

PIONEERS IN EARLY SPACEFLIGHT

SIGMA 7

**The Six
Mercury Orbits of
Walter M. Schirra, Jr.**

COLIN BURGESS

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Sigma 7

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Colin Burgess

Sigma 7

**The Six Mercury Orbits
of Walter M. Schirra, Jr.**



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Front cover: *Sigma 7* with Wally Schirra still aboard is readied to be hoisted onto the deck of USS *Kearsarge*. (Photo: NASA)

Back cover: *Top left*: The Gemini VI-A crew of Tom Stafford and Wally Schirra. *Top right*: The Apollo 7 crew of Donn Eisele, Schirra and Walt Cunningham. *Bottom*: Schirra with *Sigma 7* artist Cece Bibby (All photos: NASA)

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Contents

Foreword by Tracy Kornfeld	viii
Acknowledgements	xii
Author’s prologue	xiv
1 A pilot born of pilots	1
Flying on the Western Front.....	1
Missing in action.....	3
Growing up in Oradell	7
A love of flying and the Green Bowlers.....	10
Chance encounters	15
Horseback surrender	16
An aviator in action.....	17
China Lake	21
Test pilot and astronaut candidate.....	27
2 The making of a flight-ready astronaut	34
On becoming an astronaut	36
Early astronaut training	38
Wally and the Turtle Club	45
MA-8 pilot	49
A tale of two nurses	63
Getting ready to fly	69
3 The art of space flight	79
Realizing a childhood ambition	79
Problems on the launch gantry.....	85
Men’s worlds and mechanical mischief.....	90
“Nekkid ladies” and “gotchas”	95
After NASA	100

4	<i>Sigma 7</i> flies	107
	Final preparations.....	107
	All systems “Go”	115
	Strapped in and secure	119
	The final countdown.....	124
5	Six times around the world	129
	A near abort after lift-off.....	129
	Achieving orbit	135
	An overheating space suit	138
	“Go” for a second orbit	141
	A textbook flight	146
	“Buenos Días, you-all”	149
	Homeward bound.....	151
6	“A sweet little bird”	155
	Recovery training.....	155
	Witness to history.....	161
	Pacific splashdown.....	163
	Recovery	165
	Post-flight duties	178
	Setting sail for Hawaii.....	183
	Honolulu to Houston.....	186
7	Press conferences, parades, and post-flight honors	192
	The “textbook” flight of <i>Sigma 7</i>	195
	Welcoming a hometown hero.....	200
	Receiving awards.....	208
	Visit with the president	211
8	Mercury, Gemini and Apollo veteran	218
	On to Gemini.....	219
	Calling off a chase.....	221
	The most dangerous moments	225
	Space chase	227
	Tragedy, and a troubled time.....	232
	Third and last flight.....	235
	Pressing the issues.....	239
	Wally and the mystery boxes	242
	Epilogue: Final salute to a hero	246
	Life beyond NASA	249
	A well-traveled spacecraft	258
	Appendices	267
	About the author	292
	Index	293



*This book is respectfully dedicated to the memory of a remarkable lady:
Josephine Cook (“Jo”) Fraser Schirra (1924–2015)*

Foreword

Wally Schirra was my friend. It was an honor and a privilege to say that, and to be asked to write the Foreword to this book.

Wally was my boyhood hero – someone I admired and looked up to. If you had asked me my most outrageous dream while I was growing up, it never would have occurred to me that I might meet and then become a close friend of Wally Schirra. Never did I ever dream that I'd genuinely get to know him, laugh with him, and spend countless wonderful hours in his home working with him. While this book will discuss the flight of *Sigma 7*, I want to tell you about my friend.

Growing up in the 1960s, you couldn't help but know the name of Mercury Astronaut Wally Schirra. He was a household name. Back then, when there was a manned launch, everything stopped. Unlike today, 19-inch black and white television sets were wheeled into school classrooms, and we watched each launch with great anticipation. I have vivid memories of the launch of Apollo 7 in 1968, thinking that it took a lot of guts for those three guys to get into that spacecraft after the terrible fire of Apollo 1. At the same time, I knew how cool Wally had been during his aborted Gemini 6 launch, ahead of the first orbital rendezvous with another spacecraft and the playing of *Jingle Bells* on his tiny harmonica during that mission. And, of course, he was an original Mercury Seven astronaut. Wally would say they were "Carpenter, Cooper, Glenn, Grissom, Schirra, Shepard and Slayton: CCGSSS. I was the 'Smart S.'"

I was first introduced to Wally in the late 1990s. Wally made a pun regarding my last name of Kornfeld – he never missed an opportunity for a pun. I immediately fired back with a pun of my own. He countered, I fired back again. He then said, "You're good! I like you!" I told him that my late father was a similar punster and that I had years and years of practice. A real friendship was born that evening. He and my father would have had fun topping each other's puns.

Speaking of names, we had an astronaut named Wally. Not Walter or Walt – we had Wally. Someone that Mrs. Cleaver would have called to dinner. He stood out from Al, John, Gus, Scott, Gordon and Donald (as NASA called Deke Slayton back then).

Wally and his wife Jo took my wife and me into their personal lives. It was always fun to visit the Schirra home. Jo could be funnier than Wally, and knew how to keep him in check. We went out to dinner or lunch or just gabbed at their kitchen table. There I was, sitting in the home of my boyhood hero. The Schirras, who have been in the company of kings, queens and presidents, became personal friends.

