When NASA selected the first six women astronauts in 1978, no one really knew how having women in the astronaut corps and on the upcoming Space Shuttle flights would work out. As much as the agency prepared for the eventualty of women serving as astronauts, it remained to be determined whether the women would be successful in their jobs, whether they would be accepted into the corps as equals, or whether space-flight would put a woman’s health at risk. News reporters homed in on the particularly historical significance of these first six women and closely followed their paths through training and flight.

For the six female astronaut candidates, this was a dream job. They approached their new jobs with the same drive and dedication that they had given to their careers prior to joining NASA. They almost never considered their sex as significant to what they did, although they were aware that they were unique. In their minds, they were at NASA to do a job—to fly in space and contribute to the overall success of the missions. They expected no special treatment because of their sex. In fact, they demanded it. For Sally Ride in particular, the idea of catching the public’s attention just because she was a woman frustrated her. As they have reiterated in interviews and press conferences, the six women all just wanted to be treated like one of the guys. The six women astronauts saw themselves as no more special than their male counterparts, and they should be treated that way.

By taking part in NASA’s human spaceflight program, these women and those who have followed in their footsteps have, in fact, done something historically significant. They broke gender barriers and once again proved that women have something to offer professions that before were open only to men. These women have become role models and heroes for a new generation of future astronauts—female astronauts.
Their circumstances, however, have raised an important historical and social question. How do these women reconcile their desire to be "just one of the guys" with their inherent status as role models and heroes by being the first women astronauts? Since leaving NASA, Sally Ride and Kathy Sullivan, in particular, have embraced their hero status and have worked hard to give girls an opportunity to explore the world through science and engineering. They see it as their responsibility to encourage young girls to dare and dream. Historians and feminist theorists often grapple with the concept of how to define difference and sameness between the sexes when discussing sexual equality. In the 1920s that very issue crippled any momentum the women's movement had after the ratification of the 19th Amendment, giving American women the right to vote. Alice Paul, the leader of the National Women's Party, began pushing for an Equal Rights Amendment that would have guaranteed equal access to jobs and equal pay for women. But passing the ERA would have made the laws protecting women's health and safety that women's groups had worked so hard to pass before 1920 unconstitutional. Consequently, almost every other women's organization refused to support the amendment.

The women astronauts exemplify the conflict embedded in that discussion. They demanded equal treatment on the job but then allowed their sexual differences to define their achievements. This chapter discusses how the first women astronauts came to deal with the duality of their own positions and experiences surrounding the sexual integration of NASA's astronaut corps.

NASA's announcement of the names of the astronaut candidates for Group VIII started a media frenzy that turned the six women into the focus of public interest stories around the nation. Florida Today published a spread on the women in its magazine Family Weekly in March 1978 with a picture of the six women on the issue's cover and an individual photo of each along with the article. The reporters asked each woman what her first reaction was to NASA's invitation to join the astronaut corps and wanted to know how their families were taking the news. Rhea Seddon said about her sister, identified by the authors as a married schoolteacher, "[She] thinks I'm crazy." In thinking about his two daughters—Sally, the astronaut, and Karen, who was just months away from her ordination as a Presbyterian minister—Sally Ride's father said, "One of them ought to find God." The article appeared
four months before the class was scheduled to start training, yet Anna Fisher acknowledged that she was already getting fan mail. “I just got a letter from a little girl saying how happy she was and that she wanted to be an astronaut,” Fisher said. She admitted that she was somewhat embarrassed since she did not feel like a heroine and did not know how to act in light of her newfound fame. Not long after reporting to NASA and still seven years away from her first flight in 1985, Shannon Lucid turned down the opportunity to be interviewed for a book, claiming that “books are important” and that she had not done anything important enough yet to merit her involvement in such a project. Even after spending 188 days on board the Russian space station Mir, setting the American spaceflight duration record (which she held until June 2002 when Carl Walz and Dan Bursch set the new record of 196 days aboard the International Space Station), and serving as NASA’s chief scientist, Lucid admitted that she had some extraordinary opportunities, but in her eyes, her accomplishments still did not merit the recognition that a book entails.

