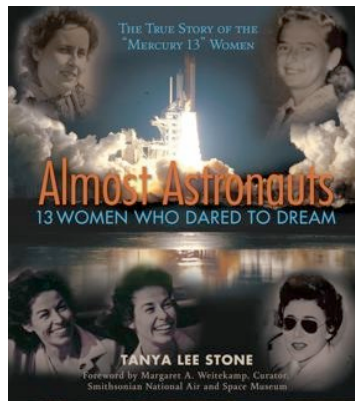


# ALMOST ASTRONAUTS: 13 WOMEN WHO DARED TO DREAM

By Tanya Lee Stone



## ABOUT THE BOOK

What are the requirements for being shot off into space with the hopes and fears of a nation riding on your ability to pilot a hunk of metal? Mastery of flying, as well as courage, intelligence, resistance to stress and fitness—any checklist would certainly include these. But when America created NASA in 1958, there was an unspoken rule in place: you must be male, and you must be white. Yet, nearly twenty years before the first women were allowed into the astronaut program, a group of thirteen women proved not only that they were as tough as any man, but also that they were brave enough to challenge the government. *Almost Astronauts* tells the story of the “Mercury 13” women, who were blocked by prejudice, jealous, and a note scrawled by one of the most powerful men in Washington. In the end, the inspiring example of these space age pioneers empowered young people to take their rightful place in the sky and beyond, piloting jets and commanding space capsules.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Lee Stone is a former editor and an award-winning author who often writes about strong women. When she first learned about the “Mercury 13” she “could not believe that such a dramatic story about courageous women, a fight for justice, and American heroes behaving badly was not already known the world over.” As she did her own original research, she learned a dark secret about the early space program that had been hidden for forty years.



## AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1. What do you hope readers remember about the “Mercury 13” women?

I hope readers will remember these women for who they are—capable, bold, risk-taking pilots who were ready and willing to be astronauts, and who didn’t back down from a challenge when they were told no. It’s also important to understand that even though these women didn’t realize their dreams of going into space, they paved the way for the women who followed.

I also hope that the story encourages kids to never give up on their dreams, and to tune out nay-sayers who may tell them they “can’t” do something. They can. And part of the reason they can today is because of people like these women who stood up for themselves and spoke out against unfairness.

2. What was the best part of putting this project together? What was the most difficult for you as a writer?

Really getting to know some of these women was a huge highlight of writing this book. They are strong, resilient people who have done amazing things with their lives and it was so exciting to hear their stories.

The most difficult part of writing this book was figuring out the best way to tell the story. Also, making sure that I was objective enough in the revision process because the story made me so outraged.

One of the things I loved about telling this story was finding all of the images to tell the story visually, too. A lot of time and thought went into choosing just the right pictures, and it was a great team effort as well. The editors and designer played a huge role in helping to ensure that we had a visual story as well as a written one.

3. What can your fans look forward to next?

I just finished a book about the history of the Barbie doll and its impact on our culture. Ruth Handler, the woman who invented Barbie, was a smart, savvy

businesswoman who co-founded Mattel with her husband and several years later came up with an idea she believed would appeal to girls. She was right!

Up next is a story not unlike *Almost Astronauts*, which focuses on another little-known group of American trailblazers. The 555<sup>th</sup> Infantry was the first unit of all-black paratroopers in World War II, who proved that African Americans were equally qualified to be combat soldiers and fought a foreign attack right here on U.S. soil that few people know about. Although the Triple Nickles, as they were called, were never sent overseas to fight the war, their unit was folded into the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne *before* the army was officially integrated.

## PRE-READING

Without showing students the book beforehand, have them draw a detailed picture of an astronaut with and without their uniform. Afterwards, count how many drew a picture of a woman compared to a man. Discuss the results.

