

FAITH 7

**L. Gordon Cooper, Jr., and
the Final Mercury Mission**

Colin Burgess



Faith 7

L. Gordon Cooper, Jr., and the Final Mercury Mission

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Colin Burgess

Faith 7

**L. Gordon Cooper, Jr., and the Final
Mercury Mission**



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Front cover: Spacecraft *Faith 7* atop Atlas 130-D at Cape Canaveral's Launch Complex 14 prior to the MA-9 mission. Inset: Gordon Cooper onboard USS *Kearsarge* at the end of his Mercury flight.

Back cover: Cooper is inserted into *Faith 7* on launch day. (Photos: NASA)

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Pencil portrait of Gordon Cooper by Dutch space artist Ed Hengeveld (reproduced with permission).

I have the normal desire, experienced by everybody who's ever flown an airplane with a certain amount of zoom capability, to go a little bit higher and a little bit faster.

Leroy Gordon Cooper Jr. (1927–2004)

Foreword

How would it feel to become an American hero, a pilot, an astronaut and an all-round well-known and respected person? What would it be like to be part of an elite group presented to the world as the first Americans to fly in space?

Leroy Gordon (“Gordo”) Cooper was all of these things. He was one of that very first group to be selected as astronauts by NASA in 1959, and he gained immediate worldwide recognition along with the other six pilots.

He was still an active astronaut in 1966 when I came onboard as one of nineteen astronaut selectees. I arrived at the Manned Spacecraft Center, later renamed the Johnson Space Center, in April of that year. At our first meeting we were introduced to the current astronauts in the program, then split up and assigned to various senior astronauts who would act as flight commanders for our first year of training. It was very similar to how the Air Force organized their squadrons: a chain of command procedure that was very familiar to me. Gordo was one of those “old heads” at the center and commanded a great deal of respect from my group of astronaut trainees. There was a certain mystique about the original guys. Plus they’d made a space flight, and we had not proved ourselves yet. I would have given anything to be in the Original Seven. We looked up to Gordo as someone who could not only fly an airplane and a spacecraft, but could also do it with élan and a calm demeanor. He was a cool and patient guy who never got excited and was always ready for the next step.

Gordo was the last person to fly a Mercury spacecraft, and it was an amazing flight. He stayed in orbit for the longest time during that record-setting Mercury program, over 34 hours, and became the last American ever to launch into orbit alone. Since he was such a “no sweat” pilot, he even went to sleep during launch and indeed during the flight. No American had ever been on a flight before this that lasted long enough to take a nap. When problems occurred with the attitude instruments while in flight he casually solved them, and then took over manual control when he fired the retrorockets for re-entry. His control was so precise that he landed right by his recovery aircraft carrier, and this helped NASA to reassess the procedures for future flights to allow the pilots to manually control their spacecraft when necessary.

He later went on to command Gemini V, flying with Pete Conrad. They stayed in space for eight days, setting another duration record for American astronauts. He was the first pilot, American or Russian, to launch into orbit twice.

Gordo was also an enthusiast of speed on the ground as well as the air, and he raced many different vehicles in the late 1960s. He especially liked to race boats, and owned a very fast and powerful eighteen-foot ski boat (SK Class) with a huge engine that produced upwards of 800 horsepower and could attain over 100 miles per hour. Racing them was really brutal on the body, from all the pounding of the wave action. I helped him with his boat, and eventually I got to drive another one like his. He was so pleased I enjoyed his sport that he even offered me a boat to race, but at the time I was so busy with my NASA duties that I could not take advantage of his offer. Automobile racing was another of his loves and he raced cars whenever he could. On one occasion he even entered the Daytona 24-hour sports car endurance race.



Al Worden flanked by (from left) Colleen, Suzi and Elizabeth Cooper. (Photo: Astronaut Scholarship Foundation)

I think the attitude Gordo had all his life transferred to some of us in my group of nineteen. I worked hard to be as calm and unemotional about flying as he demonstrated all the time. “Unflappable” is a good description of how he approached flying and life. I never witnessed him getting angry or upset during the time we were friends. He worked hard and played hard, but never lost his cool. That was very evident in later years after he contracted Parkinson’s disease. I remember seeing him many years after he left the space program, when we both attended a fund raising event for the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation. Even though he was in very poor condition and could not talk well, he attended all the sessions and was very friendly to staff and guests. It took an enormous amount of courage and determination to go through that event with a positive attitude.

