the same factual errors.

11A: Nettles refers to “letters written to a Dr. Randy Lovelace of NASA.”

FALSE ASSOCIATION: Lovelace did ‘space medicine’ for a number of clients, including NASA, but he was an employee of his own clinic in Albuquerque and did none of the women’s testing on behalf of, or funded by, NASA.

11B: Nettles: “[Funk] was to train as one of 13 women selected to become the nation's first female astronauts.”

FALSE: There never was any training involved, and nobody had been selected to become an astronaut.

11C: Nettles: “Some say NASA called the testing off, while others speculate that the order came from the White House.” Here's the old "SOME SAY" gimmick to insert editorial comment without sourcing. Lovelace scheduled testing at a US Navy facility who asked him who would pay for it. When no sponsor stepped forward, the Navy canceled Lovelace’s reservations at the facility. There was no need for “an order from the White House” or anywhere to STOP a project that had never been STARTED.

11D: Nettles: “Congress later ordered that NASA astronauts come from the ranks of military test pilots, ruling out women altogether, [Funk] said.”

FALSE CHRONOLOGY -- The White House made that decision in 1959, long before the women were even initially tested. In hindsight, it was a rational choice for the kind of people best suited to the still-unknown stresses of spaceflight; with a slight relaxation to consider all high-performance (jet) aircraft pilots, it is STILL the main criteria in use today.

12. NASA has several recent 'fact sheets' on this subject.

NASA fact sheet (March 25, 2005) by Elaine Marconi, NASA KSC

http://www.nasa.gov/missions/highlights/f_mercury13.html

correctly identifies study leader as Dr. W.R. Lovelace, who “helped develop the tests for NASA’s male astronauts” – but was not a NASA employee [not made clear]. It describes the screening, but does not make clear that it was all performed (and paid for) by Lovelace’s clinic, not by NASA. 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.

13. Further details are here: <http://history.nasa.gov/flats.html> (aug 17, 2005) where the program is correctly described as “Lovelace’s”, a “short-lived, privately-funded project.” The US Air force was initially interested -- but provided no funding.

14. A reading of the headlines in the past 24 hours and the comments posted on discussion boards also make clear the semantically spun message of the story, for example, "First women astronaut trainees snubbed by NASA to be honored" ["They trained to become astronauts, but NASA cut the exercises short, saying they had more than enough men waiting in line."]. Other stories merely say [incorrectly],

"First women astronaut trainees to be honored".

15. Seems to me, such treatment is exploiting the women's experiences and genuine frustrations and disappointments, and treating their lives as ammunition for maneuvering for modern political advantages. This overlooks and disrespects their genuine accomplishments and distracts from the reason they deserve the honor -- in my view. My astronaut friend's view (para 6 & 7) should provide good guidance for a constructive and accurate approach.

16. Roger Launius, an emeritus space historian at the National Air & Space Museum in Washington, and former Chief NASA Historian, has 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. "

17. 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."

18. 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."

19. The fact that 13 women passed the same physical and mental tests as the Mercury male astronauts also needs to be placed in historical perspective: the astronauts were not chosen based on their physical and mental qualities, they were at most screened (and selected out) if they fell short of these standards.

20. The primary select-in criterion was a person who had already undergone repeated in-flight crises and emergencies requiring fast, careful and rational constructive responses to the often-never-before-encountered technological, mechanical, or environmental life-threatening challenges. This attitude is the 'Right Stuff', NOT some measurable physiological or psychological mark. It was considered then -- and now -- as a mental characteristic that could not be trained to, could not be reliably "added on" to a person who might or might not have it, but only ex post facto recognized when its presence was proven by the pilot's survival through proper actions in a real life-threatening emergency.

21. The only known profession in 1959 that winnowed out its personnel -- often by violent death, often by broken nerves -- against such hazards was military test piloting. Women were not admitted to that profession for cultural reasons that have since subsided [under social and political pressure -- agreed!!].

22. The actual flight experience of Mercury and Gemini and Apollo missions in hindsight validated that standard. Because of the intimate integration of the pilot in the spacecraft's control system (unlike the

automated Soviet space vehicles that were less dependent on pilot intervention during malfunctions), astronauts on several occasions were able to safely complete missions that on autopilot would have led to failure and death.

22. That was the historical context, warts and all, of the White House level decision to select astronauts exclusively from among test pilots initially, and supersonic jet pilots subsequently -- a decision with the unintended consequence of ruling out the participation of women. To have done differently, on purpose, for symbolic reasons, would have been to add unmeasurable (but arguably non-zero) hazards to a project that was generally considered already almost too hazardous to perform in any case. Whenever NASA has unconsciously relaxed safety standards, disasters have followed -- from Apollo-1 to Challenger to Columbia.

23. The Soviet choice to go with automation and ground control meant flying with very limited and persnickety vehicles on much less complicated and ambitious space missions -- it took years to even get orbital rendezvous right, they never got to send men to the moon, they never got to fly cosmonauts in any kind of shuttle craft. Their vehicles are still "robust and reliable" because their mission capabilities are simple and still so very limited.

24. But this approach meant they got to fly the first woman in space, a non-pilot textile factory worker and sports parachutist -- probably, in the long run, a bad bargain for them, but as a stimulus to NASA, a good outcome for the U.S. program of today and the roles that women play in it. That's worth celebrating, and getting the story straight.

Jim O