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Wally Funk

No one has waited longer

By Umberto Cavallaro

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*Wally Funk
(Courtesy of Blue Origin ©)*

Those who saw live the landing of the first crewed Blue Origin's New Shepard will never forget Wally Funk's tireless energy and boundless enthusiasm, as she emerged from the capsule with a broad grin on her face, extending both arms wide.

"I've been waiting a long time to finally get up there," she exulted

in the postflight press conference. Wally, the Woman with the Right Stuff who never gave up on her dream of flying in space.

She was supposed to go to space 60 years before, when in 1961 she was the youngest of the "Mercury 13" group. The 13 volunteer women at the height of the space race participated in a project independently led by William Randolph Lovelace and, in the hope of becoming an astronaut, passed the same gruelling battery of physical and psychological exams as the Mercury 7, the crew-cut All-American boy, original NASA astronauts. Wally, then a flight instructor, fresh out of college, recalls: "I was twenty-one and I was too young, so they had to get extra permission for me to take the same test as the Mercury 7 astronauts took". Many of the women of the program performed better than the men who previously participated in similar astronaut testing. Wally stayed in the sensory deprivation tank's pool of water for 10 hours and 35 minutes, beating everybody who has ever taken that test. The programme was

however abruptly terminated and none of the thirteen women flew.

When Sally Ride launched into orbit in 1983, Wally was in her 40s and still eager to fly to space.

Impressive Credentials

She applied to NASA's astronaut corps four times but, despite her impressive credentials, four times she was rejected "because – she recalls – I did not have an engineering degree, and they gave me nine months to obtain such a degree, which was impossible".

Showing her unwavering tenacity she said in an interview few years ago: "I'm still pedalling! I never lost the faith. I don't have any doubt. Not a lick. I'm just as sure that I'll go into space as I am that my car will start



Seven members of the FLATs (First Lady Astronaut Trainees, later known as the "Mercury 13"), met in 1995 at the Kennedy Space Center for the launch of STS-63, the first Space Shuttle piloted by a woman. Wally Funk is the second from left. (Courtesy of NASA)



Commemorative cover by Dave Silcox

in the morning. I've lived in a man's world all these wonderful years. I've been the only girl in the cockpit, in the conference room, wherever. I have learned how to kick in a lot of doors, and I have dealt with a lot of disappointments. But I will go into space one day, when God thinks it's right or I make it right. Whether we make it with Inter-orbital or not, I'm going to make it. I don't know how, but I know it's going to happen."

"If I had \$20 million, I'd be there right now" she said in 2001, when Los Angeles millionaire Dennis Tito became the world's first space tourist, paying Russians \$20 million to vacation on the International Space Station.

The tenacious Wally hoped to make her dream true through Virgin Galactic. In October 2010, when invited to the runway dedication ceremony at Spaceport America, she paid a \$200,000 deposit for a ticket to space on SpaceShipTwo, financing the adventure with movie and book royalties and money left to her by her mother. Virgin Galactic at the time planned to begin flying commercial passengers on suborbital flights in the next 18 months.

Fulfilling Her Dreams

Finally she got the chance to fulfil her dreams at 82, becoming the oldest person ever to earn astronaut's wings. This broke a 23-year record held by the late John Glenn, the early Mercury astronaut who – 37 years after becoming the first American to orbit the Earth – went to space for the second and last time in 1998 aboard Space Shuttle Discovery STS-95, at the age of 77. Together with Gene Nora Jessen, Funk is one of the last two remaining members of the legendary Mercury 13 group. She is also the only one of the thirteen to have travelled to space.

"No one has waited longer," said Jeff Bezos (the billionaire founder of Amazon, and owner of The Washington Post) while disclosing, in an Instagram surprise announcement 3 weeks before the launch, that Wally would be joining him – and his brother Mark, and an unnamed winner of the fourth seat (*see note 1*) – as "honoured guest" on the first crewed Blue Origin spaceflight, (*see note 2*) scheduled for launch on July 20, 2021 (the 52nd anniversary of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin's Apollo 11 Moon landing).

Jeff Bezos was the second person to ride his own rocket into space, just nine days after Virgin Galactic's founder Richard Branson and five crew mates (including two pilots) – beat him to the punch by taking a suborbital

space flight on his company's rocket-plane to an altitude just beyond 50 miles, which fits NASA's and the Federal Aviation Administration's standard for spaceflight.

Mary Wallace "Wally" Funk was born in Las Vegas on 1 February 1939 and grew up in Taos, New Mexico where her parents owned a general store. The family had a collection of artwork from artists at the Taos art colony. When artists could not pay their bills with cash, they often offered paintings instead to pay off their debt at the store. In her teen, her parents encouraged her outdoors nature.

She grew up riding her bike or horse, skiing, hunting and fishing. "I did everything that people didn't expect a girl to do" says Wally who never perceived her gender as a limitation.