Gordo was a likeable cowboy, a unique individual with an unassuming manner and a down-to-earth approach in his life and work. He is missed, and his widow and daughters remain among my closest and most cherished friends. For those of you who never got to meet him, I hope you get to know a little more about him in the pages of this book.

Alfred M. Worden
Command Module Pilot,
Apollo 15, Col. USAF (Ret.)

Acknowledgements

Without any doubt it has been a pleasure and an undeniable privilege to have been given the opportunity to research and put together the truly awe-inspiring stories of the crewed Mercury flights and the legendary astronauts who carried out these pioneering missions into space. I have learned so much and made so many friends and contacts in the process of writing these six books that I know I will miss delving into the lives and accomplishments of NASA's Mercury astronauts; the heroes of my youth whose exploits still excite and fascinate me several decades on.

As this is the final book in the series I would like to recognize some absolutely amazing people who have made all of this possible. Ordinarily, they are briefly acknowledged after naming those who have supplied information, personal anecdotes and photographs for the various books, but in this case I want to express my sincere appreciation and ongoing thanks to them.

First and foremost, to fellow spaceflight author and editor David M. Harland, who has gone well beyond the call of duty over several years and over many of my Springer-Praxis books to ensure – right through to completion – that everything possible has been done, and done well. He has taught me an enormous amount about the editing process and I am continually indebted to him for his patience, persistence and good humor. He consistently proves the enduring power of a skilled and subject-knowledgeable copyeditor.

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To my two favorite ladies at Springer in New York, it is always a great pleasure working with you and receiving advice whenever it is needed. So to Maury Solomon, Senior Editor, Physics and Astronomy, my endless thanks for your patience and support of my efforts. It is constantly reassuring to know I can always turn to you and rely on your vast experience in the industry whenever an opinion is needed, or to run possible photos and cover text by you to ensure that from a marketing point of view we capture that all-so-important attention of the buying public. Thank you for your solid and enthusiastic support and friendship over many years. Similarly, Assistant Editor Nora Rawn has – also for many years

now – gone out of her way to help me with my queries, many of which probably have no relationship to her job function. But Nora never backs away from any of my questions and has happily resolved many perplexing issues, and for that I offer my sincere thanks.

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And finally, thank you to the readers who have purchased the books in this Mercury flight series. Knowing that I have realized a long-held dream in compiling this series has been personally rewarding, but an even greater reward has been the large number of people saying how much they have enjoyed reading the books, especially when they point out that they have discovered facts and stories that were new to them. That, my friends, is a truly satisfying reward for the many nights of burning the midnight oil, testing the patience of my dear wife Pat, and almost causing my home computer to collapse with exhaustion before I succumbed to that fate myself.

Thank you everyone – it's been a privilege beyond all my expectations.

Author's prologue

Back in the golden, glory days of Mercury, Leroy Gordon Cooper always seemed to exude the perfect embodiment of an astronaut: he sported those chiseled good features, possessed a bold and adventurous nature, and was living his long-held dream of space flight. There were magazine photographs of him flying with his aviator wife Trudy by his side, and in his home life he had two pretty young daughters sharing his dream. It was altogether impossible not to like and admire the guy.

I grew up in Australia, with my interest in human space activities sparked by the drama-filled, three-orbit flight of John Glenn in February 1962. That interest grew ever stronger with each passing mission. Back then, I never imagined I would ever meet any of these heroes of my youth, but over more recent years I not only got to meet many of them, but was proud to know that they regarded me as a good and trusted friend. Sadly, I was only destined to meet Gordon Cooper one time, and that was in the year before he took his final journey to the stars.

Our meeting occurred in January 2003. My longtime friend and co-author Francis French and I were delighted to receive an invitation to attend a private reception and book signing at the Oakmont Country Club in Glendale, California, hosted by Scott Carpenter's family. The occasion was the publication of *For Spacious Skies*, Scott's biography co-written with his daughter Kris Stoeber. At one stage that afternoon Scott made a short speech, thanking everyone for attending. We all listened intently, and as he expressed his individual thanks he glanced to the back of the room, paused, and announced that another old friend had just arrived. Curious, we all turned round, and there stood Gordon and Suzi Cooper. It was an unforgettable moment, and later that day I got to spend some time chatting with this legendary Oklahoman astronaut whose exploits I had followed from afar over many years.



