



Mercury 13 Discussion Guide

Director: David Sington & Heather Walsh

Year: 2018

Time: 78 min

You might know these directors from:

License To Krill (2015)

The Fear of 13 (2015)

Thin Ice: The Inside Story of Climate Science (2015)

The Flaw (2011)

In the Shadow of the Moon (2007)

FILM SUMMARY

What if mankind's first steps on the moon were actually made by a woman? David Sington and Heather Walsh's heartbreaking what-if documentary *MERCURY 13* laments the fact that this might have been the case had NASA not put a lid on the idea after discovering a secret women's aerospace study was started in parallel to the official Mercury astronaut program.

Back in 1958, a man named William Lovelace became the chairman of the NASA Special Advisory Committee on Life Science, a role that in the following year would see him play a key role in the selection of American astronauts chosen for the Mercury program, the first human spaceflight program of the United States. By 1960, Lovelace had become curious about how women would fare under the same rigorous physical testing that the military trained men had undergone, so he began to contact the top American female pilots to see if they'd be interested in joining his hush-hush program with the potential of going to space. Though they never made it to space, the women who took part in Lovelace's tests—Myrtle Cagle, Jerrie Cobb, Janet Dietrich, Marion Dietrich, Wally Funk, Sarah Gorelick, Jane 'Janey' Hart, Jean Hixson, Rhea Hurrle, Gene Nora Stumbough, Irene Leverton, Jerri Sloan, and Bernice 'B' Steadman—became known as the Mercury 13.

With its eyes on the sky and a gravity all its own, *MERCURY 13* recounts a tale of heroic pioneering aeronautics and the horrors of systemic sexism from the point of view of the surviving women themselves. Heather Walsh and David Sington paint a powerful, heart-wrenching what-if narrative that leaves us celebrating from the launch pad: Women are now seated firmly in the cockpit.

FILM THEMES

A tale of hope and possibility snuffed out by sexist beliefs, *MERCURY 13* outlines the history of William Lovelace's secret women's astronaut testing program and how NASA pulled the plug before the brave women enrolled in the program could reach outer space.

TALENTED WOMEN PILOTS POST WORLD WAR II

Midway through World War II the U.S. military realized it was in desperate need of non-combat pilots of all sorts, so women had their first chance to join the airforce as part of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program. The program began in 1943 at the urging of Jacqueline Cochran and Nancy Love, who both submitted independent proposals for the project. Following the war, over 100 highly skilled women wanted to make use of their newly developed aeronautic talents, though few were able to land commercial flight gigs, some of the best took up air racing in what was to become known as the Powder Puff Derby.

NASA, A BOYS CLUB

In the late 1950s, NASA was a male-centric operation, from all male astronauts selected to take part in the Mercury program all the way up to NASA's first administrators in T. Keith Glennan and Hugh L. Dryden, who were calling the shots. With this in mind, it's no surprise to find that the organization was averse to sponsoring an experimental women's astronaut program following the discovery that William Lovelace had secretly started his own privately funded women's astronaut study in parallel to the official men-only Mercury program.

PHYSICAL REALITIES DISREGARDED, SEXISM PREVAILS

William Lovelace's independent study of women's physical ability to handle the stresses of spaceflight and life in zero gravity included extensive x-rays, various reflex exams, endurance tests, time in an isolation tank, and rigorous psychological evaluations. The trials proved that in comparison to the men-only Mercury Seven, women proved to be on equal footing, and in some cases, fared even better than the men. Despite the evidence, NASA disregarded the facts and Vice President Lyndon Johnson personally penned a blunt death blow to the program with a simple statement, "Let's stop this now!"

RECOGNITION DECADES LATE

In 1963, Russia assigned Valentina Tereshkova to pilot the Vostok 6, making her not only the first woman in space, but the first woman to pilot a spacecraft. Despite this fact, it wasn't until 1983 that Sally Ride became the first American woman in space, and until 1995 that Eileen Collins became the first American woman to pilot the Space Shuttle. In honor of the Mercury 13, Collins personally invited the surviving women to her launch, and after discovering her intentions, NASA gave them V.I.P. access to the event.

“We do not want to slow down our program, and you are going to have to, of necessity, waste a great deal of money when you take a large group of women in, because you lose them through marriage.”

Jackie Cochran

“If we're going to send a human being into space, we should send the one most qualified. And in certain areas women have a lot to offer, and other areas, men do. I think that we ought to use both.”

Jerrie Cobb

FILM FACTS:

- Heather Walsh and David Sington's MERCURY 13 had its world premiere at the San Francisco International Film Festival on April 8, 2018, with another festival appearance following close behind at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival on April 24th. The film became available worldwide when it appeared on Netflix just 4 days earlier.
- According to a report at [NPR](#), "more than 1,100 young women, all civilian volunteers, flew almost every type of military aircraft—including the B-26 and B-29 bombers—as part of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program," which ran from August 1943 through December 1944 and proved that women were perfectly capable of piloting aircraft of all sorts.
- Myrtle Cagle, Jerrie Cobb, Janet Dietrich, Marion Dietrich, Wally Funk, Sarah Gorelick, Jane 'Janey' Hart, Jean Hixson, Rhea Hurrle, Gene Nora Jessen, Irene Leverton, Jerri Truhill, and Bernice 'B' Steadman were the original Mercury 13 who took part in William Lovelace's secret women's astronaut testing program.
- The basic qualifications to be considered for the original Project Mercury were as follows: The graduate of a navy or air force test pilot school, 1,500 hours of flight time, qualified in jet aircraft, an engineering background, and 5'11" or less.
- After Lovelace's project was shut down, Jerrie Cobb and Janey Hart, went before a special subcommittee on the selection of astronauts. John Glenn and Jacqueline Cochrane were also in attendance to argue against the inclusion of women in the space program. Ultimately, the women were denied.
- NASA didn't have a female Shuttle Pilot until 1995, when Eileen Collins became the first female pilot and commander of a Space Shuttle. For her launch, she privately invited the surviving members of Mercury 13. When NASA discovered her intentions, it authorized V.I.P. treatment of the aerospace pioneers. Gene Nora Jessen, Wally Funk, Jerrie Cobb, Jerri Truhill, Sarah Rutley, Myrtle Cagle, and Bernice 'B' Steadman all attended.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Join** [Women In Aviation International](#). This non-profit organization helps provide year-round resources to assist women in aviation and promotes public understanding of the accomplishments of women in aviation.
2. **Subscribe** to [NASA Solve](#). Keep up with opportunities to participate in challenges, prize competitions, and citizen science activities that develop solutions for problems related to NASA's mission.
3. **Inspire** kids with [NASA Education Projects](#). NASA's A-Z list of education opportunities collects STEAM based internship and fellowship opportunities, as well as programs that provide pathways for students and recent graduates to be considered for federal employment.
4. **Donate** to the [The Ninety-Nines](#), an international non-profit organization of women pilots that promotes advancement of aviation through education, scholarships, and mutual support while honoring our unique history and sharing a passion for flight.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.