

## activity thirteen

### ROLE MODEL

## ASTRONAUT LEROY GORDON COOPER, Colonel, USAF

1927 – 2004

### OBJECTIVE

To give senior members a background on one of the greatest Air Force pilots who ever lived. He was one of the original Mercury 7 Astronauts and achieved legendary status, after being featured in a Hollywood movie, the "Right Stuff."



Astronaut Leroy Gordon Cooper.



The "Mercury 7" Astronauts. From left to right: Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, and Deke Slayton.

### BACKGROUND

No one can forget the broad smile and happy-go-lucky attitude of actor Dennis Quaid, who played Gordon Cooper, when he made the statement "...Who was the best pilot you ever saw? Huh? You're lookin' at him!"® This was a portrayal of Gordo Cooper - as Gus Grissom called him, "Hotdog" in the movie. Some well-known celebrities who worked with the real Gordon Cooper had this to say about him: Senator John Glenn (also one of the Mercury Astronauts) said, "...Gordo was one of the most straightforward people I have ever known. What you saw was what you got!" Other comments included Wally Schirra who said, "...We seven were like brothers, maybe even closer if that's possible..." They all said that Gordo had an

Do\* spirit. He was never once heard saying, "you can't do it!" He was gunge-ho on everything. Another comment came from Sam Beddington, then a mechanical engineer for Project Mercury. He added, "Gordo knew what he was doing and could always make things work!"

Director Chris Kraft said that "Gordo was an outstanding test pilot" and relates this story:

"Walt Williams and I were in his [Williams'] office at the Cape one Sunday afternoon - we were talking about the project and a sudden roar came upon us. The roar was a jet airplane diving onto the Cape at a very high rate of speed...which of course was forbidden. We looked out the window and it was none other than Gordon Cooper in his F-101."

Gene Kranz, assistant flight director on the Mercury program, describes Cooper's mischievous nature in his book *FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION*. Kranz tells one episode when he was arriving in Florida to report to work for the first time at Cape Canaveral's Mercury Control. After his plane rolled to a stop, a shiny new Chevrolet convertible wheeled to a halt just beyond the wingtip. An Air Force enlisted man popped out, saluted and held open the car's door for a curly-haired guy in civilian clothes, a fellow-passenger who deplaned ahead of me," writes Kranz.

The curly-haired man offered Kranz a ride to the Cape and he hopped in. "After clearing the plane", Kranz writes, "he peeled into a 180 degree turn and raced across the ramp for 100 yards, my neck snapping back as he floored the Chevy. I had never driven this fast on a military base in my life. I was thinking I had hitched a ride with a madman, or at least someone who apparently had no concern about being pulled over by the Air Police for speeding and breaking every regulation in the book."

Kranz continues, "Hitting the highway, he made a wide turn and then a hard left, burning rubber. In no time, he had the speedometer needle quivering between eighty and ninety. A joyful cry 'Eeeeeeee-Hah!' The driver then turned and offered his hand saying, 'Hi, I'm Gordo Cooper'..." Gene Kranz had his first meeting with a Mercury Astronaut!

**NAME:** Leroy Gordon Cooper, USAF Test Pilot and NASA Mercury Astronaut.

**PERSONAL:** Gordon Cooper was born on March 6, 1927 in Shawnee, Oklahoma. He took most of his pre-college training in his home town and eventually some courses at the University of Hawaii. His interests included treasure hunting, automobile racing, fast cars, archeology, flying, skiing, boating, hunting, fishing and an intense interest in UFOs. In further research of his life, the senior member is encouraged to research the story of how Cooper was accused of a security breach when he flew a photo mission over Area 51!

## NATIONAL SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

### 2. Time, Continuity, and Change

## NATIONAL SCIENCE STANDARDS

### Content Standard G: History and Nature of Science

- Science as a human endeavor
- Historical perspectives



Leroy Gordon Cooper (March 6, 1937 - October 4, 2004)

**EDUCATIONAL:** Cooper attended primary and secondary school in Shawnee, Oklahoma, and Murray, Kentucky. He received a Bachelor of Science in Aeronautical Engineering from the Air Force Institute of Technology in 1956.

**EXPERIENCE:** Cooper received an Army commission after completing three years of schooling at the University of Hawaii. However, he transferred his commission to the Air Force and was placed on active duty in 1949. Soon thereafter, he was selected for flight training. His next assignment was with the 86<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Group in Munich, Germany, where he flew F-84 and F-86 jets. While in Munich, he also attended the European Extension of the University of Maryland.

He returned to the U.S. and after two years of study at the Air Force Institute of Technology, received his degree in engineering. He then reported to the Air Force Experimental Flight Test School at Edwards, California, in 1957 and was assigned as an aeronautical engineer and test pilot in the performance Engineering Branch of the Flight Test Division at Edwards AFB. His responsibilities included flight testing of high performance experimental fighter aircraft.

In his career, Gordon Cooper logged more than 7,000 hours in jet aircraft. He also flew all types of commercial and general aviation airplanes including helicopters.

#### ONE OF HIS MOST NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS

On May 15-16, 1963, Cooper piloted the Faith 7 spacecraft on a 22 orbit mission which concluded the operational phase of Project Mercury. During the 34 hours and 20 minutes of the flight, Faith 7, attained an apogee of 166 statute miles and a speed of 17,546 miles per hour and a distance traveled of 546,167 statute miles.

Cooper served as command pilot of the 8-day, 120 revolution Gemini 5 mission which began on August 21, 1965. It was on this flight that he and pilot Charles Conrad established a new space endurance record by traveling a distance of 3,312,993 miles in an elapsed time of 190 hours and 56 minutes. Cooper also became the first man to make a second orbital flight and thus won for the USA the lead in man-hours by accumulating a total of 225 hours and 15 minutes. On his first orbital flight a malfunction occurred in the computer controlled re-entry system. Gordon Cooper had to manually fly the spacecraft and he did so with so much skill, that he splashed down within four miles of his rescue carrier.

Among Cooper's numerous awards were the Air Force Legion of Merit, the Distinguished Flying Cross with cluster, NASA's Exceptional Service Medal, the NASA Distinguished Service Medal, the Collier Trophy and the Harmon Trophy.

In 1975, Cooper became the vice president for research and development for Walter E. Disney Enterprises, Inc., of Glendale, California, the research and development subsidiary of Walt Disney Productions.

Cooper continued to design and test new aircraft in Southern California, never giving up his passion for pushing the envelope. As it said in the movie, the "Right Stuff," © Gordo Cooper was in the eyes of many, "the best pilot they ever saw!" For an overview of this great Air Force pilot, visit <http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/htmlbios/cooper-ig.html>.