January 2003; the author meets Gordon Cooper. (Photo: Francis French)

In October of the following year, 2004, I was eagerly looking forward to attending an Autographica Show in Coventry, England for which one of the guest signers had been announced as NASA astronaut Gordon Cooper. But this was not to be; when I arrived at the venue my friend and later co-author Rex Hall greeted me with the sad news that Col. Cooper had passed away just the day before.

One month earlier Cooper had been a special guest at the Sims-Hankow Autograph Show held at the Burbank Hilton Hotel in California. Lawrence (“Larry”) McGlynn – another friend of long standing – attended the show that weekend, and he related a story from that time which he once said still brought a tear to his eye. It typifies the respect the pioneering astronauts and cosmonauts had for each other despite being depicted as Cold War protagonists in a propaganda-fueled but dynamic era. This particular tale involved another two guests. One was comedian Bill Dana, well known for his José Jiménez “reluctant spaceman” skits (which the real astronauts loved and often quoted), and Soviet cosmonaut Alexei Leonov – the first person to walk in space. As McGlynn recalled that night of 4 September:

“During the Saturday evening banquet at the LA Show, Bill Dana, MC Emeritus, was introducing the various guests at each table. When he got to Alexei Leonov, Alexei got up from his table, walked through the hall to the podium, took the mike out of a stunned Bill Dana’s hand and launched into a speech of a combination of pidgin English and Russian about many things including knowing seventeen English words, but not necessarily in the correct order. He was a hoot. Then he gave us a wonderful reflection about being with various astronauts in Russia during his training for ASTP [the Apollo-Soyuz Test Program] and after. Alexei singled out Gordon Cooper and launched into something not quite understandable, but you knew it was from his heart. Then Alexei walked over to Gordo and gave him a great big bear hug which Gordo returned. It was quite touching.”

Backgrounding this story, Leonov and Cooper were contemporaries in the vigorous and pressure-filled years of the race to the Moon, when the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in a pitched battle to land the first person on the lunar surface. In this stupendous effort, the two nations were widely regarded as aggressive rivals, and even though the Soviets pulled off some amazing space firsts and feats, they were still perceived in the Western world as a villainous enemy of the United States in the arena of outer space. And yet these men, these astronauts and cosmonauts, harbored a deep – if sometimes grudging – respect for each other, and when they met, they did so on the common ground of one pilot meeting another.

In September 1965 for instance, Gordon Cooper and his Gemini V colleague Pete Conrad were attending the 16th International Astronautical Congress in Athens, Greece. Also there were the Soviet Voskhod-2 cosmonauts Alexei Leonov and Pavel Belyayev. Wary and suspicious American and Russian delegates quickly engaged in a political point-scoring game at the congress, while trying to arrange a formal meeting between the four spacemen was becoming a diplomatic nightmare. In the end, Cooper's direct and friendly Oklahoma approach bypassed rigid formalities and achieved the proper rapport. The four men had grown tired of the bickering and protectionism and took over proceedings at dinner that night, with Gordon Cooper opting to sit beside Pavel Belyayev. Likewise, Pete Conrad sat nearby with Alexei Leonov, both men frequently breaking into laughter. Cooper and Belyayev exchanged the watches they had worn on their respective space missions, and all four men exchanged flown flight pins and drank toasts to each other until well after midnight.

At the end of the dinner, Cooper told Conrad he had organized a private breakfast with the two cosmonauts in his hotel room overlooking the Acropolis, in order to give them a chance to get together informally without the usual crush of diplomats, tourists and science congress delegates.



Athens, 1965, Soviet and American space explorers meet. From left: Alexei Leonov, Pete Conrad, Gordon Cooper and Pavel Belyayev. (Photo: AP Wirephoto)



Cooper and Belyayev share a toast at dinner. (Photo: AP Wirephoto)

Although protocol demanded that a small number of American and Russian officials (including a Russian translator) attend this breakfast, as one American official recalled, the four-way conversation was very friendly and “like you always have when fliers get together. There was nothing substantive, nothing about future plans such as Moon flight, no probing. Just pleasant talk.”

“They were just shooting the breeze,” confirmed Julian Scheer, NASA’s assistant administrator for public affairs. “They were relaxed and they joked. They spoke the same language, the language of fliers. They genuinely enjoyed each other.” To wrap up the session, toasts were made with Greek brandy. “Everybody joined in the toast,” Scheer said. “It was a toast to friendship and to flying together.”

There was simple mutual camaraderie and respect, free from personal and national competitiveness, and it was an experience that Gordon Cooper often recalled when discussing cultural and political differences between the two powerful space nations.

