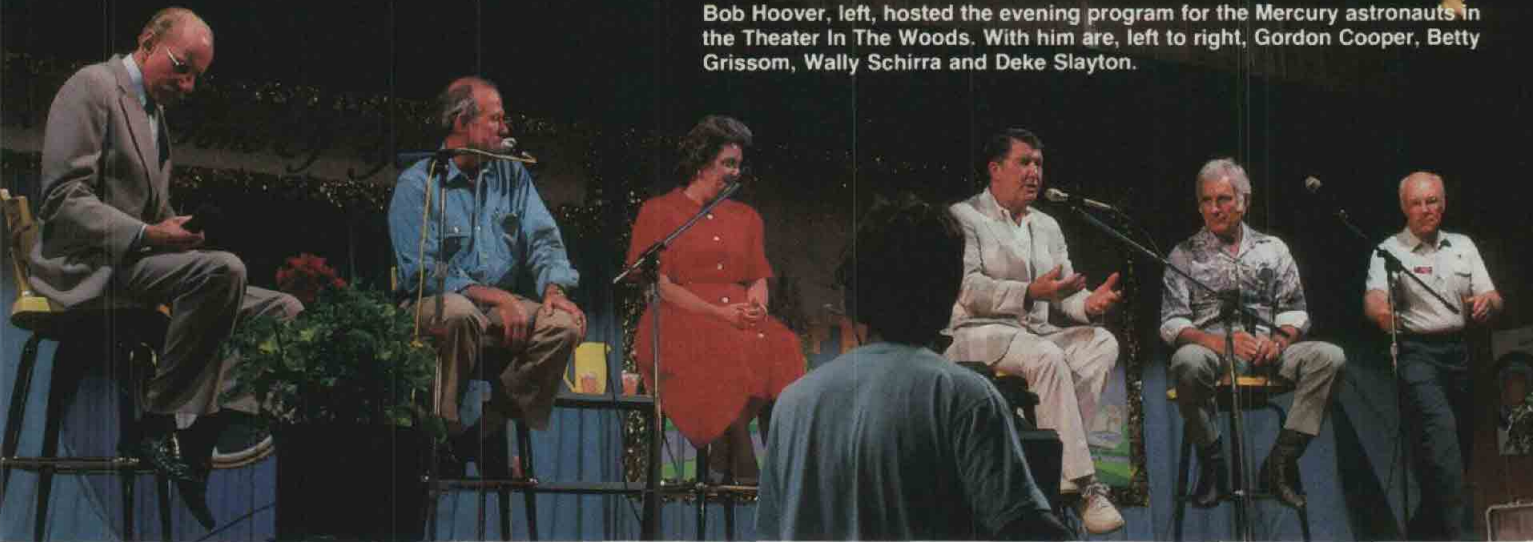


Bob Hoover, left, hosted the evening program for the Mercury astronauts in the Theater In The Woods. With him are, left to right, Gordon Cooper, Betty Grissom, Wally Schirra and Deke Slayton.



Mercury Astronauts at Oshkosh '87

They are enshrined in the history books; the subjects, too, of best seller novels and blockbuster movies. They were the heroes for a generation of young people, their exploits blazing in headlines across the daily newspapers of America.

But at Oshkosh, several of the original seven astronauts came and, like any of us, gawked at airplanes, swapped flying stories and soaked up the sights and sounds of the greatest aviation show on Earth.

EAA honored the original Mercury astronauts at the 1987 Convention, and three of them, plus the wife of another, came for the events. Betty Grissom represented her astronaut husband, Virgil (Gus), who was killed in an on-pad capsule fire in 1967. The astronauts who attended were Gordon Cooper, Wally Schirra and Deke Slayton.

None of them are affiliated with the government or its space program any more. But as members of the original corps of seven astronauts they came to fame in 1959 and flew missions that ranged from the first sub-orbital lofts into space through the Apollo launches that culminated in landings on the Moon.

These men who were the first selected for space flight are often lumped together under the title "Mercury Astronauts". While they are members of a very elite group and were selected by common process, they have gone their own ways. For each certainly has his own personality and shows it in his current activities.

What they do have in common, however, is an image — one created in a book, and the subsequent movie, "The Right Stuff."

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Wally Schirra

And all three of the astronauts who came to EAA had similar feelings about the characterizations in the book and the movie. To summarize, they feel the book was O.K. fiction. The movies: awful, and a lot of other adjectives that express distaste.