Ask readers what they know about a woman's life in the 1950s and early 1960s? What things do they think women could and could not do?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the chapter title "T Minus 38 Years?" What was life like for women in the late 1950's and early 1960's? How had World War II changed American women?
2. How did Betty Skelton and Ruth Nichols help pave the way for the other women? Without forward-thinking men like Randy Lovelace and Donald Flickinger who believed women had equal skills and abilities do you think it would've taken even longer for women to reach space? Why or why not?
3. Describe the astronaut fitness tests. Would you want to endure them yourself? Have you ever trained for anything? How did it compare to the training and testing the women went through? Do you think they were being even more thorough and exacting on the women? Why or why not?
4. What do you think will be revealed about our current stereotypes and misconceptions when people look back 40 years from now? Are there groups of people who are still denied their rights and opportunities? Why?
5. Who was Jerrie Cobb? Why was she such an important member of the Mercury 13? Why was her performance in the isolation tank so extraordinary? How do you think you would fare under those conditions? What other tests did she endure? To what outcomes? Despite her success why do you think comparisons with the men were avoided overall?
6. Why did women feel compelled to be quiet about any feminist views in their jobs and life? What consequences did they face if they showed any feminist leanings? Are there views today that are still that unpopular?

7. The Mercury 13 women represented a broad questioning of women's roles of the period, "Not just what is a woman capable of but what is a woman's place." (p. 54) Why was this so far outside the expectations and norm of the time?
8. Why were the Pensacola tests cancelled? How would you feel if you were told no to pursuing your dreams? How did the requirement of being a jet test pilot give the authorities the perfect excuse?
9. How high up did the effort to keep women out of the space program go? Why do you think Johnson didn't want to admit women to the program?
10. How did Jackie Cochran put the nail in the coffin for women joining the space program during the 60's? What do you think her motivation was? Were you surprised to learn that a woman would hold back other women in this way? Why or why not?
11. How does the book show people who are considered classic American heroes in a new light? Do you think their views were representative of most men at the time? Do you think most of them have changed their minds about women and minorities or have just become more discreet with stating their opinions?
12. What changes finally opened the door for women to become astronauts? Do you think it took too long? Who were some of the pioneering women to first slip on the uniform of astronaut and fulfill the Mercury 13 women's dreams?

## **PROJECTS**

### **Language Arts:**

Write a pamphlet biography about a woman who has been a pioneer in her field. Find at least five important facts about her work, five dates that were key in her life and who she inspired.

### **Science:**

Create a timeline of the first forty years of the space program. Add in important dates for women in science. Use an alternative color for comparison.

### **Art:**

Inspired by the story of the Mercury 13 women create a piece of art that honors their contribution. Explain your use of color, form and texture in an artist's statement that you also turn in with the project.

### **Social Studies:**

Research and read common periodicals, newspapers and other print from the late 1950's and early 1960's to find depictions and expectations of women and their roles in the family and work place. Compare to periodicals and newspapers of today. Create a Venn diagram comparing what you found.

## **Curriculum Standards**

Applies to Science History, Space Science, Civics, U.S. History

This title meets the following curriculum standards for grades 5 and up:

### **Language Arts:**

NL-ENG.K-12.1 Reading for Perspective  
NL-ENG.K-12.2 Reading for Understanding  
NL-ENG.K-12.3 Evaluation Strategies  
NL-ENG.K-12.6 Applying Knowledge  
NL-ENG.K-12.7 Evaluating Data  
NL-ENG.K-12.8 Developing Research Skills  
NL-ENG.K-12.11 Participating in Society

### **Science:**

NS.5-8.1 Science as Inquiry  
NS.5-8.4 Earth and Space Science  
NS.5-8.5 Science and Technology  
NS.5-8.6 Science in Personal and Social Perspectives  
NS.5-8.7 History and Nature of Science  
NS.9-12.1 Science as Inquiry  
NS.9-12.6 Science in Personal and Social Perspectives  
NS.9-12.7 History and Nature of Science

### **Social Sciences:**

NSS-C.5-8.1 Civic Life, Politics, and Government (delete)  
NSS-C.5-8.2 Foundations of the American Political System  
NSS-C.5-8.5 Roles of the Citizen  
NSS-EC.5-8.2 Effective Decision Making  
NSS-USH.5-12.9 Era 9: Postwar United States  
NSS-USH.5-12.10 Era 10: Contemporary United States

This guide was created by reading specialist and children's author Tracie Vaughn Zimmer. Visit her website at [www.tracievaughnzimmer.com](http://www.tracievaughnzimmer.com) to find hundreds of guides to children's and YA literature.