

Offered Title: To the Moon Alice!

In celebration of the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11, I dedicate the month of July to a brief chronology of our efforts toward putting a human on the Moon.

Jackie Gleason's character Ralph Kramden yelled this threat so many times to TV wife Alice it became a joke. Of course, it was a joke. Alice became the USA however when on May 25, 1961 President John Kennedy urged congress to allocate an additional 7-9 billion dollars to a 3-year-old NASA. His threat? Really veiled as a challenge...beat the Soviets, who launched a human into Earth orbit in April, ahead of our sub-orbital flight by Alan Shepherd in May and seemed ready to take control of this next frontier. If not, suffer the consequences.

Could this very young agency really get its act together and land a human on the Moon before the Soviets and before 1970 rolled in? Many in congress didn't think so, even with a big, big budget to work with. The nay-sayers were wrong, and NASA proved itself by getting the first humans to our Moon, and safely back to Earth.

Or did it? There are numerous bodies of "proof" that NASA did not land humans on the Moon. They include books, pamphlets, videos and voice recordings that describe and/or show in detail how NASA could not have accomplished such an ambitious plan. OK, this is just a teaser. I will give this time in my last installment.

After president Kennedy's plea, NASA received the first of several very large budgets and began the process of planning for lunar landing by the end of 1969. Of course, the Soviets were also pushing toward the same goal, and they were way ahead. No pressure!

NASA introduced us to the Mercury Seven in 1959. Out of 69 applicants, seven military men were selected, who through experience as jet pilots and as test pilots made them the best candidates for space travel. They were called Astronauts and they would be the first US humans in space! The Mercury program was the first of three stages intended to get us to space and the Moon. Incremental progress was the engineers' way, but it had to proceed at an almost risky clip.

Rockets exploded at test facilities, on the launch pad, and sometimes just didn't go where they were supposed to go. The Mercury capsule was a nightmare, too cramped, how to save it if launch failed, and keep it from burning up on reentry? NASA figured it out and Alan Shepherd went into space first in May 1961, a few weeks after Soviet Yuri Gagarin's orbit, but just up and down. John Glenn was the first American to orbit Earth in February 1962.

Good, but still behind. No pressure.

What's in the Sky?

July 13; after sunset; south southeast: The Moon and Jupiter are close. West northwest: Mars is in the Beehive cluster on the horizon – use binoculars.