Like most men, Wally loved his toys. I am a scale modeler and had constructed and given him a couple of models for his personal collection. One afternoon, he called to tell me that the Mercury/Atlas model that I had built for him earlier was the exact same scale of a model needed for the expansion of the San Diego Air & Space Museum, which he affectionately referred to as “Wally World.” He then told me that they were using this model in their plans and he wanted to know if it was alright with me that he donated it to the museum for future display. I told him that I would be honored to have something that I had built in a museum, but had to add the kicker, “And I get a percentage of the admissions for my donation, right?” Wally roared with laughter, but couldn’t resist firing back at me with, “You gave the model to me and I’m donating it, so the kickbacks are all mine!” A typical Wally response.

Wally’s laugh was infectious. You knew he was in the room long before you entered it. Once you did enter, you realized that he filled the entire room. As a member of his “inner circle,” I became privy to many stories and tales that aren’t in any books or magazines and I surely will never tell in public, but it made our friendship that much more special. On a drive from Los Angeles to his home outside of San Diego, I remarked to my friend, Steve, how lucky we were to be invited to lunch with Wally and be so blasé about it when others would have done anything in their power to be in our place. But Wally was our friend and sharing a meal was natural. The next few hours were filled with that infectious laughter. He was truly one of a kind.

While Wally was well known as “Jolly Wally,” he also had a very serious, almost stern, side. Wally was a military man and took his job and his opinions seriously. If a topic came up where he had a strong opinion, that laughing twinkle in his eye could quickly turn into the gaze of a fighter pilot. When that look appeared on his face, you could forget about winning that argument. Wally gave many of his opinions in his autobiography, *Schirra’s Space*, which was written in 1988. Several times, I asked him if he’d write an online epilogue. He’d laugh and say that no one, especially NASA, would be interested in his opinions anymore. Just the other day, I was listening to the audio book version of *Schirra’s Space* and found myself saying that I wish I had won that argument. Wally had a lot to say, both pro and con, about the space program since the book was published. I would be curious to hear what he had to say, today, about the United States depending on the Russians in order to get to the International Space Station. I’m sure he wouldn’t be amused. As he often said about the Soyuz space vehicle, “I wouldn’t want to fly in one of those dumb things.” He was very concerned about safety – and I don’t think that he was too happy with Soyuz. His opinion on the commercialization of spaceflight would also make for some very interesting reading, in my opinion. I don’t think he’d look fondly on space tourism.



Tracy Kornfeld with Wally Schirra, San Antonio, 2006. (Photo: Tracy Kornfeld)

He always said that space was a dangerous business. Perhaps he'd have a few words to say about people wearing "the black armband" when tourists are involved.

I also had the honor of working with Wally during several astronaut autograph shows where games of one-upmanship between the astronauts were the norm. One year it was "Who can still fit in their flight suit?" Another was the joke that they had to keep building bigger rockets because Wally kept gaining weight. Wally once signed a flight helmet with "The Real Space Cowboy" as a nod to the book that he had co-authored with his friend,

Ed Buckbee, that year, only to be trumped by Soviet cosmonaut Alexei Leonov, who signed the same helmet with “The Real Siberian Space Cowboy.” You never knew what would happen at those “do not miss” events. Even something as simple as sitting between Wally and fellow Mercury astronaut Gordon Cooper, watching them try to steal the one silver Sharpie pen that they shared became a hilarious game. It was non-stop entertainment.

When my wife received a terminal cancer diagnosis, Wally immediately told me that we needed to get away and have some down time, and offered the use of his home on Kauai, Hawaii for as long as we needed. When he assured me that this wasn’t one of his classic “gotchas,” we were able to spend ten wonderful days at one of the most beautiful places on Earth. My friend was extremely generous. After my wife’s passing, he sent me a handwritten letter of condolence saying, in part that “there is no solution to health problems if destiny wins.” These words came back to me after hearing of his sudden passing in 2007 at the age of 84. I still have this handwritten note under lock and key because it’s so special to me.

I miss Wally so much. I miss his puns, his jokes, his laughter, the unexpected phone calls, the e-mails filled with jokes that made you groan; drinking KJ with him at the bar, how funny it was when he’d answer other people’s cell phones with “Schirra here,” and of course trying to catch him on a “turtle” joke. But mostly, I’ll miss the man himself.

I was also Wally’s webmaster. Though he couldn’t understand why people wanted to read more about him than was already in print, I’ll keep the dream alive at www.wallyschirra.com for as long as his family wants me to keep it going. His site had one million visitors in the first 36 hours after he passed away. I will remember how I felt during his memorial service when the fighter jets flew over the cemetery in the missing-man formation, and the emptiness that I truly felt a year after also saying goodbye to my wife.

The laughter at his memorial service was perfect for the man known as “Jolly Wally.” Several of us had microphone time. Emcee Mark Larson spoke at length of Wally’s “groaner” jokes and how his home number was still listed in the phone book. When comedian Bill (“José Jiménez”) Dana took the microphone to speak, the battery died and no one could hear him. Bill just looked straight up and started shaking his fist. Another Wally “gotcha” to remember him by. A garage door-opener battery solved the problem. Bill noted that he needed a “clicker” to talk about Wally. After the service, several of us sat in former astronaut nurse Dee O’Hara’s hotel room and told Wally stories into the wee hours. There were so many stories. We all adored him. A solemn event turned around by a remarkable personality.

In conclusion, I will say what I always said to him when we parted company: “Keep your feet dry, Captain, until the next time we meet. Smooth sailing and fair winds.” I’d snap a salute, which he would return and then listen to his laughter as he drove away.

We also lost Wally’s wonderful wife, Jo, on April 27, 2015 at the age of 91. I was able to send a first draft of this Foreword to the Schirra family several weeks before Jo’s passing. I am thankful to have received their blessings for what I have written and for the friendship that continues with the Schirra family to this day.

