

Mercury 13

Movie Review

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An all-true and richly detailed historical documentary about the 1960s Space Race and thirteen American women, *Mercury 13*¹ exposes the oppression and discrimination these hopeful pilots faced when trying to earn their place on Project Mercury, the first human spaceflight program in the United States. Though these women were well-qualified to join the male astronauts and to fly a spacecraft solo, the prejudice against women becoming pilots during this time was so intense that it would take a little less than a decade for a woman (Valentina Tereshova of Russia) to make it to space. The film itself is seamlessly explained and well-documented through the present-day narration of each of the women describing their experience during the Space Race. Combined with stunning imagery, such as depictions of the women flying classic 50s airplanes over stunning views in the opening scenes, the film captures the passion the women held about flying. The film delves into the perspectives of each of the thirteen pilots, who describe their long and, at times, frustrating struggle to be accepted into the space program, having to undergo intense endurance tests while dealing with sexism from both the space administration and the public. As a viewer, I enjoyed the breathtaking imagery of the film and how I was able to get to know the women on a more personal level. I understood both their hope and courage to prove their abilities as equal (and at times better) than the male astronauts, and their disappointment and outrage when they were ultimately excluded from the missions.

The film is mainly organized around in-person interviews and narration from the time of the space race, which creates a clear depiction of the mood and atmosphere during the 50s and 60s, a time filled with anticipation and determination for America to beat Russia to the moon, though also explains the sexist attitude toward women at the time. In the beginning of the film, one of the thirteen women pilots narrates how “at that time,

¹ *Mercury 13*, film, dir. David Singleton and Heather Walsh (Boise: Fine Point Films, 2018). All quotes from this source.

there was a lot of prejudice. Women astronauts. What a ridiculous idea.” Paired with this narration, we see documentation of male flight controllers directing the iconic and exciting Apollo missions, which gives the viewer an idea of how momentous spaceflight was at the time, as well as how male-dominated the field was. As Gena Jesson, one of the pilots, states, “There was a certain amount of prejudice about women getting into the “men’s fields.” These pilots had to work extremely hard in order to prove to the space administration and the public that they were just as mentally and physically capable as men to be astronauts. As the film depicts, the women had to undergo the same rigorous physical and mental examinations as the male astronauts in order to judge whether their abilities were sufficient. From having ice water shot into their ears to induce vertigo in order to test their recovery time to floating in sensory deprivation tanks for hours (Wally Funk, one of the women, beat the male record time at 10 hours and 35 minutes), the physical and mental strain of these tests was astounding. What was even more noteworthy, however, was the women’s willingness and enthusiasm to participate in them, reflecting their determination to go to space. Funk recalls her spirited determination to reach this dream: “floating amongst the stars. That was my objective.”

In the women’s appeal to Congress, Funk reiterates the powerful statement made by Julie Cobb, the frontrunner of the women hoping to make it to space: “we women pilots...are not trying to join in a battle of the sexes...We seek, only, in our Nation’s space a future without discrimination.” The truly moving and memorable aspect of the film is seen in the harsh dismissal of the women-in-space operation, especially after stating their reasonable appeals and undergoing the extensive tests. The thirteen pilots had proven they were, without a doubt, ready and willing to become astronauts alongside men, but Lyndon B. Johnson’s letter ultimately rejected them. Ratley, another of the pilots, expresses that “it was very disappointing for me. I wanted to go on and pursue this.”

The small amount of backlash the space program received for denying the women was, unfortunately, ineffective. The little criticism there was for the president’s decision was overshadowed by the biases of well-respected figures within the space administration. One of these figures was John Glenn, who was selected to be on the team of first-time astronauts, and became the first American to orbit the Earth in 1962. We see Glenn answering questions during the astronauts’ press panel about his stance on whether the women should be allowed to join the mission. He replied, “Men go off and fight the wars and fly the planes, and women stay home. It’s part of our social order.” Similar, shocking comments abound throughout the film, such as an interviewer asking the public whether women should be astronauts. One interviewee responds “I don’t, because men are more mature than women.” Others reasoned that “men are more

physically and mentally fit than women.” These responses showcase the discriminatory mindset the public held about women in the 50s and 60s, especially surrounding their place within math and science fields.

The film reveals other clear examples of injustice the women faced, especially after Tereshkova, the female Russian astronaut, was allowed to go to space before any of the thirteen American women. When confronted with this fact, Gordon Cooper, one of the Mercury astronauts, replies, “Well, I suppose we could have used a woman in space...during the second orbital, and flown her instead of sending the chimpanzee.” Followed by a burst of laughter from this audience, this statement, and many others displayed throughout the film, exposes the blatant injustice and sexism the women experienced as the space program continued.

Though the thirteen women pilots were never included on the Mercury missions, the film does reveal the rise of feminism and mobilization for gender-equality after the Space Race. The ending depicts modern-day footage of women and people of different ethnic backgrounds in space. However, the ending also suggests that there is still a need for women in the math and science fields, and the women of Project Mercury encourage women to strive for these types of career goals. A woman still has yet to walk on the moon, and, as a whole, the majority of astronauts have still been men. *Mercury 13* is both an illuminating and moving film in its exposure of gender inequality within the space program, and sheds light on a different and often overlooked side of the traditional story of the Space Race.