Sadly, Gordon Cooper’s last years were spent in the grip of ill health, with advancing Parkinson’s Disease frustrating the once superbly fit test pilot. His heart then began to malfunction, causing further concern. While he often looked dour in photographs taken in his last few years, his ready smile, humor and quick wit never deserted him.

Gordon Cooper lived as a giant in an age of true heroes. If there was any fairness in such things, he would have fulfilled his greatest achievable ambition of walking on the Moon, but sadly that pinnacle of achievement never crowned his astronaut career.

Though he is no longer among us his robust spirit, renowned bravado, tenacity and coolness under extreme pressure, and his incredible sense of adventure are a lingering testimony to this great and much loved man.

Perhaps Col. Leroy Gordon Cooper, Jr., USAF and NASA astronaut, truly deserved that sobriquet ascribed to him in the movie *The Right Stuff* as the “greatest pilot you ever saw.”

1

The spaceman from Shawnee, Oklahoma

There was an air of deep disappointment across Shawnee, Oklahoma on Sunday, 6 March 1927. Following a flood of tantalizing advance publicity, a flying carnival was scheduled to take place at the local airport that afternoon. Promises had been made of amazing aerobatics and dazzling, death-defying parachute jumps to be performed by the barnstorming Iowa Flying Circus. But as people eagerly turned up from miles around they were greeted by some particularly somber news. A lady associated with the aerial display, Vannah Willard, nervously announced to the crowd that the show would not be going ahead. The crowd jeered and many even booed as a red-faced Miss Willard made her way from the microphone, but as she had explained, it was hardly her fault. The show had to be canceled as veteran pilot Chubby Watson, manager of the Iowa Flying Circus, had been badly injured in an airplane crash the previous day. It was a dismal ending to a warm pre-spring day that had dawned with so much promise.

Three miles from the airport, however, two people were filled with a happy expectation that had nothing to do with airplanes and daredevils. That afternoon a young assistant county attorney named Leroy Gordon Cooper helped his 26-year-old wife Hattie out of their black Ford automobile and lovingly guided her into City Hospital, aided by his sister, Jewell Truscott. Heavily pregnant, Hattie Cooper was ushered by staff to her room in the hospital, where she settled back to await the birth of their first and, as it turned out, only child.

The hours passed, and a pleasant Sunday afternoon faded into evening as the three occupants spent the time in quiet conversation. But then things began to happen in a rush and nurses wheeled Hattie into the delivery room.

At 9:15 that evening a squealing baby boy made his way into the world. He was quite big and healthy, weighing in at 10 pounds, 4 ounces, and measuring 22 inches. The moment the couple knew they had a son they endowed him with the name Leroy Gordon Cooper, Jr.

Hattie Cooper would keep a careful diary of their baby son's progress in words and photographs in his baby book. He was an unremarkable child in so many ways; he cut his first tooth at five months and wasn't sick until he caught a severe cold at the age of nine months. In that same month he had his first haircut. His first word was recorded as "Daddy," and he took his first step by himself on 7 March 1928, just one day after his first birthday.¹

2 The spaceman from Shawnee, Oklahoma

For the first three years of the boy's life the family resided in the Pottawatomie County town of Tecumseh, a major cotton center in the early 20th century. Today there is a plaque outside a house on West Washington Circle, Tecumseh, declaring it to be his birthplace, but it was simply where the Cooper family lived in his infancy.



Leroy Gordon Cooper, Jr. sitting on a toy car with his pet rabbit (left). A portrait photo wearing what was obviously a favorite cap (top right). Enjoying the porch swing at home with his father (lower right). (Photos: *Oklahoma Today* magazine, Autumn 1963)

Gordon Cooper would enjoy a relatively normal childhood and grow into a strong, good-looking youth. Early on, because he was a “junior,” he had adopted his middle name and discarded his given first name of Leroy in order to avoid confusion with his father.