When she was 14, the National Rifle Association sent her impressive shooting results to the president, Dwight Eisenhower, who wrote back to her.

The Ninety-Nines

Fascinated by planes since she was a child, she took her first flying lesson aged nine. At age 16 she entered Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri. Along with obtaining an associate of arts degree, she earned her pilot's license in 1958, at 19, rating first in her class of 24 flyers. In the same year Wally joined The Ninety-Nines, an Oklahoma City-based international organisation of licensed women pilots from 44 countries.

"I had great parental enthusiasm helping me to continue my education that I wanted in aviation", Wally says. After Stephens, she moved on to complete a Bachelor of Science degree in Secondary Education at the Oklahoma State University (OSU) primarily attracted by its famous "Flying Aggies" aviation team programme, and earned a large number of aviation certificates and ratings.

Her first job at age 20 was at Fort Sill, her training school in Oklahoma, where the barrier-breaking woman aviator became the first female Civilian Flight Instructor of non-commissioned and commissioned officers of the United States Army.

Federal Aviation Administration

She soared higher with pioneering jobs becoming the first female inspector in the US at the FAA (Federal



A vintage photo of Funk in her early 20s as a flight instructor on a military base in Oklahoma.



Commemorative covers by Gus Katmann (left) and by Dave Silcox (right)

Aviation Administration) in 1971 and in 1974 the first female Air Safety and Accident Investigator for the NTSB (National Transportation Safety Board) in Los Angeles. She retired in 1985 and went back to teaching.

“Private, commercial, instrument, flight engineer, airline transport, gliding – everything the FAA has, I’ve got the license”.

Across her career she has logged 19,600 hours of flight time as a pilot in command, and taught more than 3,000 women to fly, as she recalled in Bezos’s Instagram video.

New Shepard capsule

After a smooth countdown, the New Shepard booster with its hydrogen-fuelled BE-3 engine was launched at 8:11 a.m., (13:11 GMT) – slightly behind schedule from the secretive facility located at around thirty miles north of the small town of Van Horn, Texas, and pushed the passengers to a height beyond the 100 kilometres of the

(Note 1) Only on 15 July, five days before the launch, it was announced that the fourth passenger would be Oliver Daemen, an 18-year-old student – son of another bidder who placed the second-highest bid, Joes Daemen, the founder and CEO of private investment firm Somerset Capital Partners in the Netherlands, who paid an undisclosed ticket cost. Daemen, who has just entered the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands in September to study physics and innovation management, became the youngest spaceflier ever.

The student replaced the actual winner of the auction, an unidentified businessman – whose name was not revealed - who offered \$28 million for the seat. Blue Origin said the winner stepped aside, officially because of scheduling conflicts, and would instead

Karman line, the widely used international standard that defines the boundary of space, passing it at 8:15 a.m. At that altitude, they experienced a few minutes of weightless and were able to marvel at the planet’s curvature through viewing windows. The New Shepard capsule has large, tourism-friendly windows – the largest in spaceflight history: “These windows make up a third of the capsule, immersing you in the vastness of space and life-changing views of our blue planet”, according to the Blue Origin company’s website.

Capsule separation followed, and the booster returned to the launch site autonomously, with a loud boom, at 8:19 a.m., while the crewed pressurized capsule floated slowly returning to Earth under parachutes and touching land at 8:22 a.m. for an eleven-minutes total flight time.

Wally received astronaut wings during the post-flight press conference on 20 July 2021, “I loved every minute,” Wally said. “I just wish it had been longer.”

go on a future flight. (Although there may be more than that. Many ask if couldn’t someone reschedule things to make history in the company of the world’s richest person)

Nearly 7,600 bidders from 159 countries participated on 12 June 2021 in the charity auction for the Bezos’ educational nonprofit foundation, Club for the Future, a non-profit owned by Blue Origin which works with young people to introduce them to STEM fields. \$19 million of that sum was distributed to 19 space-focused nonprofit organisations.

(Note 2) The automated Blue Origin reusable suborbital capsule - named after Alan Shepard, the first American in space, in a suborbital flight, 60 years ago - had previously launched to the edge of space and successfully landed 15 times.



Pete Sarmiento’s GOES-U launch cover.

GOES-U A New Weather Satellite

GOES-U, the Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite - R Series, was launched on the tenth Falcon Heavy mission. GOES-U, formerly known as GOES 19, was launched from the Kennedy Space Center’s LC-39A launch complex. It was the fourth and final satellite in the GOES-R series of satellites operated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The GOES-R series is designed to extend the availability of the GOES system through 2036.



The GOES-U satellite being launched by a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket.

The launch took place on 25 June 2024. To commemorate this launch, Pete Sarmiento created an original cover. It was postmarked at the Titusville USPS post office in Florida and dated the day of the launch.