

Where's Up, Pussycat?

Photo by Sam Falk/New York Times



Weightless kitten floats out of the hand of an Air Force pilot inside a Lockheed F-94C Starfire, during a February 1958 "zero gravity" test.

A kitty orients itself.



How humans did it. Mercury astronauts in 1959 test aboard the C-131 "Vomit Comet."

NASA photo

In the early Space Age, weightlessness caused a more or less general freak-out. Medical experts worried about the consequences of "zero gravity" and what it would do to a living, breathing human being—his digestive system, vision, balance, and so forth. In February 1958, NASA and the

Air Force tested a kitten in a fighter used to simulate weightlessness. The experts wondered about the cat's famous ability to quickly orient, when dropped, and land on its feet. Released at 25,000 feet, the feline experienced at most 40 seconds of weightlessness. The cat's reaction was described

as "bewilderment." The first Project Mercury astronauts went through something similar in a special C-131 aircraft used to fly a "zero-g" trajectory. Fondly known as "the Vomit Comet"—for obvious reasons—it helped the early space voyagers adjust to the weirdness of weightlessness.