A few months into their training, the new astronaut candidates sat down for an interview with a reporter from the Time-Life News Service. The article focused on the African American and female makeup of the group. Frederick Gregory, one of the African American men selected as part of Group VIII, said about the new look of the NASA astronaut corps, “Initially, there is an aura about someone who is an astronaut—like the six million dollar man. That wears off once people realize we get no special treatment.” Flight manager Jay Honeycutt agreed with Gregory’s analysis of the situation at NASA as it applied to the women: “[They] are given no special treatment and have asked for none.” Even though NASA hoped and tried to maintain a normal work environment, the reality was that the selection of women astronauts created a new opportunity to highlight NASA’s accomplishments. One news article entitled “The Glamornauts,” which referred to the women as “these six NASA lovelies,” certainly made the female astronauts out to be more than just “one of the guys” in the eyes of the reader.

Throughout their training and respective missions, each of the women astronauts experienced her own time in the spotlight. Brian Duff in the Office of Public Affairs submitted a memo in March 1983 stating how important it was to emphasize the success of the flights that included the first female and the first African American crew member. As the first American female astronaut, Sally Ride saw more than her share of public attention and scrutiny. She also grew to hate it.
Every day for five days before Ride's launch on June 18, 1983, the Washington Post published another part of its story about her entire life: her childhood, her family, her education, the development of her aspirations, and her time at NASA. Her identity as a "First Woman" in history opened her life up for public criticism and also turned her into a presumed "expert" on everything from fashion to politics. In her column for the Sun (Boston), Ellen Goodman noted how all First Women share a "special conflict." She wrote, "There is a desire to be accepted as a self-made woman, a person who was and is judged on individual merit. And there is the realization that each carries a load of other women's frustrations and hopes." Supporters across the United States adopted these women as their champions for feminism whether the astronauts identified themselves as feminists or not. In the Houston Post article "Feminist Cause Not a Factor, Astronaut Hopeful Says," Judy Resnik argued that she had made it as a female engineer and an astronaut on her own merit. One woman wrote a letter back to the editor stating, "Unfortunately astronaut hopeful Ms. Resnik's 'I pulled myself up by my own bootstraps' syndrome is not unique among successful women. I in no way belittle her accomplishments. But without the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the women's movement, she would not have even had a chance to apply." Whether this woman is right or not is inconsequential. But her comment is indicative of the fact that some Americans were not satisfied with Resnik acknowledging her accomplishments as her own; others needed to couch the successes of the women astronauts as triumphs of the feminist cause. As suggested by Ellen Goodman, the women of NASA's first sexually integrated astronaut class, by their own places in history, found themselves trying to define their own lives while other people shackled them with the title "hero."

Over the last three decades practitioners of women's history and feminist theory have struggled to come to terms with the concept of identity. Philosopher Allison Weir put forth the argument that "any identity is necessarily repressive of difference, of nonidentity, or of connection. Identity is the product of a sacrificial logic." For the women astronauts of Group VIII, arguably society—not the women themselves—defined their identities as heroes and fighters for the feminist cause. In Weir's terms, their public identities developed at the sacrifice of their own personal identities and talents. Throughout their careers at NASA, the six women argued that they were simply "one of the guys" and often took criticism for not meeting the public's expectations about what a female astronaut should be. As the only
mother selected for the astronaut corps in 1978, Shannon Lucid sat through continuous questions from reporters about how her children were handling the idea that their mother would go into space. Sally Ride stunned NASA employees when she refused to accept a bouquet of roses and carnations upon the crew’s arrival in Houston after the completion of her first flight in space. She saw herself as nothing more than a member of a crew and would not accept accolades not given to everyone involved in the mission. NASA's protocol office arranged for the flowers, certainly thinking that because Ride was a woman, presenting her with flowers was appropriate. But in trying to define herself as just an astronaut and no different from her male crew members, she felt that accepting the bouquet undermined that identity that she and the five other women astronauts were trying to construct for themselves.

