

Jeff Bezos picks female aerospace pioneer to launch with him

July 1 2021, by Marcia Dunn



In this undated image from video provided by Blue Origin on Thursday, July 1, 2021, Mercury 13 astronaut trainee Wally Funk, right, meets with Jeff Bezos. On Thursday, Blue Origin announced the early female aerospace pioneer will be aboard the company's July 20 launch from West Texas, flying as an "honored guest." Credit: Blue Origin via AP

Sixty years after acing astronaut tests but barred because she was a woman, Wally Funk will rocket into space alongside Jeff Bezos in just

three weeks.

Bezos' company Blue Origin announced Thursday that the pioneering pilot will be aboard the July 20 launch from West Texas, flying in the capsule as an "honored guest." She'll join Bezos, his brother and the winner of a \$28 million charity auction, as the first people to ride a New Shepard rocket.

At 82, she'll be the oldest person to launch into space.

Funk is among the so-called Mercury 13 women who went through astronaut testing in the early 1960s, but never made it to space—or even NASA's astronaut corps—because they were female. Back then, all of NASA's astronauts were male military test pilots.

Funk said she feels "fabulous" about finally getting the chance to go to space.

"I'll love every second of it. Whoooo! Ha-ha. I can hardly wait," Funk said in an Instagram video posted by Bezos.

"Nothing has ever gotten in my way," she added. "They said, 'Well, you're a girl, you can't do that.' I said, 'Guess what, doesn't matter what you are. You can still do it if you want to do it and I like to do things that nobody has ever done.'"



In this 1995 file photo, members of the FLATs, also known as the Mercury 13, gather for a photo as they attend a shuttle launch in Florida. From left are Gene Nora Jessen, Wally Funk, Jerrie Cobb, Jerri Truhill, Sarah Rutley, Myrtle Cagle and Bernice Steadman. Blue Origin's Jeff Bezos has chosen Funk, an early female aerospace pioneer, to rocket into space with him later this month. The company announced Thursday, July 1, 2021, that Funk will be aboard the July 20 launch from West Texas, flying as an "honored guest." Funk, along with the other women of Mercury 13, went through astronaut training in the 1960s, but never made it to space - or even NASA's astronaut corps - because of their gender. Credit: NASA via AP

In a cosmic twist, she'll beat the late John Glenn, who set a record at age 77 when flying aboard space shuttle Discovery in 1998. Glenn pooh-

poohed the idea of women flying in space, shortly after he became the first American to orbit the world in 1962.

"No one has waited longer," Bezos said via Instagram. "It's time. Welcome to the crew, Wally."

The Amazon founder is stepping down as the company's CEO on Monday.

The upcoming launch—which follows 15 successful test flights—will open the door to paying customers. Blue Origin has yet to announce ticket prices or when the public might strap into the spacious six-seat capsule, which reaches an altitude of about 65 miles, just beyond the edge of space. The up-and-down flights last 10 minutes.

The reusable rocket is named for Mercury astronaut Alan Shepard, the first American in space, and July 20 is the 52nd anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing.

Funk, who lives in Texas, was the first female inspector for the Federal Aviation Administration and the first female air safety investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board. In the posted video, she said she has 19,600 flying hours and has taught more than 3,000 people to fly.



In this 2019 photo made available by NASA, Mercury 13 astronaut trainee Wally Funk visits the Glenn Research Center at Lewis Field in Cleveland, Ohio. On Thursday, July 1, 2021, Blue Origin announced the early female aerospace pioneer will be aboard the company's July 20 launch from West Texas, flying as an "honored guest." Credit: NASA via AP

She was among two dozen female pilots who underwent six days of rigorous physical tests—the same ones administered to the Mercury astronaut candidates—in 1960 and 1961. The doctor who had tested the Mercury 7 men had heard the Soviets planned to send a woman to space and he wanted to see if women could endure the effects of weightlessness.

The candidates had to spend hours in an isolation water tank, swallow

rubber hose, and get needles stuck in their heads, among other things.

Thirteen of the women—including Funk—passed. But the program was abruptly canceled, and the Soviets went on to launch the first woman into space—Valentina Tereshkova—in 1963.

"They told me that I had done better and completed the work faster than any of the guys," Funk recalled. "So I got hold of NASA four times. I said I want to become an astronaut, but nobody would take me. I didn't think that I would ever get to go up."

It wasn't until 1983 that the first American woman soared into space—Sally Ride, who died in 2012. And it wasn't until 1995 that an American woman piloted a spaceship—Eileen Collins aboard shuttle Discovery. Many of the Mercury 13 women gathered at Cape Canaveral for that launch.

Keen to get to space, Funk reserved a seat years ago on Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic rocket ship. She remains on the passenger list; the company plans three more test flights from New Mexico, one of them with Branson on board, before launching customers.



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In the video, Bezos describes to Funk how the four Blue Origin passengers will experience zero gravity for a few minutes, then land gently on the desert surface and open the hatch.

"You step outside. What's the first thing you say?" he asked her.

"I will say, 'Honey, that was the best thing that ever happened to me!'"
Funk replied, embracing Bezos in a big bear hug.

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