

# NASA's Top Astronaut John Young to Retire

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by Amiko Nevills

After four decades and half a dozen space flights - including a moonwalk and the first Shuttle mission -veteran NASA astronaut John Young is hanging up his flight suit. So, how did this amazing career of exploration get off the ground?

*Image: Young salutes the American flag next to the lunar module Orion during the Apollo 16 mission in 1972. (NASA)*

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Forty-three years ago, Young -- then a Navy test pilot -- tuned in on a small, black-and-white television at the Naval Air Test Center in Florida as President John Kennedy addressed the nation.

After hearing the president's bold proposal to land a man on the Moon and return him safely to Earth, Young knew what he had to do.

"I thought returning safely to Earth sounded like a good idea," quips Young, who has stood on the Moon, driven 16 miles in a lunar rover and spent three nights on the lunar surface. He is the only person to go into space as part of the Gemini, Apollo and Space Shuttle programs and was the first to fly into space six times -- seven times counting his lunar liftoff.

Quite a resume. But the way the retiring astronaut describes the extraordinary achievements of his four decade career, he was merely doing his job.

"John's tenacity and dedication are matched only by his humility," said NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe. "He's never sought fame and often goes out of his way to avoid the limelight. However, when you need a job done and you want it done right, John's the person to go to. He's a true American treasure, and his exemplary legacy will inspire generations of new explorers for years to come."

Young's impressive career at NASA began in 1962 when he was selected from among hundreds of young pilots to join NASA's second astronaut class, known as the "New Nine."

Young was born in San Francisco. His family moved to Georgia, and then Florida where he lived most of his childhood along with his younger brother.

As a boy, Young's favorite pastimes were building model airplanes -- the first hint of his passion for aeronautics -- and reading.

"My grandpa taught me how to read," says Young, whose hobby today is

still reading about history and exploration. "I read the encyclopedia when I was five."

His father, a civil engineer, was Young's role model. Young graduated from Orlando High School in Florida and went on to earn a degree in aeronautical engineering from Georgia Tech, where he graduated with highest honors in 1952.

Following graduation, he joined the Navy and, after a year's service aboard a destroyer, was sent to flight training.

He flew fighter planes for four years, then completed test pilot training and served three years at the Navy's Air Test Center, where he heeded the president's call to go to the Moon.

In March 1965, Young made his first flight as an astronaut, joining Gus Grissom on Gemini 3, the first manned flight of that program. As Young prepared, obligation overruled excitement or any other emotion.

"We were just thinking about doing the job right," Young said.

"You run out of superlatives when you talk about Captain John Young as a test pilot, astronaut and engineer," said former Space Shuttle astronaut and Associate Administrator for Space Operations William Readdy.

"John has an incredible engineering mind, and he sets the gold standard when it comes to asking the really tough questions. When he talks, everybody listens."

Young commanded Gemini 10 in July 1966. He and pilot Mike Collins rendezvoused with two Agena target vehicles, and Collins did a spacewalk to retrieve a micrometeorite detector from one of them.

In May of 1969, he served as command module pilot on Apollo 10, and

flew all the way to the Moon with crewmates Tom Stafford and Gene Cernan. The crew scouted landing sites from lunar orbit and rendezvoused the lunar module and command module in a full dress rehearsal for the Apollo 11 landing two months later.

Young made a return trip to the Moon as commander of Apollo 16 in April 1972. With Ken Mattingly orbiting above in the command module, Young and lunar module pilot Charlie Duke landed in the Descartes highlands. "The Moon is a very nice place," Young said. "When we landed, we were 20 minutes behind. Because time on the Moon was so precious, what I remember most is trying to catch up."

Young and Duke set up scientific equipment and explored lunar highlands in the rover. The mission returned more than 200 pounds of Moon rocks gathered from three geological outings.

Young's career was full of firsts, none more notable than in April 1981, when he commanded Space Shuttle Columbia's on its -- and the Shuttle program's -- maiden flight, STS-1. It was the first time a piloted spacecraft was tested in space without previous unpiloted orbital flights. Young and pilot Bob Crippen accomplished more than 130 flight test objectives during their almost 55-hour mission.

In late 1983 Young commanded STS-9, the first Spacelab mission. During the 10-day flight, the six crewmembers worked around the clock in 12-hour shifts, involved in more than 70 experiments in a range of scientific disciplines. The mission returned more scientific and technical data than all the Apollo and Skylab missions combined.

In addition to his six spaceflights, Young was a member of five backup crews. He's logged thousands of hours of training and flight time, including a total of 835 hours in space.

In early 1973, he became chief of the Space Shuttle Branch of the Astronaut Office at Johnson Space Center. The following year, Young, who retired from the Navy as a captain in 1976 after 25 years of military service, was named chief of the Astronaut Office, a post he held until May 1987.

He later served as special assistant to the JSC director, advising on engineering, operations and safety matters relating to the International Space Station, Space Shuttle upgrades and advanced human space exploration programs.

Young became associate director (technical) of the Center in February 1996, overseeing technical, operational and safety of NASA programs assigned to JSC.

"John Young has no equal in his service to our country and to humanity's quest for space," said current JSC Director Jefferson D. Howell Jr. "He is the astronaut's astronaut, a hero among heroes who fly in space. His achievements have taken space from an unknown environment to the expanding frontier we explore today. His steady hand and unflinching eyes have served our cause of space exploration well, expanding our horizons with unshakable dedication and calm courage. He will be missed," Howell said.

Throughout this time, Young has remained an active astronaut, eligible to command Space Shuttle missions.

Young has six honorary doctorate degrees and more than 80 awards, including three NASA Distinguished Service Medals, the NASA Outstanding Leadership Medal, two Navy Distinguished Service Medals, and three Navy Distinguished Flying Crosses. In 1988, he was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame.

The legacy he leaves behind exemplifies a commitment to space exploration for humanity in its truest form. His dedication thrives on his belief in the space program.

"I've been very lucky, I think," Young says. As to which moment was most memorable, he says simply, "I liked them all."

Source: by Amiko Nevills, Johnson Space Center

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