Tracy Kornfeld
Ridgefield, Connecticut

Acknowledgements

There are no set rules about writing acknowledgements. Every author does them differently, and I normally adhere to my standard practice of listing everyone who has helped me to any degree in all of my books. In putting together this book, however, I realized that my very first published book – on the Australian POW experience – was released some 30 years ago, in 1985. I would therefore like to express my overall and sincere thanks to the countless people who have assisted me over those three decades, for their recollections, guidance, support, kind words, and even their loyalty. I am very humbly grateful to each and every one of you, and I offer my deepest thanks for making these years so unforgettable and mostly enjoyable.

In compiling this book, I must thank first and foremost some good people at the San Diego Air & Space Museum for allowing me access to their files on Wally Schirra, a beloved patron who had a passion for the museum, which in typical Wally fashion he referred to as “Wally’s World.” To long-time friend and prodigious writing collaborator Francis French, Director of Education at the museum; to Director of Library and Archives, Katrina Pescador; Assistant Archivist Debbie Seracini; aviation historian Gordon Permann; and the education department’s Rossco Davis and Shalene Baxter, my enduring thanks for all that you have done to aid me in realizing this book. In recognition of their kind and ongoing assistance, half of the proceeds from this publication will go to support the future work of the museum library in Wally’s name.

Many thanks also to Suzanne Schirra for her help and support during the busy and sad time following the passing of her beloved mother, Jo. To Suzanne and her brother Marty my condolences and very best regards.

Additional thanks go to those who were close to the *Sigma 7* story and who so willingly gave their time and memories to aid the story. They are: Col. Kermit (“Andy”) and Martha Andrus, Elwood Johnson, Dee O’Hara, Bruce and Nonnie Owens, Alan Rochford, John Stonesifer, and Shirley Sineath Watson. Assistance, support and encouragement also came from: George Carter (Oradell Borough Archivist), Steve Hankow (*Farthest Reaches*), Hunter Hollins and Michael Neufeld (Space History Department, National Air & Space Museum), Richard Jurek, Tracy Kornfeld, Bruce Moody, Linda Pabian (Oradell Public Library),



The two portraits of Wally Schirra by artist Craig Kodera that are on display at the San Diego Air & Space Museum, California. (Images and permission courtesy of San Diego Air & Space Museum/Gordon Permann)

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A bouquet of thanks as always go to Clive Horwood and his Praxis team in the U.K. for their ongoing enthusiasm for my work, as well as the encouragement and support of Maury Solomon, Editor of *Physics and Astronomy*, and Assistant Editor Nora Rawn, both of whom are with Springer in New York. And acknowledgements once again go to Jim Wilkie for his outstanding cover artwork and to the master copyeditor and author who always manages to weed out embarrassing errors, sort out my scrambled syntax, and provide that critical final polish to my work, my friend, David M. Harland.

Author's prologue

My first encounter with the truly heroic NASA astronaut Capt. Wally Schirra took place on Sunday, 13 March 1966. I was 19 years old and fully swept up in the romance, excitement, and drama of space travel and astronauts.

Along with fellow astronaut Col. Frank Borman and their wives, Wally was on a daunting three-week goodwill tour of eight countries following their historic December 1965 orbital rendezvous as commanders of Gemini VII and Gemini VI-A respectively. After Japan, Korea, Formosa, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, they arrived in Australia. The venue for their only fully public appearance in Sydney (in fact their only day in Sydney) was at the Roselands Shopping Centre in nearby Wiley Park. I was part of the audience on that memorable day.

A stage had been prepared and Frank Borman spoke first, thanking everyone for turning up and saying how much they were enjoying their all-too-brief stay in Sydney. Wally Schirra then stepped up to the microphone, saying (with a broad smile on his face) that he admired everyone for coming to see them on a sunny Sunday instead of going to "Bond-ee Beach," and that everyone must be looking forward to their "styk 'n' ex" for lunch. After a few more words and a rousing "We love Australia!" the speeches were over. There was thunderous applause, and the two astronauts gallantly stepped into the 4,000-strong crowd to shake a few hands. I really wanted to meet Wally, but he was facing the wrong way as they passed by in the crush of people. However I still managed to shake the hand of Frank Borman.

The next time I saw Wally was at the Kennedy Space Center on Thursday morning, 29 October 1998. I was there at the kind invitation of crewmember Scott Parazynski to witness the launch of shuttle mission STS-95, carrying Senator John Glenn back into orbit. It was early morning and I noticed Wally standing with Gene Cernan near a press tent, so I walked over and introduced myself. I told Wally about hearing his brief talk in Sydney 32 years earlier, and repeated what he said on that occasion. Wally roared with laughter and we chatted for a few more precious minutes before he was called to reporting duties.

The next occasion was in San Diego on Saturday, 18 January 2003. Francis French and I had just concluded an interview with astronauts' nurse Dee O'Hara, and Francis had to



As Frank Borman and Wally Schirra make their way through the crowd, I am standing towards the back (arrowed), but I still managed to shake Borman's hand as they swept by. (Photo: Lloyd Bott, Australian Department of Supply)

leave for another engagement. It was getting late, so Dee asked what we should do about dinner, and then said, "I'll just give Wally and Jo a call and see if they'd like to join us." Happily they were available and we all enjoyed a night that was filled with recollections and laughter. It was during dinner that Wally laughingly bestowed upon me the nickname "Semi-Colon." From then on, any time he saw me at a space event in the States he would greet me with, "Hey there, Semi-Colon!" It made me feel ten feet tall to be so recognized, and with such friendship, by a man I had always regarded as a great and lovable hero.