By the time these women arrived at JSC for ASCAN training, individually they were already well equipped to deal with the potential sexual discrimination and talk among their coworkers and superiors about being women in a man's world. After all, each worked in traditionally male professions. Sally Ride was a doctoral student in astrophysics at Stanford University. Anna Fisher worked as an emergency room doctor in Los Angeles. Rhea Seddon was completing her surgical residency in Memphis. Kathy Sullivan was finishing her doctorate in marine geology. Judy Resnik worked at Xerox as an electrical engineer. Shannon Lucid was a biochemist for the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation. Rhea Seddon has said, “I’ve obviously been a part of a man’s world for my entire adult life. And there have been times when that was okay; I was doing what I wanted to do and it was fine. And there were other times when you think, ‘Man, this is miserable.’” She further noted, “The thing that bothered me a lot and occasionally still bothers me is that you have to act like a man or you have to look like a man or you have to be like a man in order to do your work. I am a ‘female’ female, and a lot of times you lose credibility by being that way.”

As First Women, the six faced expectations that their male counterparts could avoid. NASA, although stridently in support of women in the astronaut corps, needed the women to prove that they were up to the challenge of spaceflight.

Supporters of women’s rights may well have viewed the women astronauts as the doorway to greater opportunities for others. By breaking down sexual barriers—both real and assumed—their success as actors in one of the most elite fields in America would suggest that women were capable of all sorts of
jobs previously not open to them. The strategy the six used during their astronaut careers was, and continues to be, to pick one’s battles.¹⁸

Treating questions and concerns as “nonissues” was one of the techniques the women used to avoid special treatment. It was part of how the women downplayed their identities as women astronauts within the agency. Seddon recalled one meeting with the engineers designing the Space Shuttle toilet over their concerns about mucus. These engineers ignorantly believed that women secreted more mucus during urination than men, which might clog up the sensitive plumbing. After the six stopped laughing, they assured the male engineers that generally women’s urine was the same consistency as men’s. However, if they were so concerned, they could take the toilet apart after Sally Ride’s flight to confirm that mucus was not an issue.¹⁹

But what are the consequences of picking one’s battles? Does that attitude lead to a mentality of complacency or one that invites unintended discrimination? Might insisting that engineers treat their concerns, such as the mucus case, like nonissues until they become issues result in their future failure to anticipate problems related to women? Whether mucus was an issue or not, it may have been more important to make sure that all necessary steps to accommodate women as equally as men were being made. But as Judy Resnik suggested, these women did not sign up as astronauts to make a statement about women’s rights.

Whether the astronauts embraced their public roles or not, women’s groups and girls of all ages adopted these women as their heroes. Their uninvited hero status carried with it a socially constructed expectation of their service to other women and the feminist cause. Since leaving NASA, both Sally Ride and Kathy Sullivan have worked hard to encourage girls and young women to study and pursue careers in science and engineering. Ride has participated in a number of special events, including at the U.S. Space Camp, where she sponsored special parent-daughter programs as a way to educate girls about the history of human spaceflight.²⁰ In 2002, she founded Imaginary Lines, a foundation dedicated to supporting girls’ entrancess into scientific and technical fields. Kathy Sullivan, former president and CEO of the Center of Science and Industry (COSI), renewed her lifelong commitment to the Girl Scouts of America and science through programs and overnight “Camp-ins” for scout troops at the Columbus, Ohio, center.²¹ Their work is commendable. But from Weir’s discussion of feminist identity, their efforts at outreach, which are built on their fame and recognition as America’s first women astronauts,
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seem to conflict with the stance the six women took while at NASA—the position that they did not want any special treatment or recognition because they were women.

Further, the culture at NASA—at least from a public relations standpoint—continued to emphasize the specific achievements of women, particularly the achievements of its more publicly recognizable women, the astronauts. Although the last of the six women selected in 1978 to fly, Shannon Lucid is the one with the most extensive spaceflight credentials. She is a veteran of five Shuttle flights, spent six months on Mir with her Russian station mates, the "two Yuris"—Yuri Onufriyenko and Yuri Usachev—and she was the first and is the only living female recipient of the Congressional Space Medal of Honor. (In 2004, President George W. Bush bestowed the medal posthumously to the Challenger and Columbia crews, which included four women.) When Lucid returned from Mir in 1996, she became NASA's public relations gold mine.

