

INSPIRATION AND IMAGINATION

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. SALLY K. RIDE

By Rebecca Wright, Jennifer Ross-Nazzal, and Sandra Johnson

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Dr. Sally Ride will forever be known as the first American woman to fly in space. She was also the youngest American astronaut and the only person to sit on both the Rogers Commission and the *Columbia* Accident Investigation Board. In the following interview, conducted during two sessions in October and December 2002, Ride discussed her two *Challenger* flights, her time at NASA headquarters, inspiring children—especially girls—to pursue math and science careers, and her experiences as one of the first women in a male-dominated profession. Although Ride died in 2012 from pancreatic cancer at age 61, her impact on the exploration of space and the pursuit of scientific inquiry will continue to be felt long into the future.

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WRIGHT: In January 1977, you submitted a handwritten note to the Astronaut Selection Office at the Johnson Space Center, requesting the forms necessary to apply as a mission specialist candidate. Tell us what prompted you to write that note and describe the events that followed.

RIDE: I saw an ad in the Stanford University student newspaper that the Center for Research on Women at Stanford had put in the paper on behalf of NASA. It announced that NASA was accepting applications for what would be the astronaut class of 1978.

The ad made it clear that NASA was looking for scientists and engineers, and it also made it clear that they were going to accept women into the astronaut corps. They wanted applications from women, which is presumably the reason

the Center for Research on Women was contacted and the reason that they offered to place the ad in the Stanford student newspaper.

I read the ad in the Stanford student newspaper, and either that very day or shortly thereafter whipped off a little handwritten note asking for more information.

WRIGHT: And what was the next step? How long was it before you heard back from the selection office that they wanted you to apply?

RIDE: Well, it wasn't very long. The selection office had a pretty good process in place even back then. It struck me as kind of an entertaining process. I remember that relatively quickly—and I don't know whether that was a week or a month—I got a simple one- or two-page application that was not much more than, "Is there really somebody at the other end of this application? Do you really want to apply?" It didn't really ask for much more than the civilian equivalent of name, rank, and serial number: name, address, educational background, maybe names of a couple references. Not very much.

I sent that in then got another form back that was considerably longer, much more like an application that asked for things like medical history, and asked why I wanted to be an astronaut.

After that application form was received, NASA performed a background check on a certain fraction of the applicants. I don't know whether they weeded anyone out before they did the background checks, but they probably did. They also conducted very detailed interviews with the references that applicants had listed.

NASA reduced the number of applicants down to 200 and invited those 200 down to Houston, Texas, in groups of 20. So I went to JSC with 19 other prospective astronaut candidates for a week of interviews, briefings, and med-



Dr. Sally K. Ride

Credit: NASA

ical exams at JSC.

WRIGHT: Were you associated with any of the other 200, or was this a group of people that you had never met before?

RIDE: It was a group of people I had never met before. And I didn't meet any of the other 180 who were interviewed. The only ones that I met were the ones in my little group of 20. We spent a week going from briefing to briefing, from dinner to dinner, and medical evaluations, brief psychological exams, and individual interviews with the Astronaut Selection Committee.

WRIGHT: How did you learn that you were selected to be a candidate?

RIDE: I got a phone call from George W. S. Abbey very, very early in the morning California time. He was probably going through his list, making calls to those selected at, oh, 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning, Houston time. I was awakened by the phone call, and when I heard George

Abbey on the phone, I thought it was probably good news. He would have delegated the bad-news phone calls to someone else on the selection committee.

WRIGHT: And your reaction?

RIDE: Well, it took me a while to wake up! I thought maybe I was dreaming [laughter]. But, of course, I was thrilled. My biggest frustration was that it was 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning in California, so all my friends and family were asleep. I wasn't sure that I should wake them up to give them the news!

WRIGHT: Now, was this good timing for you in your career plan?

RIDE: It was almost perfect timing for me. And as I remember, it was January of 1978 when we were told we'd been selected. The 35 of us in the new class of astronauts were all told to report to Houston in July. My PhD thesis was scheduled for late June, so it was almost perfect timing. I literally defended my PhD thesis, got in the car, and drove to Houston.