It was hard not to like or admire Wally Schirra. He flew an almost technically perfect Mercury flight aboard his *Sigma 7* spacecraft in 1962. Then in 1965 he saved the Gemini VI-A mission by not initiating a launch pad abort when the Titan II rocket failed to lift off after ignition. A few days later he and Tom Stafford flew an historic joint mission with the Gemini VII spacecraft. As commander of the backup crew for the first Apollo mission, Wally and his two crewmembers had to take over that role after the launch pad tragedy that



The last time I saw Wally Schirra was at an autograph show in San Antonio, Texas, in 2006. Seated around a hotel breakfast table was a very impressive gathering of space folks. From *left*: Colin Burgess, Francis French, Dee O'Hara, Wally Schirra, Erin French, Jeannie Bassett, Ed Buckbee, and Cece Bibby. (Photo: Author's collection)

claimed the lives of three colleagues in January 1967. By completing the Apollo 7 mission in 1968, Wally became the first (and only) Mercury astronaut to fly on all three NASA programs to that time: Mercury, Gemini and Apollo. Throughout his time with NASA he exuded a calm and thorough professionalism, but even when things were at their toughest Wally would be the first one to break the ice with a joke or a pun, or even carry out one of his infamous “gotchas” – which will be further explained in this book.

Wally Schirra's passing on 3 May 2007 came as a dreadful shock to me, as it did to so many others who knew him. It was hard to realize that he would never be present in his Hawaiian shirt at any future space shows. He always commanded a delighted audience wherever he went, and his booming voice and frequent laugh would often fill the most cavernous of rooms. Although we miss him a great deal, we are richer for the fond and enduring memories that he left with us as his legacy.

Ave atque vale, Wally Schirra



Wally Schirra sent me this signed photo as a souvenir of his Gemini VI-A flight with Tom Stafford. It was another of his famous "gotchas" that I truly treasure. (Photo: NASA)

1

A pilot born of pilots

“You don’t raise heroes; you raise sons. And if you treat them like sons they’ll turn out to be heroes, even if it’s just in your eyes.”

Walter M. Schirra. Snr. (1893–1973)

They were strong-hearted, incredibly valorous young men. Any pilot who flew into perilous aerial combat in the Great War (as it was known before it became necessary to number them) and lived to tell of his encounters had a valid reason to believe that the gods were on his side. Especially those who took to the air in the AirCo DH.9 single-engine light bomber airplane.

Designed by aviation engineer Geoffrey de Havilland, the DH.9 was introduced into service in 1917, but rapidly gained a poor service reputation over the Western Front, with more aircraft losses attributed to mechanical or performance issues than through enemy action. The engine was notoriously unreliable and underpowered, and there were design problems inherent in the undercarriage, wings, and tail unit. Although tempting fate, pilots and their gunners would often and ruefully refer to the DH.9 as “the flying coffin.” And with good cause, because between May and November 1918 two squadrons on the Western Front (Nos. 99 and 104) lost 54 DH.9s shot down, and another 94 written off in accidents.¹

FLYING ON THE WESTERN FRONT

One such Western Front pilot was 24-year-old Lt. Walter Marty Schirra, who regularly flew a DH.9 on aerial bombing and photo reconnaissance sorties over the war-ravaged land below. It would often strike him as odd to be engaged in shooting down German airplanes or bombing German troops, as his parents, Swiss-born Adam and his wife Josephina Marty Schirra, had only emigrated to the United States from Bavaria in southern Germany some 38 years earlier.

2 A pilot born of pilots

An art collector and talented musician, Adam Schirra had become the one-time principal cornet player with the Philharmonic Society of New York, but later gave up touring to concentrate on teaching the instrument. Like his wife, Adam was of Swiss stock. The Schirra name seems to have originated in Switzerland's Valle Onsernone, and Adam was born in the Italian-speaking village of Loco in Canton Ticino, located between the Swiss Alps in the south, Lake Lucerne to the west, and Lake Zurich to the north.

Philadelphia-born Walt Schirra only became a pilot through a series of mix-ups. An engineering graduate from Columbia University employed at the United Fruit Company in Honduras, he had signed up as a U.S. Army engineer in 1916. Later, however, he heard through the grapevine that only 45 men out of a company of 150 would be commissioned. Determined to take an active part in the war he sought a transfer to the artillery, but to his disappointment this was refused. Then fate lent a hand. As he was about to leave Army headquarters at Fort Myers, Virginia, an adjutant stopped him and asked a question that would dramatically change the course of his life, "How would you like to get in the aviation section of the Signal Corps?"

He quickly signed on, and took a course at the Fort Myers officers' training school as a preliminary to flight training on Curtiss Jenny JN-4 biplanes at Toliaferro Field, near Ft. Worth, Texas. Following flight training, he was posted to a new squadron that was being assembled at Kelly Field, five miles west of San Antonio, Texas. After several months of Army training there, the unit received its official designation as the 28th Aero (Fighter) Squadron, U.S. Air Service (USAS) in June 1917.

As the USAS did not yet have any active front line squadrons, Schirra's squadron was attached to Britain's Royal Flying Corps for training purposes, and was sent to a pilot training facility in Toronto, Canada. The cadets were given lessons in aircraft construction, overhaul, upkeep, motor transport work, aerial gunnery, and other skills. On completing their training, each cadet was commissioned an officer and assigned to the squadron as a first lieutenant, and then on returning to the United States they were told to prepare for overseas embarkation early in 1918.

It was not just flying that had occupied Walt Schirra's thoughts after his squadron was sent to Canada; a few days beforehand he had chanced to meet a pretty young art major and fifth-generation Brooklynite from the Pratt Institute named Florence Shillito Leach, and made up his mind that she was the one and only girl for him.