PIONEERING FAMILY

Gordon Cooper's family enjoyed a truly rich heritage; his maternal grandfather, George Washington Herd, was a minister for the Church of Christ. According to Cooper, his grandfather “traveled through the Indian territory – Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma – preaching the gospel.” He married Orena Eliza Blunt, and Cooper's mother Hattie was one of four children born to them. As well, his Texas-born Grandma Cora (née Stearns) Cooper

“had arrived in Indian territory on horseback in the 1880s after her first husband had been killed by Indians, carrying her baby on her back papoose-style. She’d stopped at a remote trading post in Maud, Oklahoma, and asked for work. The store’s proprietor, Phillip Henry Cooper, a native of Kentucky, hired her and later married her.”²

Gordon Cooper’s own father, born in 1902, had run away from home during World War I at the age of 15 to join the Navy, but was given an honorable discharge several months later when checks revealed his real age. Undaunted by this, he managed to re-enlist the following year and served as a gunner’s mate aboard the presidential yacht, *Mayflower*, which transported President Woodrow Wilson and his guests up and down the Potomac River. Post-war, Leroy Cooper joined the Army National Guard, and following a period of training began flying the de Havilland JN-4 “Jenny” aircraft.

Gordon Cooper’s parents had actually known each other most of their lives. When his father returned from the war he was keen to complete his high school education, but another compelling reason for attending school was Hattie Lee Herd, whom he knew from the nearby oil-boom town of Maud, where they both grew up. Although Hattie was only two years older, she happened to be his teacher at the school. Over time they fell in love and were married.

After graduating from high school, Leroy Cooper completed a four-year college degree in two years at Cumberland University, Tennessee, graduating in 1923 with a Bachelor of Laws degree. He was admitted to the Oklahoma bar that same year, and began practicing in Maud. In January 1925, he took on the responsible position of assistant county attorney, which he held until January 1929 when he became a county judge, having been elected to that office in November the previous year.



Leroy Gordon Cooper, Sr. (Photo: Oklahoma Historical Society)

4 The spaceman from Shawnee, Oklahoma

While he was still only a toddler, Gordon Cooper's parents were embroiled in a sometimes-heated dispute between the neighboring towns of Shawnee and Tecumseh as to which town might see the planned construction of a courthouse. His father waited patiently through the arguments until a decision was finally reached to build the new Pottawatomie County courthouse in Shawnee, located just 30 miles to the east of the state capital, Oklahoma City. (Many years later Shawnee would be recognized as the birthplace of movie star Brad Pitt.)

With his appointment as judge to the courthouse confirmed, Leroy Cooper moved his family five miles from Tecumseh into Shawnee, having purchased a comfortable home at 905 Jefferson Circle (the house no longer exists).



An early postcard of the Pottawatomie County Court House in Shawnee. (Photo: Pottawatomie County Historic Places on the National Register)

The coming of the railroads in the late 19th century made Shawnee the metropolitan center of Pottawatomie County, although Tecumseh was the county seat and a much older town. Every effort was made by Tecumseh's leaders to bring the first railroad their way, but geographical conditions and other factors favored the newer and larger Shawnee, setting off a bitter and ongoing rivalry between the two neighboring towns. On 4 July 1895 the citizens of Shawnee held a festive parade to welcome the first train to pull in on the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf (later Rock Island) tracks.

The first Santa Fe train would arrive in Shawnee nine years later on 29 June 1904. Not to be completely outdone in the matter of railroads, the townspeople of Tecumseh built a short rail line to the junction in Shawnee, and subsequently did a brisk business transporting thousands of bales of cotton, in addition to mail and passengers.³

Leroy Cooper was active in state politics during the Depression years, but with the onset of World War II he was placed on active duty with the U.S. Army Air Corps as legal staff and flight crew in the South Pacific. He later joined the Judge Advocate General's office and argued cases before the Supreme Court. He eventually retired from the U.S. Air Force with the rank of colonel.



Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company Depot, Shawnee, Oklahoma, at the turn of the century. (Photo: Oklahoma Historical Society)



Leroy Gordon Cooper, Sr. in the USAF. (Photo: Oklahoma Historical Society)

6 The spaceman from Shawnee, Oklahoma

TAKING TO THE AIR

Young Gordon began his education at Cornett Kindergarten, later moving a short distance away to attend Jefferson School, where he spent all seven of his elementary education years. The principal there, Gladys Risher, remembered him as a “serious young man, intent on doing what was expected of him and what he expected of himself. He was a happy child, and as so many of us look back to those years we remember the quick smile, the bright, alert eyes, the sunny disposition.”⁴

A pilot himself, Cooper’s father kept a family airplane, a Command-Aire biplane, at nearby Regan Field. Young Gordon enjoyed being around airplanes and was in awe of many of his father’s friends, who often dropped by their house. They included such aviation luminaries as Wiley Post, Pancho Barnes, Roscoe Turner and Amelia Earhart, and through his father he developed a deep and enduring fascination for flying and fliers.