WRIGHT: When NASA announced the new class that included six female astronauts, which was totally different from

anything they had done before, how did [the] response of the media and other organizations, especially some of the feminist organizations, impact your life? And did the impact start before you actually went down to JSC?

RIDE: The impact started before I left for JSC. The announcement was made in the winter. There was a lot of media attention surrounding the announcement, because not only was it the first astronaut selection in nearly 10 years, it was the first time that women were part of an astronaut class. There was a lot of press attention surrounding all six of us.

Stanford arranged a press conference for me, the day of the announcement—the first time, of course, that I had even thought of being part of a press conference. I mean, my gosh, I was a PhD physics student. Press conferences were not a normal part of my day.

A lot of newspaper and magazine articles were written—primarily about the women in the group—even before we arrived at JSC. The media attention settled down quite a bit once we got to Houston. There were still the occasional stories, and we definitely found ourselves being sent on plenty of public appearances.



Left to right: Shannon W. Lucid, Margaret Rhea Seddon, Kathryn D. Sullivan, Judith A. Resnik, Anna L. Fisher, and Sally K. Ride. NASA selected all six women as their first female astronaut candidates in January 1978, allowing them to enroll in a training program that they completed in August 1979. Credit: NASA

WRIGHT: Did this impact on your private life affect your decision or make you think that you were getting into something a little bit more? You were applying to be an astronaut. Now all of a sudden people were asking questions about who you were. As you said, you were a physics student.

Dr. Sally K. Ride

Born: 26 May 1951
Died: 23 July 2012

EDUCATION

- B.A. English, B.S. Physics, Stanford University, 1973
- M.S. Physics, Stanford University, 1975
- PhD Physics, Stanford University, 1978

CAREER OVERVIEW

NASA Johnson Space Center, Houston, TX (1978-1986)

- Astronaut, Astronaut Office (1978-86)
NASA Headquarters, Washington, DC (1986-87)
- Special Assistant to the Administrator for Strategic Planning (1986-87)
- Assistant Administrator, Office of Exploration (1987)

Stanford University, Stanford, CA (1987-89)

- Science Fellow, Center for Internal Security and Arms Control (1987-89)

University of California at San Diego, La Jolla, CA (1989-2012)

- Professor, Department of Physics (1989-2007)
- Director, California Space Institute (1989-1996)
- Professor Emeritus, Department of Physics (2007-2012)

Space.com, New York, NY (1999-2000)

- Executive Vice President of Strategic Planning (1999)
- President, Space.com (1999-2000)

Sally Ride Science

- (formerly Imaginary Lines), San Diego, CA (2001-2012)
- Founder, President and CEO

AWARDS AND HONORS OVERVIEW

- Jefferson Award for Public Service
- American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA), Lawrence Sperry Award
- Five NASA Group Achievement Awards
- Five NASA Special Achievement Awards
- American Institute of Physics, Science Writing Award
- Space Flight Medal, 1983 and 1984
- Lindbergh Eagle Award, 1985
- National Women's Hall of Fame, 1988
- National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Silver Anniversary Award, 1997
- International Scholar-Athlete Hall of Fame, 2001
- Astronaut Hall of Fame, 2003
- California Hall of Fame, 2006
- National Aviation Hall of Fame, 2007
- National Space Grant Distinguished Service Award, 2012
- General James E. Hill Lifetime Space Achievement Award (posthumous), 2013
- Presidential Medal of Freedom (posthumous), 2013

RIDE: Actually, it didn't. It wasn't particularly burdensome after the initial flurry of interviews. There was a fair amount of it, but it was still easy to have a normal life.

WRIGHT: What type of preparations, if any, did NASA, especially at JSC, make to accommodate the female astronauts? Were there accommodations or facility changes to assist what females needed, compared to what the males had always just taken as their own?

