Remarks by the Honorable Sean O'Keefe
NASA Administrator
Gordon Cooper Memorial Service
Olin Teague Auditorium
NASA Johnson Space Center
Houston, Texas
October 15, 2004

Mrs. Cooper, family members and distinguished guests from the Mercury Seven: astronauts Commander Scott Carpenter, Senator John Glenn and Captain Wally Schirra and members of Gus Grissom's, Alan Shepard's and Deke Slayton's families who are all here.

In my youth, John (Glenn) you just reminded me, these were the super heroes of our time, and deservedly so. I must confess that it is an extremely humbling experience to be following them on program such as this.

But I appreciate the opportunity to represent the NASA family today at this heartfelt tribute to a hero for millions of Americans, Colonel Leroy Gordon Cooper, Jr.

He was born in the American heartland.

He was destined to soar in our nation's spacious skies and into the heavens above.

Gordon Cooper, the last of NASA's lone eagles to fly in Project Mercury, is now one with the stars.

Forty-six years ago, on October 1st 1958, when this part of Texas was farmland and pasture, a new agency called the National Aeronautics and Space Administration opened its doors.

A mere four days later, NASA initiated a fledgling program with the audacious notion to send humans into space. Those who answered the call to explore would dare to dream no small dreams.

In those early days when everything NASA tried had never been attempted we asked the best and

bravest to help lead the way into the new ocean of space. We members of the NASA family are forever grateful that Colonel Gordon Cooper answered America's call.

It was almost as if he had been preparing his whole life for this momentous period in our nation's history.

When he was five, Gordon's dad, an Army Air Corps Colonel, took him flying in a Curtis Robin high-wing monoplane. No sooner had they landed, Gordon asked when they could fly again.

At the age of eight Gordon was already taking the controls of his dad's plane. And before he was old enough to drive, Gordon was flying solo, a condition that never bothered him a bit.

Of course, when you grow up in a household that opened its front door to family friends like Amelia Earhart, a life devoted to flight and exploration came naturally.

When Gordon was introduced to the country along with Senator Glenn, Captain Schirra and Commander Carpenter and their fellow Mercury astronaut band of brothers, the folks at NASA knew what the public was soon to find out. Gordon Cooper was not only a great pilot, he was also unflappable, a "natural born stick and rudder man" you could count on in a tight spot.

And he also was a character. There is an image that will forever be imblazened in my mind. There was an entry in Gene Kranz's book, the famous flight director, who wrote his book just a few years ago, "Failure is Not an Option," in which he described his first encounter meeting Gordon Cooper. Gene had been summoned down from Langley to Florida, arrived at Patrick Air Force Base, looking for a ride over to Cape Canaveral. As soon as he got off the plane, he met a gent with a convertible who immediately whisked him off to Canaveral. He

realized along the way as they were going at a blazing speed for the entire distance that this was the famed Gordon Cooper. Gene has never been the same since and that's what his book says.

Also a part of NASA's rich folklore of course, and the cinema has helped all Americans know about, was Gordon's response to the long countdown before his 24-hour Faith Seven Mercury flight, as he calmly dozed off. "No man about to ride a rocket was ever less nervous," observed Mission Director Chris Kraft. When he was testing for the astronaut corps, his minders put him in a tiny dark box to test for claustrophobia. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable option at the time for Gordon to take a nap, which he promptly did. Maybe that's why a key experiment on the Faith 7 mission aimed to determine if humans could sleep in space. Needless to say, Gordon was the perfect subject for that experiment, calm and cool at all times.

What we remember most about the Faith 7 Mission, however, is a great moment of peril, when Gordon Cooper's life, and perhaps the fate of our space program, hung in the balance.

On his 20th orbit an alarmed Mercury Control informed Gordon that his capsule was experiencing a total power failure and that carbon dioxide levels were rising in his spacesuit and in the cabin. Gordon Cooper coolly took command of the situation, and assumed manual control over the reentry sequence, guiding his craft to a perfect splashdown near the USS Kearsarge.

He appeared on the cover of Time Magazine that week, the illustration of his face surrounded by the hours of a clock, symbolizing that we no longer were limited to quick sprints into space and that greater leaps lay ahead.

In his book that introduced a new generation of Americans to the courage and heroism of Gordon

Cooper and his colleagues, Tom Wolfe wrote, "No one could deny it…no brethren, old or new, could fail to see it…when the evil wind was up, Ol' Gordo had shown the world the pure and righteous stuff."

Yes, he had the pure and righteous stuff. And then Gordon followed up on the Gemini Five Mission with Pete Conrad by demonstrating that crews could live and work in space for eight days--the period of time required for a lunar mission--and by once again taking command of the reentry process when a faulty computer program was sending the Gemini capsule off course. Once again Gordon proved that you can never underestimate the importance of the human element in spaceflight.

As the first American to return to space Gordon Cooper's place in exploration history is certainly guaranteed. But his courageous performance on the Faith Seven and Gemini Five missions by no means represents the sum total of Gordon's contributions to

the space program. He served as the backup command pilot for Gemini 12 and backup commander for Apollo 10, the dress rehearsal flight for the first lunar landing. He also headed up flight crew operations for the post-Apollo Skylab program and the astronaut office's design input into the emerging Shuttle program.

Even in his later years when his astronaut days were long behind him, Gordon was thinking of exploration goals that will inspire the next generation of explorers.

He said, "I still believe we need to send a manned mission to Mars. What will keep the public's interest will be when we get back to the real nuts-and-bolts of exploring space and finding out what's really out there. To do that, we need to get back to the Moon, and go to Mars, and be looking down the road at undertaking missions to other planets--and expeditions like mining asteroids."

Well, in the trailblazing spirit of Gordon Cooper, we are determined to make those words come true.

Today, visitors can come to Space Center Houston just outside the main gate here and see the Faith Seven and Gemini Five spacecraft that Gordon Cooper rode into history.

Generations from now, when the reach of human civilization is extended throughout the solar system, people will still view these artifacts of 20th century ingenuity, and then turn their gaze to the stars, their hearts filled with gratitude for Gordon Cooper and the other brave explorers who led the way during NASA's first great era of exploration.

Today, in appreciation of Gordon Cooper's enormous contributions to the exploration of space, I would like to present to Suzy Gordon a symbol of NASA's deepest respect.

The Distinguished Service Medal, created on July 29, 1959, is our Agency's highest honor. It recognizes his distinguished service to the nation for opening the space frontier as pioneer astronaut and explorer during the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programs.

Finally, as NASA continues to work to expand humanity's exploration reach, just as Gordon Cooper wished, one of our best who has followed in Gordon's footsteps would like to offer his words of tribute to this great American hero. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm honored to introduce from the International Space Station, Expedition Nine crew member Air Force Lt. Colonel Mike Fincke.