During breaks from his training, Schirra would send a steady stream of letters to Florence. For her part, she adored the dashing young U.S. Army Signal Corps man, but one letter caught her completely by surprise. "The next thing I got in the mail was an insurance policy for \$10,000 made out to me, naming me as his wife. That's how he proposed."²

On his return from Canada, there was just one thing Schirra wanted to do before leaving for France. As his astronaut son would later observe, "He married my mother just before catching the troop ship. It was a whirlwind romance."³ Florence dropped out of art school to get married and the wedding took place on 8 February 1918. Just twelve days later the troop transport ship RMS *Olympic* (White Star Line) left New York Harbor bound for England. Schirra was in his Army Signal Corps uniform, and "he wore boots with spurs," Florence recalled as she waved him goodbye.



Lt. Walter Schirra (standing on left) with two fighter pilot friends, and in civilian attire at right. (Photos courtesy San Diego Air & Space Museum Walter Schirra personal collection)

On arrival in England, the eager recruits completed additional combat training prior to being sent to an airfield in France, located some 35 miles behind the front line. Meanwhile, Schirra's new bride moved to Meriden, Connecticut to live with her husband's family while awaiting his return. Once No. 108 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, had arrived at their French base, a gunner/observer was assigned to Schirra, to sit immediately behind him in their aircraft. As pilot, Schirra's weapon consisted of a forward-firing Vickers machine gun, whereas his gunner was equipped with a Lewis machine gun mounted on a swiveling scarf ring. Their aircraft could carry up to 460 pounds of bombs below the wings. Back then, however, there was no such lifesaving equipment as a parachute; the unlucky pilot of an aircraft that was shot down would ride his crippled machine down to a generally fatal crash with the ground. If the engine erupted into flames in the air, many doomed pilots would simply leap out of the airplane rather than be roasted alive.

MISSING IN ACTION

Walt Schirra would fly as many as four sorties per day, engaging with enemy aircraft (he is believed to have shot down two airplanes), dropping bombs over German lines, and carrying out hazardous photo reconnaissance missions. His combat flying career came to an abrupt end as was returning from a reconnaissance mission and his aircraft was downed over the French countryside, having been chewed to pieces by shrapnel from enemy ground fire. Thick black smoke belched out of a ruptured crankcase. His gunner, hit by the ground fire, apparently died before the DH.9 landed hard. Schirra, badly injured, was initially transported to a field hospital in Dunkirk.

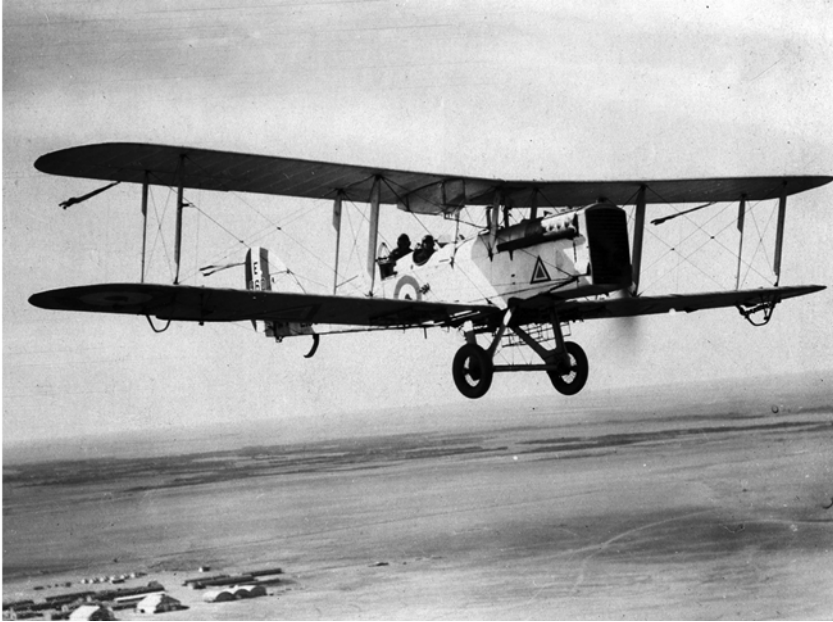
4 A pilot born of pilots



Walt Schirra in France standing by his AirCo DH.9 bomber aircraft. (Photo: Schirra family)

It was a worrying time for Schirra's family back home when his flow of letters suddenly ceased. Florence's sister-in-law, Alma Schwartz, recalled in 1962 that a letter to her brother had been sent back unopened with "Recipient Deceased" written on the envelope. The return of the letter bearing the terse endorsement came as a complete surprise and was understandably a great shock to the new Mrs. Schirra. And then, to compound their misery, a telegram arrived informing Florence that her husband was missing in action and presumed dead. On returning home after a somber funeral service in a little Catholic church in Meriden, she found another telegram waiting for her, this one bearing the news that her husband was wounded but alive and was being tended in a hospital in Winchester, England. Alma's husband Michael sent an urgent wire to Washington D.C. seeking clarification. They finally learned to their relief that Walt Schirra had indeed survived a serious crash and was being nursed in England.⁴

Much to her distress, Florence would receive two further false alarms by telegram before the war ended. However, after the first of these she refused to believe them. Once peace had been declared, records indicate that Schirra apparently stayed on and served as a pilot for Col. Frank P. Lahm, Chief of the Air Service, Second Army at Toul in



An AirCo DH.9 similar to the airplane flown by Lt. Schirra over France. (Wikipedia Public Domain photo)

north-eastern France, until the unit was dissolved on 15 April 1919. Her husband finally returned home in July 1919.