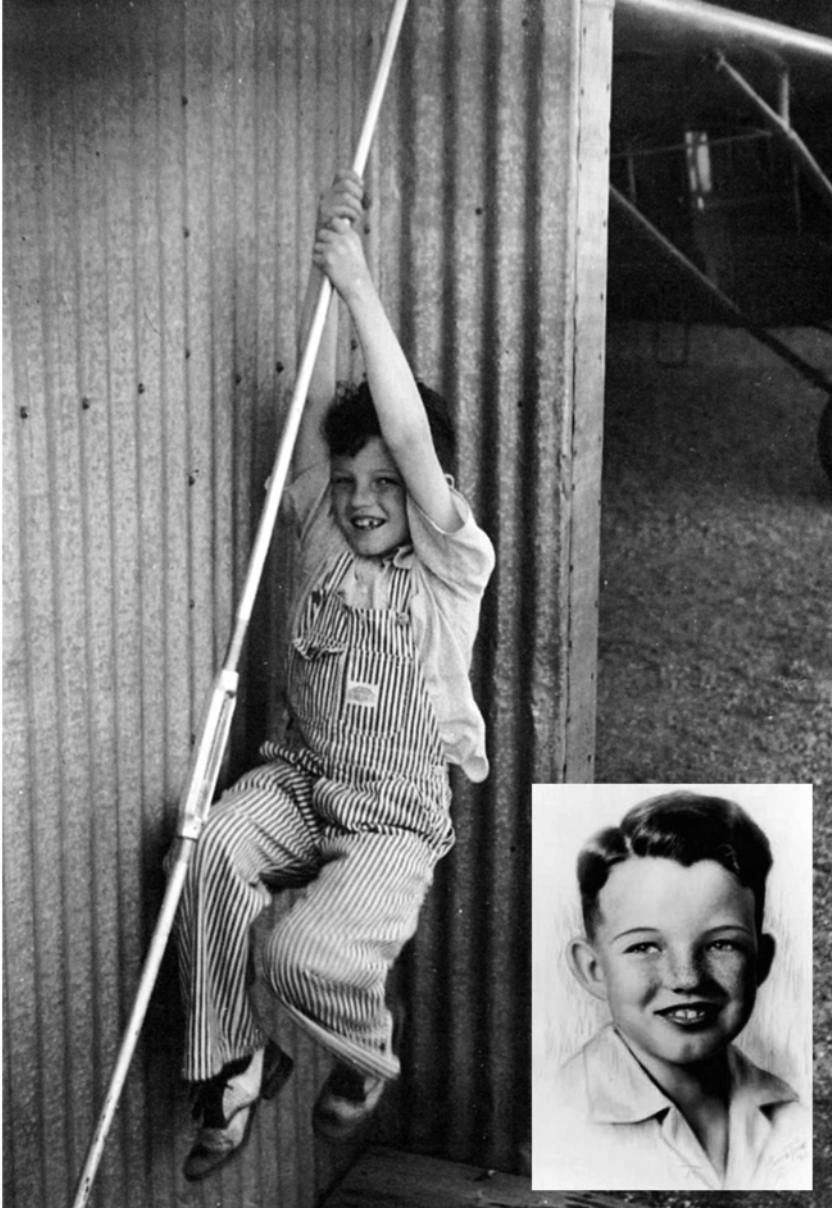
“My first flight was in a single-engine Curtis Robin high-wing monoplane, sitting on my father’s lap,” he later recalled in his memoir, *Leap of Faith*. “I loved it from the moment Dad cranked the engine and I heard the low-throated rumble of the engine as it shook the light fuselage. We took off on one of the grass fields at Regan Airport, just outside of Shawnee, and flew around. No sooner had we landed than I was asking Dad when we could go up again.”⁵

He often accompanied his father on flights in their old three-seater Command-Aire, sometimes with his mother seated in the forward cockpit. By the time he was eight, with the help of blocks his father built for the rudder pedals and “lots of cushions,” he could see out the cockpit window. Then, with his father sitting behind him in the main cockpit, he would take over the controls. While flying they talked over many things, including his father’s interest in the adventures of such fictional space heroes as Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon – a passion they shared – and his father would say that actual space travel was probably not that far away. Cooper eagerly devoured comic strips about his space heroes and would never miss an episode of Buck Rogers’ exploits on radio.