Even before she broke the record, she was top news for NASA. Lucid's scheduled return to Earth aboard STS-79 (Atlantis) got pushed back from August to September 26, 1996, because the flight management team was forced to delay Atlantis's July 31 launch. But NASA started receiving interview requests for Lucid from national and international news shows in the middle of July. In a presentation called "The Shannon Lucid Story: One of the Top 10 Stories of 1996 and Beyond," NASA Public Affairs Office compiled a plan of "maximum exposure with minimum time from [Lucid's] schedule," emphasizing the "biggest bang for the buck." Over 140 interview requests spanned the gamut from local affiliates and newspapers, such as KOTV out of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the Houston Chronicle, to national programming, including CNN International, CBS's 60 Minutes, and three major networks' national shows. NBC News with Tom Brokaw anticipated that Lucid's story would be newsworthy well before she set the new duration record. NBC actually sent its request to interview her upon her return at the family home on March 28, only six days after the launch of Space Shuttle Atlantis (STS-76) that carried her to Mir. Lucid recalled that for six months after her return, the public appearances and interviews were regular events.

The attention that Lucid's record attracted does not appear to be simply an acknowledgement of the new record. After all, when the new record holders Carl Walz and Dan Bursch returned to Earth in 2002, the press hardly noticed. As evidence, a quick search of the Newspaper Abstracts database pulled up only twenty-two articles about Walz and Bursch. An identical
search for Shannon Lucid returned 150 articles. Arguably, what attracted the public to Lucid's experience and made her one of the "top ten stories of 1996 and beyond" was the fact that she was female. According to a 1998 Washington Post article, the fact that she was 53 years old also made her a role model for members of the American Association of Retired Persons.

Lucid acknowledges that she was discriminated against because of her sex. But as a mother to a son and two daughters, she has also been critical of any effort to separate out the sexes for any reason. As a senior in high school, she was devastated to learn of her second place finish at the 1960 National Science Fair. It was not exactly the second place finish that stung; it was the fact that she finished second in the girl's division. In her mind, the separate divisions suggested that she was not good enough to be judged with the boys. As a mother, she has tried to educate her daughters about the struggles she faced being a woman in the man's world of science. She has also watched her son struggle with the reality that he was overlooked for myriad college scholarships because of what he was: "a plain old white male." Because of these experiences, she refuses to participate in programs that promote science and engineering for just girls or for just boys and admits that she would be very upset if NASA were to sponsor such an event. She acknowledges, however, that women still struggle at NASA and within the public sphere for acknowledgment of their work in spite of their sex.

The crux of any discussion about NASA's first class of female astronauts as feminist role models and heroes depends on how we interpret the concept of equality, as well as sameness and difference. Using Alison Weir's analytical tools, the first question we should ask about the women astronauts is whether they have created irreconcilable identities for themselves. Can they demand equality and sameness from both NASA and the general public, but then stand on ceremony and use their public roles to promote special attention for girls because they are often seen as different from boys? What critics may not see, however, is how important difference is to the way the first American women astronauts approached their work.

While often grouped collectively as women astronauts, these six women are very different from each other. Seddon insisted on taking cosmetics with her as part of her personal preference kit, while Sullivan could not have cared less about taking makeup on her flights. Some are married with children; others are single. One even gave her life to spaceflight. But as the first women paving the way for those to follow, they recognized how important it
was for them to establish precedents. It is clear by now that receiving no special treatment because of their sex was vital to proving that women could do the job. But together they were careful as well to protect their status as contributing members of a team. Sally Ride was particularly careful to include her five female classmates when making procedural decisions. As Kathy Sullivan described it, Ride's idea was to establish consistency in problem solving between the women so no man could accuse them of whining or complaining. Underlying their identities as one of the guys, the six also recognized and valued being one of the girls.

