



Wally Funk's long-deserved trip to space By Tiffany Fields, WISEatlantic Educational Assistant



Image: <https://www.nasa.gov/topics/history/features/flats.html> Credit: NASA

Caption: Wally Funk (second from left) joins other members of the FLATs in 1995 to watch a Space Shuttle launch in the United States

From the time she was 17, Wally Funk knew she wanted to be an astronaut. She had an attitude that made her excel anytime she was told she could not or should not do something, and in the 1960s when all NASA astronauts were male, she fought for herself and her colleagues to fly into space as well.

Unfortunately, that never happened. A group of thirteen women advocated for the opportunity to fly alongside the chosen male astronauts. These women were often deemed the “Mercury 13,” a play on the name “Mercury,” the name of the program sending the first astronauts into orbit from the United States during the Space Race between the US and the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Another name for the group, however, was the First Lady Astronaut Trainees (FLATs). These women went through the same incredibly rigorous testing that the male astronauts did. Funk and others even surpassed the males in many tasks. Funk spent more than 10 hours in a sensory deprivation tank to simulate vertigo, and researchers ended the test only due to wanting to go home.

Despite the years of Funk and her colleagues proving they were fit to be astronauts, the United States did not send a woman into space until 1983 with Sally Ride, more than 20 years after Wally Funk fought for a chance to fly. In fact, until the astronaut selection in 1978 (where Ride was selected to be an astronaut, along with 5 other women and 29 men), all astronaut candidates in the US were required to have military jet test pilot experience. Since no women at the time were allowed to gain this experience, they were eliminated no matter what their other qualifications would be.

Wally Funk has been a pilot, a flight instructor, and more. She has logged 19,600 flight hours and trained more than 3000 students to fly. She earned her pilot's license at just 17 and has a number of other "firsts", such as first female flight instructor at a US military base. Not until this summer, at age 82, did she finally get a chance to fly into space like she had prepared for nearly 60 years ago.

The space flight company Blue Origin had their first crewed launch in July this year, and company founder (and passenger on the flight) Jeff Bezos asked Funk to join him for the launch. Funk had been a ticket holder on another commercial space flight with Richard Branson and Virgin Galactic, who coincidentally flew their first suborbital flight just days before the Blue Origin flight that Funk was invited on. Despite her being more than qualified, it took capitalistic competition to finally get Funk into space.

In the video released by Bezos after he asked Funk to join him on the first crewed Blue Origin flight, Funk recalls that she repeatedly asked NASA to be an astronaut, but she had been told "Wally, you're a girl, you can't do that," to which she very passionately responded "Guess what, it doesn't matter what you are, you can still do it if you want to do it!"

In Canada, the first astronaut selection was in 1983, and of the six chosen, just one – Roberta Bondar – was a woman. Of the 14 total astronauts chosen in Canada, just three in total have been women, most recently selected was Jenni Sidey-Gibbons in 2017.

Of all 3772 astronaut applications submitted by Canadians in August 2016 for the 2017 selection, just 24% of the applicants were women, according to the Canadian Space Agency. Having one of two chosen astronauts in 2017 be a woman is a great achievement when only 24% of the applicants were female. The candidates went through many tests, such as team-building tests, endurance tests, cognitive tests, and many strenuous tests to assess their ability to remain calm and productive in stressful environments, further proving Funk's response that no matter what anyone says, you can do hard things if you want to do them.

When Funk returned from her spaceflight, she said the flight was "incredible." Bezos described her during the flights as "never nervous," which makes sense given that she had prepared for years to handle every possible outcome as an astronaut. hilariously, when there was a 6-minute delay prior to launch, Funk said "Are we going or not?" impatient to go. She said "It was so easy, it was just incredible," stating "I want to go again" while speaking to reporters after landing.

Funk proclaimed that nothing has ever gotten in her way, and that truly seems to be the case.

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