?To the moon, Alice!?

by BRIAN LOCKHART

?Godspeed, John Glenn.?

That was the historic sendoff astronaut Scott Carpenter gave to John Glenn moments before Glenn's Redstone Rocket lifted off on his historic flight into orbit to become the first American to circle the planet in outer space.

It was a new era when rocketry, at least with human cargo, was in its infancy, and as many test rockets blew up on the launch pad as managed to get off the ground.

The men who were chosen to be astronauts really did have the ?right stuff.'

They were chosen for the space program for several reasons.

They were test pilots and former combat pilots, so they had the mental strength to remain composed and think rationally under extreme stress. They were smart, with all of them having engineering and related, or advanced degrees.

They were physically tested and ready to endure the rigours of a launch.

They had grit ? they took on the challenge of getting into a space capsule smaller than your car and taking a ride on top of what is basically a controlled explosion, until they were doing 17,000 miles per hour ? escape velocity for going into a successful orbit.

The astronauts had nerves of steel, but they were still human.

Astronaut Carpenter, years later, described a space flight by saying, ?You're looking out at a totally black sky, seeing an altimeter reading of 90,000 feet and realize you are going straight up. And the thought crossed my mind: What am I doing??

One thing that is often overlooked about early space flight was that the original seven astronauts were all of average size or slightly smaller ? and for good reason.

The flight had to carry the least amount of weight possible, and the capsules were so small that a man who was 5'11? or taller would not fit inside the craft.

The concept of manned flight was so new that NASA sent up a monkey in a space capsule for a test.

This test flight did create some ridicule when some people said, ?If a monkey can do it,' it must be easy.

However, the reason NASA scientists sent a monkey into space was because, as it had never been tried before, they had no idea what would happen to a man placed on top of a rocket and subjected to a high G-force. It wouldn't make much sense to launch a man in a space capsule if crushing G-forces killed your astronaut.

The crowning achievement of space flight was, of course, the moon landings.

When you look back at the technology available to land a man on the moon in 1969, it is an absolute miracle they achieved what they did, in a program that was only five years in the making.

Years later, astronaut Neil Armstrong, the first man to set foot on the moon, said that at launch for the moon mission, he figured they

had a 50/50 chance of being successful.

There was no backup plan and no escape route. Even a minor failure could have resulted in a crash on the lunar surface or left the astronauts stranded with no way to get back to their mother ship.

The cost of sending people into space is huge, and there is the question of why we need people in space these days.

The US has made massive cuts to its NASA program because it is just too expensive to operate.

I saw a video on the new manned space capsule NASA is currently working on. It seats four astronauts and returns to earth by parachute with a water landing.

That's the same way astronauts returned from a mission five decades ago. It seems space travel technology really has not advanced that much.

Every time a space capsule returns, you have to send out a large naval vessel to retrieve it. You also have to deploy several other ships over hundreds of miles in case the return burn to slow the craft is late or early, which could mean a landing hundreds of miles off course.

Space technology is largely communications and similar satellites, which have become a regular part of daily life on the planet.

What is the purpose of the International Space Station other than making videos of ?This is how we brush our teeth in space??

NASA has a plan to return to the moon ? but why? There's nothing there.

There is talk of going to Mars ? but why? There's nothing there either, and realistically, a successful return trip to the plan is never going to happen.

I know Star Trek fans like to dream about zipping around the galaxy at warp speed, but the truth is, that's not going to happen either.

Maybe it's time to clean up the massive amount of space debris that is orbiting the planet and use the funds allocated to studying how bees behave in near-zero gravity for a more practical earth-bound purpose.