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Astronaut Scott Carpenter and his attractive wife Rene.

By JOHN KENT

WITHOUT any prearrangement, America's seven astronauts found themselves assembled in an unpretentious ranch home in a newly developed area of Newport News, Va., one evening last month.

The home, already upset by plans for an imminent move to Houston, Texas, belonged to Maj. Donald (Deke) Slayton. Five hours before, he had been told that a minor heart condition would prevent his being the second American to orbit the earth. That honor would go to Lieut. Comdr. Malcolm Scott Carpenter, 37.

Like the other astronauts, Carpenter had been stunned by the news. He immediately drove to his home at Langley Air Force Base, picked up his ash-blond wife, Rene, and went on to the Slaytons'. The other astronauts had done the same. Later, Scott Carpenter said: "We all knew Marge and Deke would need people around at a time like that—people who really understood what had happened."

While at the Slaytons', Carpenter excused himself and placed a call to his mother, Florence, in Boulder, Colo. "I'm in," he said simply.

In recalling the conversation, Scott's mother remembers him repeating, "What a terrible disappointment for him (Deke). What a disappointment!"

"I almost felt like crying myself," Mrs. Carpenter says. "It wasn't a long talk, but Scott always calls when something big happens, like when the babies were born. He has always been the kind to share things with me and his family. He's the outgoing kind—doesn't store up things inside. I think that's why they picked him for the Mercury project."

NOT EVERYBODY agrees with this mother's evaluation of her "outgoing" son. Interviewers, for example, have found him one of the more monosyllabic of the astronauts. In most cases, though, Scott's reticence is due to interviewers who have failed to ignite his sole consuming interest—flying. When it comes to this subject, he can be articulate and, unlike the other astronauts, who have perfected a cold-blooded, scientific exterior to Project Mercury, he can also be romantic about its dangers and glories.

"As far as I can recall," says a National Aeronautics and Space Administration official, "he has been the only one to express the idea of 'giving his life' to the conquest of space. He's also the only one who has talked much about there being glory in this business, and he isn't poised enough to cover up the fact he's human and kind of enjoys it."

If Carpenter is less impersonal about the space pro-