One friend of his father at this time was Orville (Pat) Tibbs, born on an Oklahoma farm, who went on to become a distinguished chief test pilot for the Glenn L. Martin Company, wringing the bugs out of the B-26 Marauder, P4M Mercator patrol bomber, XB51 tri-jet, and XB48, the latter being their first six-jet bomber. Tibbs remembered Gordon as a small boy who ran around Shawnee Airport, absorbing information that would one day lead him on his flights into outer space.

Back in 1934 Tibbs was stationed with the Army Air Corps at Randolph Field in Texas. “Whenever I could, I’d visit my home in Maud, Oklahoma,” he once told an interviewer. “That’s about 20 miles from Shawnee where the Coopers lived. Gordon was a small boy, six or seven years old then. I remember him wandering around the airport most of the time when his father was there. [His father] owned a three-place Command-Aire biplane, which he kept at Shawnee Airport. I used to fly it, and when I went off active duty I bought the plane from him and barnstormed around the country.”⁶

In observance of the old saying that every boy needs a dog, the Coopers brought home a German Shepherd puppy named Max that would bring great joy to the family for the next 16 years. Their neighbors grew accustomed to the sight of Gordon and his faithful Max happily jogging along the streets of Shawnee. He also developed a great love of the outdoors and fishing. He joined the Boy Scout movement, achieving the second highest rank of Life Scout.



Even at the tender age of eight, Gordon loved hanging around Shawnee Airport. In the background of the photo on the left is the Curtis Robin airplane in which he had his very first flight. The inset is a 1934 ink drawing of nine-year-old Gordon by an unknown Shawnee artist. (Main photo: Cooper family archives. Inset: *Oklahoma Today* magazine, Autumn 1963)

8 The spaceman from Shawnee, Oklahoma

When Gordon was about 11 years of age, one of his best friends was Frank Leslie, who would later become a reporter for the newspaper *Tulsa World*. He also reflected on his friend's determination to succeed and his powers of concentration.

"Gordon could sit in a room filled with visiting, talking youngsters – or adults – and become completely absorbed in a project," Leslie recalled. "His competitive spirit was great, although never manifested in any angry, vocal outburst of action or emotion. But you knew when it had risen to the surface. Gordon simply set his jaw – his most marked facial feature – even more firmly and pushed to the goal."

The two boys became "campaign managers" for Cooper's father during one summer, spending much of their free time distributing "Vote for Cooper" cards to Pottawatomie County communities. His father would eventually enjoy a long career in Pottawatomie County Democratic circles, rising from assistant county attorney to county judge, then to superior court and eventually district judge.⁷

Fueling Cooper's love of the outdoors was the time his father bought a mountain ranch for the family in Carbondale, Colorado. He received all of his elementary and secondary schooling in Shawnee with the exception of the tenth grade, which was at Murray High School in Murray, Kentucky. During his junior year he returned home. He graduated from Shawnee High School on 24 May 1945, just a few weeks after the end of the bitter war in Europe.

A DETERMINATION TO SUCCEED

With great confidence and a noted discipline in all that he did at school, Cooper was always graded in the upper part of his class, achieving A's in citizenship right through grade school and high school. He also became a member of the Hi-Y Club and Honor Society while attending high school. The Hi-Y Club was a social club affiliated with the



The original Shawnee High School that Cooper attended. It was destroyed by fire in 1948. (Photo: Shawnee High School)

Young Men's Christian Association. A natural athlete, he was on the high school's track team, and lettered in football. During his senior year, his Wolves football team played for the state championship with Cooper at tailback. "He wasn't as involved with all the roughhousing going on that other members of the football team did," recalled a longtime friend from Shawnee, Haylor Fisher. "We didn't get into fisticuffs and trouble."⁸



Gordon Cooper in his Wolves high school football team uniform. (Photo: Cooper family archives)

Fisher also recalled the nights he and Cooper walked through Shawnee, looking for something to do. "Like all teenagers, we went up and down Main Street just seeing who was out and what was going on, and admittedly to look for girls. We didn't get into trouble very much. It was about as much excitement as you could find in Shawnee." They sometimes attended get-togethers at local girls' clubs. "That was part of the education, was girls. You had to learn a lot about that."

Another school friend, Jack Vandaveer, said of Cooper that, "He liked to goof around like the rest of us. He was a very nice guy and a good student, but he liked to have a lot of fun. He was somebody who always liked to be doing something, but he was like a regular, average kid. He wasn't a prankster or anything."