RIDE: There were some things. The most obvious was that they needed to add a women's locker room to the astronaut gym. That and most other things were accomplished before we arrived. I think JSC worked hard to prepare for the arrival of women astronauts and female technical professionals. The technical staff at JSC—around 4,000 engineers and scientists—was almost entirely male. There were just a very small handful of female scientists and engineers—I think only five or six out of the 4,000. The arrival of the female astronauts suddenly doubled the number of technical women at JSC!

WRIGHT: It was a class of 35, and a lot of attention was on the fact that it did include six females. How [was] the rest of the class impacted by the fact that so much of the attention was on six members instead of the whole 35?

RIDE: I think the rest of the class understood that that was natural and maybe even appreciated it! It was really a good group of 35. The selection committee was looking for men that were comfortable working with women, that were used to working with women, and that had no problem working with women, and they succeeded. It was a very congenial class, and we really didn't have any issues at all within our group. They were very respectful, and incorporated us as part of the group from the very beginning.

So we all walked in as rookies, neophytes in the astronaut corps. None of us knew anything about what was about to happen to us, and so as you can imagine we were a pretty close-knit group. None of the astronauts who applied did it for publicity. Everybody applied because this

is what they wanted to do. So the males in the group didn't really want to be spending their time with reporters; they wanted to be spending their time training and learning things. They didn't seem to mind at all that more of the attention was paid to the women astronaut candidates. In fact, they wished us well. And, frankly the women probably would have preferred less attention.

WRIGHT: How did the current astronaut corps accept the new class? It had been so long since they had any new ones added, and now 35 new ones showed up.

RIDE: They seemed to accept us pretty well. We had them outnumbered, so I'm not sure they had a choice. It was clearly very different for them. They were used to a particular environment and culture. Most of them were test pilots. There were a few scientists, but most were test pilots. Of course the entire astronaut corps had been male, so they were not used to working with women. And there had been no additions to the astronaut corps in nearly 10 years; so even having a large infusion of new blood changed their working environment.

But, they knew that this was coming and they'd known it was coming for a couple of years. Well before the announced upcoming opportunity to apply for the astronaut corps, NASA had decided that women were going to be a part of it. So I think that the existing astronauts had a couple of years to adjust and come to terms with it.

By the time that we actually arrived, they had adapted to the idea. We really didn't have any issues with them at all. It was easy to tell though that the males in our group were really pretty comfortable with us, while the astronauts who'd been around for a while were not all as comfortable and didn't quite know how to react. But, they were just fine and didn't give us a hard time at all.

WRIGHT: It was a new time for NASA, with the new Shuttle era moving in at the same time, so they have all this newness that's facing you. What were your expectations? What were your goals and your objectives when you moved into this new phase of your career?

RIDE: [Laughs]. I had no idea what to expect. I mean, what do you do when you're an astronaut? Who knows? I don't even remember having specific goals, other than to fly in space! So my goals were day-to-day goals to learn the things that I needed to learn and master the technical subjects that I needed to master; basically to do everything that I needed to do to put myself in a position to be selected for a flight.

WRIGHT: You're there and they begin the training program. Can you tell us how that progressed, some of the different areas that you found to be more challenging than others?

RIDE: The training program included a few different components. Some of them I was very comfortable with. For example, we spent a lot of time in the classroom—it was just like being back in college. We studied systems and schematics and other things that I was well trained to do.

And then there were other parts, like learning to fly in the T-38s that were completely new to me. I'd never even been in a light plane before I set foot on the Johnson Space Center, so the flying was totally foreign to me—and an awful lot of fun! I really enjoyed both the ground school and then the flight training itself. That was probably one of the more challenging aspects of the training, just because it was so new to me. Flying was completely out of my experience, whereas learning a schematic for an electrical system was something that I knew how to do. And it was just a matter of putting in the time to learn it.

WRIGHT: What were some of the first responsibilities that were given as part of that on-the-job training and those first assignments that AsCans [Astronaut Candidates] were given to move them through the program?

RIDE: I was given a couple of different assignments. We were given our first assignments after we graduated from being AsCans. NASA had initially planned for us to be AsCans for two years; then they decided that two years was too long and just removed the title