Lovelace Clinic, New Mexico

With the preliminary examinations out of the way and the final thirty-two candidates chosen, a comprehensive physical evaluation began at the Lovelace Foundation for Medical Education and Research, commonly referred to as the ‘Lovelace Clinic’, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Dr. W. Randolph Lovelace II oversaw the medical and biological aspects of the selection process. These gruelling and clearly comparative tests were designed to determine the physical health of each candidate and identify any previously undiagnosed problems that might preclude him from the rigours of space travel.

PHASE THREE BEGINS

The clinic was an excellent facility with a background in aviation medicine research, as well as the clinical examination of commercial airline pilots and aviation-industry test pilots. For this, and other related reasons, it was felt the clinic was well qualified to conduct the examinations – more so than other institutions such as university and military hospitals. However, the role of the civilian pilot was a far cry from that of an astronaut pilot, and many dissatisfied individuals from the Air Force medical service made it known that they were unhappy with the choice of the independently operated Lovelace Clinic – particularly as this research was being funded by a U.S. Air Force grant.

Because the astronaut testing programme was to be conducted in secrecy, each of the thirty-two finalists was allocated a number, 1 through 32, by which they would be identified at all times in order to preserve their anonymity. They were also required to use this number to identify themselves in all correspondence and phone conversations relating to the tests in New Mexico and, later, at the Wright Aero Medical Laboratory in Ohio, and were not to discuss the purpose of their visit with anyone. For their part, the administrators took steps to avoid drawing public attention to the operation.

To facilitate close scrutiny of each candidate by a limited number of examiners, the finalists were split into six groups: four containing five candidates and two with
six. The screening began at the two test sites in staggered groups, a week apart, and the candidates travelled separately on commercial airlines to escape the attention of any suspicious members of the press.

One of the physicians heavily involved in the testing at the Lovelace Clinic was Dr. Robert Secrest, a specialist in internal medicine who had been a flight surgeon during the Korean War and had worked alongside Dr. Lovelace at the clinic since 1955. In discussing the clinic’s involvement during a 1996 interview with Professor Jake Spidle of the University of New Mexico’s Department of History, Secrest also recognised the tremendous work of his colleague, Dr. Ulrich Luft, the eminent head physiologist at Lovelace who was an authority in the fields of lung physiology and high altitude acclimatisation. He had been in charge of the Department of Aviation Physiology at the Aeromedical Research Institute in Berlin during World War II, and was part of Operation Paperclip by which dozens of German scientists were brought to the United States after that war. Arriving in 1947, Luft was appointed to