10 The spaceman from Shawnee, Oklahoma

Vandaveer also said that Cooper was a member of a small group of youths called the Shawnee 6, who used to hang out every Saturday morning at a friend's home five miles out of town. At lunchtime, they were all bundled into the mother's car and driven into town so they could go to the movies and catch up on the latest episode of the thrilling serials that used to be a prelude to the main feature.

The boys also spent a lot of their free time at Teen Town, outside the Shawnee town limits. The center, a place for underprivileged kids, was formed by local football coach Harold Liddell and his wife Jean Marie, along with a group of teenage volunteers. The center was a popular gathering place, giving young men and women something to do, as dancing and other activities were forbidden in town.⁹



A slightly out-of-focus photo of a teenage Gordon Cooper with his mother and father. (Photo: Oklahoma Historical Society)

Over the years, Cooper became increasingly familiar with handling aircraft and conducting simple aerobatics. As a teenager, he was often seen hanging around the airport, doing odd jobs after school in order to earn enough money for flying lessons. One of his father's friends, Marvin C. ("Davey") Davenport, was a civilian instructor and he taught the keen youngster to fly in a J-3 Piper Cub, a 50-horsepower airplane. He proved to be a fast learner, going solo at 16, and he had already realized his future would somehow involve his passion for flying. Davenport later said that Cooper was the best student he ever had; "a natural."

By now he had hopes of qualifying for flight training with either the Army or Navy once he had graduated from Shawnee High School, but to his disappointment he was told there was a surplus of war pilots, and those services weren't accepting candidates.

He therefore enlisted in the Marine Corps for boot training, as he had heard they were the best fighting infantry in the world. He was hoping to do his part as a rifleman (and in doing so turned down the possibility of a football scholarship to Oklahoma A&M). As he was still attending high school when he enlisted, he wasn't called to active duty until he graduated in June 1945. Of course by that time the war in Europe was over, but it was still raging in the Pacific. So he sat some tests to attend the U.S. Naval Academy Preparatory School and was assigned there for several months, during which time he was told he was an alternate for an appointment to Annapolis. "The man who was the primary appointee made the grade, so I was reassigned in the Marines and wound up on guard duty in Washington, D.C."¹⁰ In fact, he was a member of the Presidential Honor Guard in Washington, D.C., a traditional role for the Marine Corps, until the time of his discharge in 1946 along with other Marine reservists.

By now, with the war in the Pacific having ended in August 1945, his parents had moved to Hickam Air Force Base on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, where his father, now with the rank of colonel, was stationed. Cooper went to visit his parents and ended up staying. He enrolled at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu, where he spent the next three years studying engineering. During this time he also served as an Army ROTC cadet.

While in Hawaii, Cooper not only purchased his first airplane – a near-new J-3 Cub – but met an attractive young woman of Norwegian descent named Gertrude Bernice ("Trudy") Olson. She was the daughter of Elvin Jennings Olson and his wife, Margery Frame (née Nichols) Olson. Sadly, her mother had died three years previously in 1943, aged 41 years. Formerly of Seattle, Washington, Trudy was also living with relatives at Hickam Air Force Base and attending the same university. Similarly active in flying, she planned to complete the requirements for an instructor's license so that she could teach students. They quickly formed a friendship, as Trudy recalled in an interview:

When I was 18 and a freshman at the University of Hawaii it occurred to me that flying must give a pilot a tremendous sense of freedom. As I watched the planes fly over the campus, I thought it would be wonderful to be up there. I'd have sturdy wings for support and could fly away on my own. One beautiful, blue-sky day in Honolulu I just made up my mind to try it. I decided to take flying lessons.

After 15 hours of dual time, I soloed in a small Interstate Cadet at Haleiwa Field, about a 30 minute drive from the campus. From the beginning I was amazed that flying seemed even easier than driving a car, and the feeling of almost complete freedom was just as I had imagined it would be. Hawaii seemed even more verdant and tranquil from the air than it did from the ground.

One day at the flying club, at nearby Hickam, I met another freshman, young Leroy Gordon Cooper. I learned he had been a Marine for 18 months and now, as a civilian, was studying at the university for an aeronautical engineering degree. He was in Hawaii because his father, a colonel in the Air Force, had transferred from the mainland to Hickam.

Like his father and myself, Gordon liked to fly. Before long, we were flying together over the islands. He had a likeable smile, an Oklahoma accent, and was serious and conscientious about a career in aviation. At the end of the school year he asked me to marry him. He didn't exactly propose in an airplane, but we both thought about it while we were flying the planes over the campus together.