

Astronaut Gordon Cooper & UFOs

Courtesy of Terry Colvin

To many UFO enthusiasts, Gordon Cooper is a legend. An original Mercury astronaut, he was one of those clear-eyed, ambitious, optimistic, straight-arrow Americans with "the right stuff," as Tom Wolfe put it -- men who made the U.S. space program synonymous with success and national pride. But unlike many of his fellow astronauts, Gordon Cooper has said for decades that he believes at least some UFOs are alien spacecraft.



With the assistance of a mutual friend, I met Gordon Cooper at his office in Van Nuys, California on February 8.

He isn't as big as I expected, neither in height nor build. (In retrospect, it occurs to me that large size would be no asset in the space program.) At 68, he is balding. He still has the signature grin, toothy and slightly cock-eyed. He has sharp blue eyes. He speaks quietly, clearly and concisely. We simply pulled up a few chairs around his desk and started talking.

I said I had enjoyed Dennis Quaid's film portrayal of Cooper in "The Right Stuff," and asked how he had liked it. "I liked it. He did a pretty good job," he said. "So did you think of yourself as a hotdog back then?" I asked. "Yes, I guess so."



We talked about the space program. He had gone up in Mercury 9 in May, 1963 and completed 22 orbits, an American record at the time.

Then in August, 1965, he went up again in Gemini 5 with Charles "Pete" Conrad and stayed aloft eight days, going 122 orbits, a world record. They had purposely set out to get ahead of the Soviets in at least a symbolic way. It was a turning point in the space race. We were already headed for the moon. We got there. The Soviets never did.

Cooper was going to go to the moon, but Alan Shepherd went instead, and then the Apollo program was cancelled. Cooper was going to go to Mars, too. Few Americans even know that NASA was well along on plans for a manned Mars mission, with a landing projected for 1981. Cooper was in line for commander of the mission. It would have been a nuclear powered spacecraft, assembled in earth orbit after parts were sent aloft on a series of Saturn 1-Bs. The nuclear engines were ready, Cooper said. A lot of the spacecraft was ready. They were still working on the lander and then that program was cancelled, too.

"By Senator Proxmire. The worst enemy America ever had."

I asked about his famous UFO sighting. It was in 1951 over Germany. He and several other pilots were flying F-86 jets -- "We were super-sonic, barely," he said -- when they looked up and saw what appeared to be a large group of "double lenticular shaped" aircraft, classic flying saucers, flying in formation. He said these craft were much higher than his plane could go, though he couldn't tell how high. They were going faster too, but he couldn't tell how much faster. Over the next two or three days, he and other pilots saw "several hundred" of these craft. Cooper said they flew formation maneuvers very much like his own squadron would fly. He and the other witnesses were uniformly convinced they were seeing a technology that wasn't human.

Cooper and his fellow pilots reported the sightings to their superiors. In due course, the official explanation was relayed back down. "High flying seed pods."

Though the UFO subject frequently must endure strange episodes of official denial and obfuscation, this offering of "seed pods" in answer to Cooper's sighting struck me as one of the wackiest I've heard. "You knew this was crazy," I said to him. "How could you put up with it?"

His answer was simple. "I was in the Air Force. I wanted to fly."

But Cooper had already made up his own mind that UFOs represented visitations from elsewhere, and in time he made his position clear. He wrote a letter to the United Nations in 1978. It said, in part, "I do believe UFOs exist and that the truly unexplained ones are from some other technically advanced civilization... I believe that these extraterrestrial vehicles and their crews are visiting this planet from other planets, which are obviously a little more advanced than we are here on earth... I feel that we need to have a top-level, coordinated program to scientifically collect and analyze data from all over the earth concerning any type of encounter, and to determine how best to interface with these visitors in a friendly fashion."

Cooper was convinced by 1978 that these visitors, most of them at least, were friendly. He holds to that view today.

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