It was only then that Florence found out that she might have actually lost him for good as a result of misadventure after the war. Walt had admitted to being curious about whether he could fly an S.E.5A biplane through the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, and so one day he roared westwards at low altitude along the Avenue des Champs Élysées towards the monument. In the end he wisely decided not to make the attempt because there were too many power lines in the way, but he nearly gave a lot of people heart failure by trying.⁵

“Dad saw a lot of combat over France shooting down Germans,” Wally Schirra wrote in his 1988 memoir *Schirra’s Space*, “and on three occasions he was downed and listed as missing in action. His favorite story was about ferrying an aircraft from France to Britain at the end of the war. He asked a French mechanic what was in a box strapped to the fuselage, and the mechanic said it was something called a ‘parachute.’ He’d flown without a parachute in combat, and when hit, he crashed the plane. Mother held two funerals for him and collected insurance money, which she returned. Dad came home healthy except for a hunk of shrapnel in his leg. To the end of his life he was unable to pass a metal detector test in an airport security check.”⁶

After the signing of the Armistice ending the war, Walt Schirra wanted to continue flying but was not interested in holding down a regular job in civil aviation. He even turned down highly paid employment flying the New York-Cleveland route with the U.S. air mail service because that would not provide the freedom of the skies that he desired. The thrill

6 A pilot born of pilots

of flying was still there and Walt decided he wanted to fly his own airplane. He finally bought a Curtiss Jenny JN-4D similar to the one in which he had trained at flight school.

The post-war years became renowned as an era of “barnstormers” across the United States. The participants in this dangerous activity were mostly returned war veterans or daredevil pilots who performed aerial stunts to attract a crowd, after which they would sell rides aboard their airplane to those game enough to purchase a ticket. This activity appealed to Walt Schirra and he went on his own barnstorming tour at county fairs around New Jersey, selling airplane rides at a dollar a minute. But Florence had also proved to be a plucky young lady and they decided to form a flying duo. Once the little biplane was airborne at about 65 mph she would clamber out of the rear seat onto the wing and walk along it, holding on to the struts that connected the upper and lower wings. Her husband once explained that the wing walk was just a promotion gimmick designed to drum up business, and help to pay the fuel, oil, and hangar bills. As their son later described:

“In the carefree days before my sister or I was born, my parents had a fine time barnstorming in a Curtiss Jenny. Mom was a wing-walker. With Dad at the controls she would dance on the lower wing of the biplane, using the struts for support. It looked hair-raising and no doubt was. Her act attracted customers who would pay five dollars for a turn around the field. When asked about it later, she would say she gave up wing-walking when I was in the hangar.”⁷

As Florence later admitted to a reporter, “Stunt flying at the New Jersey fair was a lot of fun, but we couldn’t find enough passengers at one dollar a minute for rides. I never



A wing-walker on a Curtiss Jenny over New Jersey in a similar, dangerous stunt to that performed by Florence Schirra. (Photo: Slideshare.com)

tried to stop my husband from flying, but when Walter was born he decided to sell the plane and go to work.”⁸

With the barnstorming venture a financial failure, the Schirras decided that when things went really bad they would seek employment elsewhere. Eventually they rented a home in tree-lined Oradell in northern New Jersey, a small town of around 2,000 people, where Walt had found employment as the borough engineer. Over the next few years the family lived in at least three rented houses, mostly of them on Maple Avenue. There is no record of them ever buying a dwelling, which is why today there is no street marker officially identifying Schirra’s boyhood home.

On 12 March 1923 the Schirras celebrated the birth of a son in nearby Hackensack Hospital (Oradell had no hospital of its own) delivered by Dr. George Edwards. The delighted couple named their baby Walter Marty Schirra, Jr. Four years later, in 1927, the arrival of his little sister Georgia Lou completed the family.

GROWING UP IN ORADELL

As a young boy, Wally Schirra attended Sunday School at the local Episcopal Church on Kinderkamack Road, and grew up in a house filled with love and laughter. In 1962, before he flew his Mercury mission, his mother Florence said, “The Schirra family has always had a lot of fun. We kid each other a lot and whenever we get together, there’s somebody who gets it. We had a wonderful family life; we lived like a family; we acted like a family. It is wonderful to remember.”⁹

His mother would also recall that as a little boy, “All his toys became airplanes. He never used to run his little trucks along the ground. He would pick them up instead, and make a plane sound and fly them through the air. When he was three he was tearing up note paper into dart shapes and flying them across the room.”

To assist in raising his young family, Walt Schirra “moonlighted” on various engineering jobs, which included helping to build the northern approach to the Lincoln Tunnel and working on a sewage disposal plant project in Long Island.

In another interview, Florence revealed that Wally started out early as a prankster. “Oh, he was a handful,” she said, although adding that he never got into real trouble, but was sometimes so completely mischievous, “that I had to send him to his room for punishment.” One time, she remembered, Wally told his playmates that he would show them their school principal dancing for the price of one cent each. After collecting the money, Wally led them into the principal’s back yard and pointed out the gentleman’s long underwear dancing around in the wind. Dissatisfied by this ruse, his customers complained to Wally’s mother and the money was grudgingly refunded.¹⁰

Flying, it seemed, was always apparent in some way in young Wally’s blood. His bedroom was cluttered with airplane models that he had built, and one wall was covered in photographs of his uniformed father as a Great War aviator, along with pictures of the types of aircraft he had flown. Hanging prominently on a nail were his father’s soft flying helmet and goggles. Their living room often played host to some of his father’s wartime buddies, and young Wally would sit quietly to the side, rapt in the exciting stories they told of aerial combat and other adventures in the air.