Schirra, who flew on Mercury, Gemini and Apollo spacecraft, spoke of the movie at a news conference during the EAA Convention. "I called it 'Animal House in Space'. The first two people who bid for rights to it were Belushi and Ackroyd, and I wish they'd gotten it," he said.

At that news conference, the subjects ranged widely, from the astronauts' initial introduction to aviation to their feelings about U. S. and Soviet space efforts.

Betty Grissom mentioned that her father had been a flyer in World War I,

and her father and mother were later barnstormers. She and Virgil had a Stinson Voyager once, she said, "but we traded it for a Buick." The Grissoms had two sons, now both in their thirties, and both still tied to aviation. Their son Mark is an air traffic controller and Scott is a first officer flying for Federal Express.

Cooper recalled flying airplanes from his family farm "when I was first driving cars." He almost always had an airplane of his own, and still, in the course of his business, flies 50 to 60 hours a month.

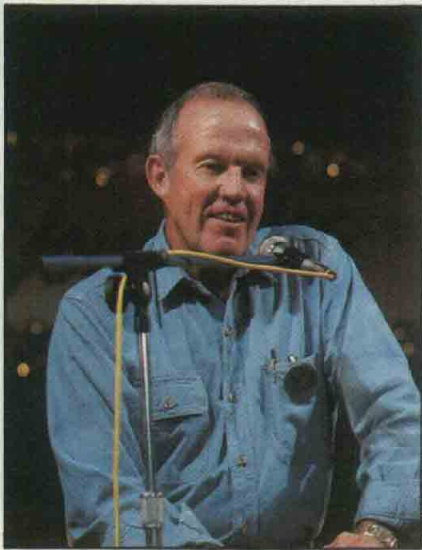
Schirra spoke of the vintage jets on display outdoors near the EAA Museum. "I was rather surprised when I realized that all those old monuments were the ones I flew." Schirra recalled an early flight with his father in an Aeronca C-3 from Teterboro airport in New Jersey. "We were going backwards, the wind was so strong. We had to tack back to the airport, and that impressed me."

Slayton, who first flew as an aviation cadet during World War II and then flew 56 missions as a B-25 pilot in Europe and another seven missions over Japan, talked little about his early flying. Instead, he spoke of his current flying priority, pylon-racing in Formula One class airplanes. Slayton, too, is president of the Formula One Air Race Association.

In addition to their reactions to "The Right Stuff", their perspectives on the Challenger space shuttle accident were sought by those they spoke to.

"The shuttle is the first machine that's reusable," Slayton explained at the news conference. "People made the mistake of thinking it was an ordinary airplane. And that's where they got caught."

Jim Koepnick



Jim Koepnick

Gordon Cooper

Early in the Mercury program, Cooper said, "We only had 150 people at NASA. Management was easier. The program was never without close calls. Most of us had a lot of cliffhangers. But the laxity got amplified as NASA got bigger."

Schirra quoted a line Virgil Grissom had coined about the risks they faced: "The most excitement on a flight came between liftoff and landing."

And on some other subjects:

Slayton compared U.S. and U.S.S.R. space efforts: "If you look at hours in space, they have us beat. They take an evolutionary approach. We've done big things, but without a steady flow." He noted that just recently the Soviets had introduced a booster rocket that has capability of the U. S. Saturn 5 of two decades ago.

Cooper talked of progress in airplane design. "We're still doing things from the '30s. EAA has had an impact. Whether you like him or not, Jim Bede made a big impact. He proved that kits can be sold and that interest was there. And EAA has shown that there are new things in airplanes and engines that can be applied."

Schirra touched on the reasons the astronauts got where they did. "I think most of us want to fly higher, faster and farther. And that's why we go into the space program."

Away from the conferences and public appearances, Schirra, Cooper and Slayton were just guys getting together to talk about common experiences, old friends and airplanes, during their day-and-a-half at the EAA Convention. Among themselves, too, at one point in the back room of an EAA building they explored more deeply the Challenger accident, seeking to make sense out of a mishap that was as close to them as it was to anyone in the world.

While they are seasoned veterans at news conferences and interviews, they

seemed most at ease watching, and mingling with, airplanes. Cooper, settling into a seat to watch the Sunday afternoon air show, said he'd "been up and down the flight line, from ultralights to the warbirds. It's hard to say what I like best."