Unlike most fields of work that women enter, the astronaut corps represents one of the most elite jobs anyone can pursue. For men and women alike, the public status of astronauts rivals that of professional athletes, actors, and entertainers. As a result, their lives are constantly under scrutiny. Even Gen. James Abrahamson, the head of the Space Shuttle program between 1981 and 1984, made some critical statements about the women astronauts choosing to have children while they were still active astronauts instead of waiting until they left the corps. In his mind it seemed reasonable to expect the women to be ever ready and vigilant about flying in space just as the men had been. What he failed to recognize was that the male astronauts, who were also typically selected at an age when they would normally be starting their families and raising small children, could do so without affecting their flight status. Abrahamson did not realize that he was holding the women astronauts to a different standard than their male counterparts. The NSBRI workshop on gender-related issues noted with concern NASA's expectation that the women astronauts put their family lives on hold for the sake of their careers.

Even though it meant shining a bright light on the women astronauts, highlighting their successes mattered. Supporters of feminism need female success stories, like the first American women astronauts, as fuel for their cause. As people openly criticized them for projecting conflicting personas—that is, one side that demands equality on the basis of "sameness" and the other that champions programs to overcome difference—Allison Weir's assumptions remain. Any claim to a single identity—be it "astronaut" or "female astronaut" or even "female"—entails the repression of difference. Even as a coherent group, the women astronauts react to criticism and questions differently. Rhea Seddon noted, "You react to those sorts of questions depending on [your] comfort level with yourself and how much you
depend on other people's opinion of you.” Kathy Sullivan commented, "My time and energies are best spent living the life I've been given as fully as possible and by my best lights. [It] does surprise me that folks somehow think it's my task or concern to address (much less reconcile) others' viewpoints.”

By insisting on an identity as "one of the guys" along with a collective identity as the first female astronauts and their individual personas (which are defined by their own histories and value systems), the six women created for themselves complicated social identities. As a suggestion for dealing with the sacrificial nature of identity, Allison Weir offers the following statement:

Essential to an individual's capacity to problematize and define her own identity are cognitive and practical capacities for self-knowledge, self-realization, and self-direction, which involve cognitive capacities for learning, for critique, and for organization, and practical capacities for expression, engagement, commitment, and flexibility. The development of self-identity requires the cognitive capacity to reflect on who I am and what matters to me, and to organize diverse identities, and identity-attributes, into some sort of meaningful narrative or constellation. It also requires the practical, existential capacity to discover and define and commit to what matters to me, to my meaning, while remaining flexible and open to change. It is through these practices of expression and critique that social and linguistic norms change, and are kept open and diverse.

At some level, the way the women astronauts constructed their identities seems hypocritical. Not only did they expect to be treated like one of the guys, but some also championed equal rights and the feminist agenda. Weir would applaud these women for finding a way to merge their identities as one of the "thirty-five new guys" with their identities as women and for their unwavering commitment to those two distinct identities. It could be easy to argue that the women's actions were not hypocritical, but rather this was just narrow thinking on the part of those who judged the women for their dichotomous identities. Instead of pointing fingers at one group or another, we need to realize how complicated the concepts of gender and gender identity remain.

Ultimately, NASA wanted these women to succeed as astronauts and hoped they could attract positive attention to the agency. As for their legacy, Rhea Seddon believes, "We each made our mark in our own separate way. We were just like the guys, and I think we proved we could do [the job]. There's not that question anymore. I think that was the big question for everybody
including us: ‘Is this going to work for women?’ . . . The answer to that was ‘Yes.’” Seddon continued, “We’re not this separate but unequal cadre. I think we proved to NASA that we were serious astronauts.” Although they demanded no special treatment from NASA because they were women, these six women continued to be the kind of women they chose to be in spite of the job. What the general public expected from these new heroes in space and heroes for women developed more out of the centuries-old debate about differences between the sexes and was less about women as astronauts. As challenges to their ability or competence arose, they chose to tackle the problems occasionally from a feminist standpoint, but more often as professionals. In their own ways, from their own experiences, and sometimes as a united force, they did their jobs the best way they knew how given their own personalities and their own scientific, technological, and medical training. In doing so, they challenged the collective identity that still exists about women at work, about women as feminists, and about women as heroes. When we begin to understand the complications that these first women astronauts faced in trying to create a united genderless identity of astronaut, then the conflict between the “woman astronaut” identity and “feminist hero” can fade.