

## The Magic Seven



NASA photo

A group of nomads in the middle of the Sahara Desert? Extras from the movie "Lawrence of Arabia"? Look closely. This weary group of "nomads" is none other than the original seven US astronauts after a four-day training mission in the Nevada desert in 1960. The desert training, as well as water and jungle survival courses, were all designed to teach the astronauts how to survive for a short time anywhere on Earth beneath their planned orbital track. Here, following their four days spent in isolation in the intense desert heat, are (l-r): L. Gordon Cooper Jr., M. Scott Carpenter, John H. Glenn Jr., Alan B. Shepard Jr., Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom, Walter M. Schirra Jr., and Donald K. "Deke" Slayton.

These seven astronauts were the first in the US man-in-space program—Project Mercury. Initiated in 1958, the

project completed six manned flights from 1961 to 1963. Its first major success was the flight of the Mercury capsule dubbed Freedom 7 on May 5, 1961, in which then-Lt. Cmdr. Alan Shepard became the first US astronaut in space. Shepard died July 21, 1998.

While the desert training looks especially rugged, the Mercury 7 astronauts went through even more rigorous physical and psychological tests to get the opportunity to become the nation's first in space. The initial group of candidates, all military test pilots selected from their records, included five Marines, 47 from the Navy, and 58 from the Air Force. The volunteer rate was so high that not all of these 110 pilots were even interviewed. By March 1959, the number of candidates was down to 36. Of those, 32 accepted an invitation to undergo extensive physical examina-

tions at the Lovelace Clinic in Albuquerque, N.M. Only one was dropped for a potential medical problem. The next stop was the Aeromedical Laboratory of the Wright Air Development Center, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, for what was a set of stressful physical tests and, even more stressful, psychological evaluations, known as "the week of truth." With this barrage of tests and evaluations complete, the number of candidates was down to 18 but the goal was for only six. The final decision came down to an analysis of the men's technical qualifications and how well they would complement each other.

In the end, the magic number became seven.