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The Right Stuff' wasn't whole story **Space insiders give real scoop on first astronauts**

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"The Real Space Cowboys," by Ed Buckbee and Wally Schirra: ISBN 1-894959-21-3
Collectors Guide Publishing, 200 pages. \$29.95.

In a tribute to colleague Gordon Cooper in October 2004, Scott Carpenter said, "Nearly 50 years ago, a small group of American men were given a special charge by this nation to ensure pre-eminence in space ... We were welded into a fraternity that had no equal at the time."

Any baby boomer should still be able to name the Mercury 7, America's first astronauts. Alan Shepard. Gus Grissom. John Glenn. Scott Carpenter. Wally Schirra. Gordon Cooper. Deke Slayton.

They were the men who flew on our black-and-white TV sets in our homes and schools, majestic heroes exploring the last frontier.

We knew them then from media reports, later from books like "The Right Stuff." (By the way, to a man, the Mercury 7 were irritated by the Hollywood-ization done to the movie version of the book.)

"The Real Space Cowboys" picks up where "The Right Stuff" left off. It's contemplative and insightful, as if only years later did these men appreciate the enormity of their accomplishments. It's a "Greatest Generation" sort of reflection on their part, through interviews, anecdotes and first-person accounts.

Along with the Mercury 7, there is another central character in the book, Dr. Wernher von Braun, the German rocket scientist whose skills in persuasion to get the space program launched and to motivate his teams of engineers and workers was matched only by his scientific genius.

"I liked that the book brought von Braun to the surface," Schirra said in an interview. "People didn't know much about him. He was a very gracious man who did some amazing things."

This is the ultimate insider book. Ed Buckbee, the author, worked with von Braun at Marshall Space Flight Center, and as a NASA public affairs officer worked with all the astronauts who flew the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo missions.

He was selected by von Braun to create and manage the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, and was founder of the U.S. Space Camp and, along with the Mercury 7, the U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame near Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

Schirra shrugged off his role here as "editing and verifying a lot of things." If that's not just mere modesty, he has to be the most accomplished fact-checker in publishing history, the only man to travel in Mercury, Gemini and Apollo flights.

Along with a gallery of photos displayed throughout, the book comes with a DVD that has save-for-your-grandchildren moments, like a mini-documentary on Shepard's first flight, as well as some whimsical moments with elaborate practical jokes. "Levity is lubricant of crises," Schirra said, explaining the astronauts' love of a good "gotcha."

The fun-loving side - Shepard once borrowed an Indy 500 race car and drove it onto Johnson Space Center, just to trump Schirra's pride in a new Ferrari - mixes wonderfully and entertainingly with the contemplative side in this book.

What Buckbee and Schirra proved conclusively in "The Real Space Cowboys" is there was plenty of fascinating stuff to write, years after "The Right Stuff."