The parade of passing airplanes opened a cornucopia of comments from Cooper as he sat at Wittman Airfield that sunny Sunday afternoon.

"There isn't an airplane I haven't flown," he commented. A P-47 roared by. "My first fighter. I spent two years in the Marines and trained in the T-6 and P-80." Bob Hoover was flying his Shrike performance that day, and Cooper recalled how it was Hoover, as a test pilot of the F-86, the first swept-wing jet, "demonstrated how a bent-wing airplane could be O.K."

Cooper, watching performers intently, wondered aloud about his friend Art Scholl, the air show pilot and movie stunt pilot who'd died in an accident several years earlier. Ironically, Scholl had done much of the flying for the filming of the accident sequences in the movie "The Right Stuff."

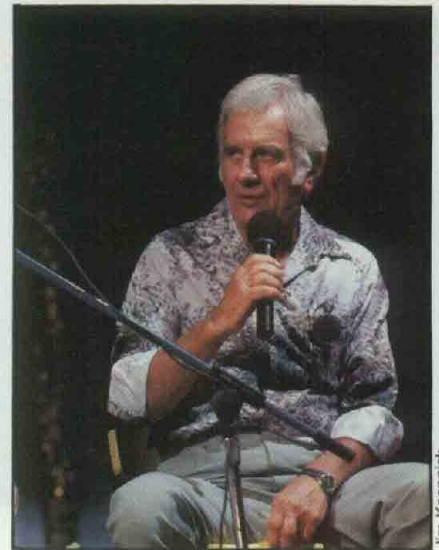
And Cooper reflected on his boyhood in Oklahoma, his father a pilot who had a Command-Aire, and how "if we had to go to the corner grocery store we'd take the airplane." His family had welcomed a lot of aviation's greats: Wiley Post, Amelia Earhart and Pancho Barnes. Back then, he noted, aviators would fly from one aviator's home to the next.

Both Cooper and Slayton talked of their NASA days. Cooper told of being summoned to Washington, DC in 1958. Neither he nor the other 129 military pilots had any inkling of the reason they'd been ordered to the Pentagon. They were, he said, the most surprised guys in the world when they learned they were being considered for space flight. They were given the opportunity to back out right there, with no penalty. But 96% of them stayed for further evaluation. The field narrowed as the astronaut candidates went through weeks worth of technical, physical and physiological competition. And ultimately seven were chosen: "Members of a club nobody else can ever get in," Schirra told an EAA video crew on Monday.

Schirra, too, spoke of the eerie feeling of "lying on your back" in the space capsule, "seeing this myriad of millions of parts all put together by the lowest bidder."

It was Slayton, however, who made one of the more telling comments concerning his astronaut years. "If Jules Bergman and Walter Cronkite had reported everything they knew about us, they could have put an end to the space program right then and there."

Both Cooper and Slayton continue



Jim Koepnick

Deke Slayton

careers related to aerospace. Schirra's work is primarily involved with investment and real estate.

Cooper's company, located in southern California, is certifying methanol fuels for use in aircraft engines — from small piston powerplants in PA-18s through the PT-6 engines common in corporate turboprops. The benefits of methanol are many, Cooper says, including lower cost, lengthened engine time between overhaul, and significantly reduced chance of fire or explosion in an aircraft accident.

Slayton is president of Space Service, Inc., a company gearing up to do a series of launches to put commercial payloads in orbit. His company is to have the capability to launch payloads that weigh from 300 to 4500 pounds, and he says he has three customers for launches at the end of 1988. His company has made arrangements with the government to use launch facilities at Wallops Island, VA, for the private launches.

The original astronauts continue to cooperate on one project: the Mercury Seven Foundation. That foundation provides scholarships to students in scientific and technical fields toward their third year of college. Thirteen scholarships were awarded last year.

Slayton and Cooper were both graduates of the test pilot school at Edwards Air Force Base, and had been assigned to test activities there. Schirra, during a portion of his Navy career, was a test pilot for the Navy. At Oshkosh, they were honored for their military and test flying accomplishments. Bob Hoover, another Edwards test pilot and long-time friend of all of them, served as interviewer at the evening event where they were honored and helped them bring out their intriguing stories.

And if anybody had interesting stories to tell at Oshkosh '87, it certainly was this very special crew of test pilots.