8 A pilot born of pilots

An unnamed local Oradell scribe once delved into the 18 years that Wally Schirra lived there before enrolling at the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland. “He was exactly like any one of several boys in our town. Good boys, intelligent youngsters with normal curiosity about the world in general. Like many other teenagers he was interested in model aircraft and flying, but neither his parents nor his friends felt that this was any particular indication of his future career, for many of his contemporaries were just as expert as he was in model making. And yet possibly this interest did suggest to some people that he might seek to make a career in flying.”¹¹

Virginia Chapin (later Mrs. William Knight) was assistant to school principal Evelyn Lindstrom as a kindergarten teacher when Wally Schirra began his education in Oradell. She fondly remembered him as a “smiley type” of boy, a little on the chubby side, but a very nice youngster. Helene Mertching, a one-time school superintendent, taught him mathematics for three years. She recalled him as a particularly good student. “He had a sort of shy smile and was most dependable,” was her recollection.¹²

On summer breaks, Wally and his sister Georgia would spend many happy days on the farm of their aunt and uncle, Alma and Hungarian-born Michael Schwarz, in the small rural town of Chester on the banks of the Connecticut River. Wally would often be found sticking his head under the hood of his uncle’s Model A Ford to see what made it run. He would later own one himself.



This photograph of 371 Maple Street, Oradell, was taken circa 1933–1934, at which time it was occupied by the Schirra family. (Photo: Courtesy George Carter, Oradell Local History Collection)

In 1934, at the qualifying 12 years of age, Schirra joined the Boy Scouts in Oradell as a member of Troop 36. This had become the first scout troop to be organized in the borough two years earlier. He would eventually attain the rank of Scout, First Class. Some later biographies claim that he achieved Eagle Scout, but this was not the case. Oradell historian Frank Vierling wrote in his book *The Delford-Oradell Centennial 1894–1994*: “My boy scouting years were spent in Troop 36 along with Wally Schirra. We had great scout meetings every Friday night in the school gym. We participated in Jamborees with other Troops in the area and had many hiking forays into the countryside. We camped in Saddle River and Paramus.”¹³

The late Lew Robinson was the scoutmaster in charge when Wally joined, and during an interview after Schirra’s Mercury space flight he said that, like so many other friends and neighbors of the Schirras, he never suspected the heights of achievement to which the boy was destined to soar. “Walter Schirra was a fine lad, very dependable,” he ventured. “I’d call him a darned good scout, but, to tell you the truth, I never guessed that he would be one to volunteer for the kind of sky-blazing job he took on – and made good at. I’ll say one thing, though; Scout Schirra had the stuff in him to make good at almost anything he tackled. I never found him trying to bluff his way through any merit badge examination. He learned his scout skills thoroughly. And that, I think, was one of the things that helped him get into Annapolis.”¹⁴

One of Wally’s schoolboy companions, Herb Landmann, said of his future astronaut friend, “We lived within a block of each other in two or three different houses and we hung around together. We would spend Saturday afternoons in his living room [at 317 Maple Avenue] talking and building model airplanes. I think being a flyer was on his mind. He was a good, natural, intelligent, average type of guy. He was never voted the most likely to succeed. There were a number of people who really impressed me during our school days, but he wasn’t one of them. I admire Wally, of course. But I was surprised when they announced the seven original astronauts on TV. I turned to my wife and said, ‘By gosh – one of them is Wally!’”¹⁵

In his youth, Wally Schirra may have harbored a moderate interest in airplanes and flying but he did have other sporting enthusiasms, including ice skating and ice hockey, basketball, soccer, and golf. For a time he even took trumpet lessons, probably at the prompting of his cornet-playing grandfather Adam, but gave up the instrument because it really didn’t appeal to him.

Even though it was forbidden by law at the time, he also loved paddling on the nearby Hackensack River in a kayak that he had built in a shop class at the Oradell school. Local historian George Carter recalled for this book that Schirra “would stand on the Oradell Avenue Bridge and create a ruckus so that residents further down would call the police. Wally would be right there, volunteering to go into the water in his kayak to check it out.”¹⁶

On one occasion, Wally’s bridge follies caused his parents some grief while Florence was driving across the Oradell Avenue Bridge. She happened to look down in time to see Wally and a friend tip their kayak over and disappear momentarily into the swirling waters. As it transpired the boys were fine, but Wally’s mother was so alarmed that she ran off the road and demolished someone’s fence.

10 A pilot born of pilots

Another time he and a friend hid their kayak under the bridge, cried out for help and made loud splashing noises, which were so dramatic that two elderly ladies passing by thought someone had fallen or jumped into the water and was experiencing difficulties. As Florence later recalled for a *Life* magazine reporter, the ladies promptly called the police station. Within minutes, squad cars and fire engines had converged on the scene. Shortly after, Wally was back home and innocently resting in his room when the police chief came and knocked on the Schirra's door. He was very stern, and asked Wally to bring his kayak and help search for the body of a drowned person. But the chief was no fool; he knew exactly what had happened. As Florence recalled of those times, "How I used to hate to open the front door and see the police chief again."¹⁷

When asked years later what he liked most about Oradell, Schirra replied, "The typical American family likes a home among trees, and that's what I liked about Oradell."

As with most boys, Wally always had at least one pet. His last prior to moving on was a German Shepherd named Pepper, which later became a K-9 Corps dog in World War Two and was credited with saving two lives while on sentry duty in Saigon.

In school, Wally was an excellent student, especially in mathematics. "He was good at everything," his mother said. However, he wasn't allowed to go out on school nights unless it was to his Boy Scouts meeting or the library.¹⁸

Wally graduated from Oradell Junior High School in 1937, where he had been voted the "wittiest student" because of his wild and often ridiculous puns. He often played his prized harmonica, displaying a penchant for swing music. In fact he was one of the promoters of a frenzied harmonica quartet, which gave him an added popularity. He became a member of the school orchestra and other musical groups, and even worked on the class song. Wally was also a reasonably good artist and he contributed to the school's yearbook. As well, he displayed some ability as an actor when he played the leading role in the class play. But his class yearbook could not resist chiding him for his surprising shyness. "Again we are able to remonstrate with one of the shyest of our masculine members. It seems Wally Schirra has a great obsession for gazing at the stage floor. During the play, 'The Promoters,' it was almost impossible to get him to raise his head for identification. Head up, Wally. We don't mind your face."

