

Her Dream Of SPACEFLIGHT

Female Aviation Pioneer Wally Funk Has A Ticket and Awaits a Ride to Space

By Rene Romo

Journal Southern Bureau

LAS CRUCES — Wally Funk, 71, has had her sights set on the heavens all her life.

With the purchase of a \$200,000 ticket to ride Virgin Galactic's spaceplane from southern New Mexico, the flight instructor who five decades ago was part of a group called the First Lady Astronaut Trainees is finally on the doorstep of her dream of spaceflight.

When she was 6, a Superman cape hanging from her shoulders, Funk repeatedly jumped off the roof of the barn at her parents' Taos home into a pile of hay.

"I just kept jumping in the hay, hoping to learn how to fly," Funk said in a telephone interview from her north Texas home. "Mother said, 'Honey, you can always be a flight attendant.' "And I said, 'No, I want to be in the front of the machine.' ... Aviation was part of my bloodstream."

Funk came closest to her dream of being a pioneering female astronaut in 1961 when, at 21, she became the youngest volunteer in an Albuquerque based private program that evaluated women's fitness for spaceflight. Twenty-five women from around the country were invited to participate, 19 accepted, and the baker's dozen who passed the demanding series of tests were dubbed the Mercury 13.

The name is a spinoff of the Mercury 7 male astronauts, introduced to the public by NASA in early 1959, who would take part in the nation's initial spaceflight program.

"All the guys got the glory," Funk said. "We didn't."

The program was abruptly canceled before the women could take part in advanced testing at a naval facility in Pensacola, Fla., when NASA declined to sponsor the tests.

Funk was disappointed, but she didn't let go of her dream.

"This kid didn't give up," Funk said. "I've been waiting since '61 to get there (space), and I'm going."

Funk attended the Oct. 22 runway dedication ceremony at Spaceport America, the publicly financed spaceport under construction 24 miles southeast of Truth or Consequences. There, Virgin Galactic plans to begin flying commercial passengers on suborbital flights in the next 18 months.

A twin-fuselage aircraft, the mothership, will release a six-passenger spaceship at 50,000 feet, where the smaller craft will rocket to the edge of space for a few minutes of weightlessness and an eye-popping view of Earth.

When Virgin Galactic's coupled aircraft and spaceship flew over the spaceport during the dedication ceremonies, an animated Funk let out a loud whoop.

"I'm going to make it," she said.

Early wings

Funk took flight at an early age. At 16, Funk, whose birth name is not Wally (she declined to disclose it) enrolled at Stephens College in Columbia, Mo., where, along with obtaining an associate of arts degree, she earned her pilot's license. Before graduating in 1958, she competed as a Stephens Suzie in intercollegiate flight contests.

After Stephens, Funk entered Oklahoma State University where, as a Flying Aggie, she continued competing in intercollegiate events until her graduation in 1960. Soon after she took a job as a civilian flight instructor at the Fort Sill, Okla., Army base.

At the time, Dr. William Randolph Lovelace II, who ran the Lovelace Foundation for Medical Education and

Research in Albuquerque, was the head of NASA's Special Committee on Bioastronautics. Lovelace had helped design the physical testing regimen used to select the Mercury 7.

Believing that women, generally smaller and lighter than men, would be well-suited for the tight quarters of a space capsule, Lovelace and an Air Force brigadier general in 1960 invited pilot Geraldyn "Jerrie" Cobb to undergo the same testing that produced the Mercury 7.

Cobb, an Oklahoman who had set world records for nonstop long-distance flying and for flying higher than anyone else in a lightweight aircraft, performed so well that Lovelace sought out other female pilots.

Seeing an article about Cobb's testing, Funk promptly wrote Lovelace asking to be part of the program. Lovelace agreed, but only after Funk, still 20 when she applied, received her parents' permission.

Lovelace gantlet

Arriving in Albuquerque in February 1961, Funk, who had been a competitive skier and horsewoman, was subjected to nearly 100 physical and mental endurance tests. According to NASA, the women underwent multiple X-rays, rode stationary bicycles to near exhaustion, swallowed rubber tubes to test stomach acids, and had ice water injected into their ears to induce vertigo.

"She (Funk) was outstanding. In fact, she participated at a higher level than most of the men," said Dr. Donald

Kilgore, an 88-year-old Albuquerque resident who was an ear, nose and throat specialist at the Lovelace Foundation. "My memory of her is that she was at the front of those who were taking the endurance tests. She was just a very impressive human being."

After the initial round of tests, Cobb, Funk and another woman were sent to Oklahoma City for additional psychological testing that included floating in a water-filled sensory deprivation tank. Funk passed with flying colors, floating for 10½ hours without experiencing the hallucinations that sensory deprivation can induce.

At the time NASA required all astronauts to have engineering degrees and to be graduates of military jet test pilot programs. Women could not qualify under those standards.

After the program was canceled later that year, Funk continued testing on her own.

She traveled to El Toro Marine Corps base in California, where she became the first woman to take the high-altitude chamber test. She was also tested in a spinning centrifuge, subjected four times to five Gs.

When Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space in 1963, Funk was inspired to travel overseas to try to meet her.

One more hurrah

According to her biography posted on the website of the Ninety-Nines Inc., an international female pilots group first led by Amelia Earhart, Funk in 1971 became the first woman to complete the FAA's General Aviation Operations Inspector Academy course, which covered pilot certification and flight testing procedures.

After four years with the FAA, Funk was hired by the National Transportation Safety Board as its first female air safety investigator in 1974. She retired from that post in 1985.

She has been chief pilot for five aviation schools across the country, been hired as a captain for several small commercial airlines and logged over 18,000 hours of flying time. She continues working as a flight instructor in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

"I'm a happy kid," said Funk, who describes herself as "71 going on 45."

"I've never been bitter. I've never met a stranger. I've had a great life," Funk said. "And I want that one more thing, to be up in a Virgin Galactic spaceship with Sir Richard Branson."

Virgin Galactic chief executive officer George Whitesides, former chief of staff at NASA, said Funk was "sort

of an American hero given her amazing flying career."

"She's packed in so much in her life. This will be an amazing way to cap off her aviation and space career,"

Whitesides said. "We're honored to have her as a Galactic customer."



COURTESY OF WALLY FUNK
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ABOVE: When the runway at Spaceport America was dedicated last month, Wally Funk, third from left, was there — with astronaut Buzz Aldrin, right, Virgin Galactic’s Sir Richard Branson, second from left, and Gov. Bill Richardson, left. TOP: Wally Funk at Fort Sill, Okla., her first job as a civilian flight instructor.



COURTESY SPACEPORT AMERICA

SpaceShipTwo, a rocket ship, and WhiteKnight2, a carrier plane, make the first flight to Spaceport America.



COURTESY OF WALLY FUNK

Pioneering aviator Wally Funk at age 8; she dreamed of flying since she was a child.



ROBERTO E. ROSALES/JOURNAL

Wally Funk walks toward the unfinished Spaceport America terminal Oct. 22, when the runway was dedicated.



COURTESY OF NASA

These seven women were part of the Mercury 13, the First Lady Astronaut Trainees in the 1960s. From left, Gene Nora Jessen, Wally Funk, Jerrie Cobb, Jerri Truhill, Sarah Ratley, Myrtle Cagle and Bernice Steadman.