



Impact Statement

Sophia Sterling, Grade 12

The Helmet She Never Wore, 2026

Oil on wood panel, 24 x 30 inches

Maret School, Washington DC, District of Columbia

Unsung Hero: Jerrie Cobb

My Unsung Hero is Jerrie Cobb, a pioneering American pilot and aviator whose contributions to aviation and space exploration were groundbreaking but sadly often overlooked. I chose Jerrie Cobb because of her courage, determination, and resilience even when facing gender discrimination. She is a powerful role model as she didn't let societal barriers limit or define her but instead used her voice to advocate for equality. To me, what is most inspiring is not her incredible skill as a pilot, but her persistence in pursuing her dreams despite often being denied opportunities.

Jerrie Cobb's impact on history is tremendous and impressive. In 1960, she was part of the Mercury 13 which were a group of women who underwent physical and psychological tests at the same time as the original Mercury Seven astronauts. She then went on to complete all of the tests first and scored in the top 2% of both the men and women. Despite her obvious qualifications, Cobb was denied the opportunity to become an astronaut due to gender discrimination. Instead of giving up and staying silent, she testified before congress and advocated for women's inclusion in NASA's astronaut program. Even though her actions did not cause immediate change in policy, she helped to expose the inequality that was preventing her and other outstanding women from reaching space.

My artistic vision for this project was to highlight both Cobb's achievements and the barriers she faced. In my artwork, I placed Jerrie Cobb at the forefront to immediately draw attention to her importance. Directly behind her head I painted the Earth in place of the astronaut helmet she never had the opportunity to wear in space. This is meant to symbolize both her connection to space and the dreams she had that were kept just out of reach. I also positioned the Earth between Cobb and the spaceship/planet to represent the restrictions placed on her because of her gender. Her expression is calm and smiling as she looks upward, reflecting on her passion for flying and her hope for women's presence in space in the future. I chose bright and vibrant colors to capture the beauty of space and to emphasize that her impact is still alive and influential today. I intentionally avoided black and white tones because I wanted to show that her legacy is not part of the past as it continues to inspire progress and possibility.

Jerrie Cobb's story has had a meaningful impact on myself as it reminds me to be grateful for the progress that has been made in women's rights and opportunities, especially in careers that were once inaccessible. Her perseverance encourages me to pursue my own dream career in art without hesitation. I can recognize that I have

opportunities today because of people like Cobb who challenged unfair systems and I do not want to take that for granted. Instead, I want to make the most of those opportunities and push myself to succeed.

For the past 2 months, I have begun sharing her story through my artwork as it has been hanging up in my school library. Beside the painting is a small written excerpt about her life. My goal is that students who pass by will take a moment to read and reflect on Cobb's achievements and struggles. By bringing attention to her story I hope others get inspired and appreciate the contributions of overlooked individuals. In conclusion, this project is more than just honoring an Unsung Hero, but is about continuing the impact of Jerrie Cobb's legacy and sharing it with others.

References:

<https://www.lowellmilkcenter.org/programs/projects/view/jerrie-cobb-the-fight-to-send-women-to-space/hero>

<https://airandspace.si.edu/support/wall-of-honor/geraldyn-m-cobb>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerrie_Cobb