Wally's ability as a punster also led to the comment that a good class present to him would be an oven fitted with a clock, "to keep Wally's jokes from coming out half-baked." A final comment was somewhat prophetic, saying that he, "Wants to be a West Pointer – ought to be an airplane designer."¹⁹

A LOVE OF FLYING AND THE GREEN BOWLERS

"Dad still flew during my childhood but just for the fun of it," Schirra would later write in his autobiographical memoir *Schirra's Space*. "He owned an Aeronca C3, and he took me up for the first time when I was eight or nine. I remember we climbed from the runway and headed into a stiff wind – it blew so hard that we were moving backwards in relation to the ground. From that day on I loved flying. Teterboro Airport wasn't far from Oradell, and

I remember riding there on my bicycle to watch the ‘airplanes.’ It wasn’t until later that I learned an aircraft doesn’t plane, as a boat does when it moves through water. A wing generates lift passing through air, with the air on top going faster than air underneath, resulting in less pressure on top, thus lift. Aircraft were crafty vehicles, I thought, and I no longer called them airplanes.”²⁰

One of the main reasons Schirra would pedal the 25 miles to Teterboro Airport, apart from watching whatever aircraft were present, was to talk with a close friend of his father’s, Clyde Panghorn, who patiently told the eager youngster all about aircraft and flying. However, his interest in aviation did not truly turn into a passion until one summer’s day in 1936, while he was still attending high school. He was riding alongside his father in the two-seater Aeronca (unkindly known to the family as “the bathtub”) 3,000 feet above Teterboro when his father nudged him in the arm and shouted, “You take it over!” It was an unforgettable moment for both of them, and the 13-year-old boy’s eyes widened with excitement as he clutched the wheel between them and steered the frail craft for 30 minutes, flying over the Palisades and the Hudson River to the fringes of Manhattan. “That was it,” his father later recalled. “From then on that boy was hooked on flying.”²¹

“My father did not push me into flying,” Schirra would recall. “But we were very close, and I had such a complete respect for him that I wanted to be just like him.”²²

Schirra would further his education as a sophomore at Dwight W. Morrow High School in nearby Englewood, where, at that time, Oradell was sending its students. Curiously, given his later achievements, he was never regarded as being particularly outstanding at the school. Retired vice-principal Charles Wildrick served as adviser to the math club, of which Schirra was a member, and he once admitted that he could not recall the youth at all. “He must have been quiet and calm, the A-student type, or I would have remembered him.”

Conversely, James Kirkland, who was both vice-principal of the school and coach of the school’s soccer and ice hockey team (Schirra played on both), did remember the youth. “He was the kind of fellow who would do a job and not want the limelight. If he played, it was swell. But if he didn’t, it was all right with him. In his senior year he was the best fullback we had.” Kirkland also said that Schirra was essentially a good team player, and he thought that this contributed a great deal to his later success as an astronaut. He added that Schirra certainly contributed to the success of the soccer team, as they won the league championship in 1938 and again in 1939, and tied with Hackensack High in 1940. He was, however, less successful as a hockey player, missing out on the starting line-up and playing mostly in defense. But the team only lasted two years before it disbanded and hockey was dropped from the senior sports program.

Kirkland was also the school’s guidance counselor, and in this capacity he recalled that, “Although he was a good-looking boy, I don’t recollect his going out with the girls or even talking about them. He was a thorough gentleman, as were the rest of the group from Oradell that came to school here. There was not much guidance necessary in his case. He knew where he was going. His best subjects were math and science. He wanted to be a civil engineer and follow in his father’s footsteps.” Kirkland also said that as a good average student, Schirra was always grouped with the better students.²³

12 A pilot born of pilots



Dwight W. Morrow High School, Englewood. (Photo: Englewood Board of Education)

While attending Morrow High, Schirra won the school's bronze "E." This was awarded for outstanding scholarship and participation in extra-curricular activities, one of which was secretary-treasurer of the boys' cooking club. He was also in the math club and the mask and wig club, and was property manager for the senior play. Kirkland believes Wally may also have been in the astronomy club, although he is not listed as such in the school's year book. He also sang in the school choir for about a year.

His first automobile, which he purchased while still attending Morrow High, was a Ford Model T. He later owned a Model A, and then a 1929 Pontiac convertible. But these cars soon gave way to his pride and joy – a 1932 Plymouth PB, for which he paid the princely sum of \$25. Music also played an important part of Schirra's formative years. He and his friends derived great pleasure from attending Frank Dailey's Meadowbrook dance hall in Cedar Grove and listening to live swing performances by such big bands as Harry James, Duke Ellington, the Dorsey Brothers, and Glenn Miller; as well as the young New Jersey-born crooner by the name of Frank Sinatra.

After graduating in 1940, Schirra attended the Newark College of Engineering, one of the oldest and largest professional engineering schools in the United States, where, significantly, he became a member of the Sigma Pi fraternity. Flying lessons continued, but he never got to solo in the Aeronca, because one day his father lent it to a friend who made a brutally hard landing and smashed it to pieces. Schirra was still attending Newark College when Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor on Sunday, 7 December 1941, drawing America into World War Two. The next day, students who were in the Reserve Officers Training Corps turned up to class wearing their uniforms, and Schirra said he was "suddenly aware of a national emergency."

The Schirra family was now living at 79 Elizabeth Street in Oradell, but it was time for 18-year-old Wally to move on. With the support of his father, Schirra, eager to become a service pilot, sat for an examination that would qualify him for immediate entrance to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in New York State, not far from where they lived in