

Russia marks 'forgotten spaceman's' historic flight

August 4 2011, by Stuart Williams

Russia on Saturday marks 50 years since Gherman Titov became the second man in orbit, a historic achievement long eclipsed by the first space flight of his friend and rival Yuri Gagarin months earlier.

His exploit was just as astonishing as Gagarin's journey to immortality and proved man could spend many hours in orbit. Yet Titov took to his grave the disappointment of being passed over in the race to be the first man in space.

Aged just 25, Titov orbited the earth 17 times after blasting off on August 6, 1961 in a flight that lasted more than 25 hours. Gagarin had made just a single orbit in his 108-minute April 12 flight.

Titov was the first man to spend a day in space and take pictures in orbit and also the first victim of space sickness. To this day, he remains the youngest human ever to have been to space.

At the height of the Cold War, Titov's feat stunned the United States. [Alan Shepard](#), on May 5, 1961, had become the first American and second man in space but his flight lasted only 15 minutes and was suborbital.

But celebrations of the records set by Titov -- who died of a cardiac arrest in his sauna in 2000 -- are set to be considerably more muted than the extravaganza of events laid on for the Gagarin anniversary earlier this year.

The main event will be the opening of a memorial museum in Titov's native village of Polkovnikovo in the Altai region of southern Siberia in a ceremony due to be attended by ex-cosmonauts and his widow Tamara.

Moscow photo gallery Fotosoyuz has also opened an exhibition of the history of space photography in honour of Titov's achievement in taking the first images of the earth from space.

But tragically, Titov was painfully aware throughout his life that Gagarin's narrow selection over him to fly on April 12 essentially meant he would be forgotten by history.

Chosen after years of demanding tests from a long list of hundreds of ambitious Soviet fighter pilots, Gagarin and Titov emerged as the two strongest candidates to become the first man in space.

The Soviet authorities only made the decision in favour of Gagarin on the eve of the flight. In the archive footage, Titov makes no attempt to disguise his disappointment, hanging his head as the official decision is announced.

"Journalists said I was so glad for Gagarin," Titov said in rare comments in 1985. "Of course, there was nothing of the sort."

Russian space experts have always acknowledged that Titov was physically as ready as Gagarin for the flight. But the Soviet authorities were said to have been concerned by Titov's introvert character, less proletarian upbringing and un-Russian sounding name.

Titov's father named his son Gherman not because of any link to Germany but after a character in Pushkin's masterpiece "The Queen of Spades". For many, this cost Titov his place in history.

"I am often asked how Gherman coped" with not being the first man in space, his widow Tamara Titova told Russian Channel One television in a 2010 documentary. "Of course he suffered that it was not him. He was ready to carry out that mission."

"It was the eternal question for Gherman. 'Why were you not the first?'" she recalled. "His reply was 'There was just one seat in the spaceship, so we could not go together.'"

Titov's flight aboard Vostok-2 was a resounding success, although he had to cope with the nausea of space sickness, a problem still encountered by modern day astronauts. He famously told mission control he felt "ghastly".

Yet he also managed to take a nap, even oversleeping and prompting fears at mission control that he had died.

He was rocked by Gagarin's death in a plane crash in 1968, not just because he lost a friend but because the Soviet leadership then banned Titov from his greatest passion -- flying. Having lost Gagarin, they would not risk losing another hero.

Titov did not take well to the collapse of the Soviet Union. He was in particular saddened by the state of the space industry in the new Russia and became a member of the Russian parliament for the Communist Party.

He dreamed of one more record -- going into orbit again to beat John Glenn as the oldest man in space. But he died before coming close to realising this final ambition.

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Citation: Russia marks 'forgotten spaceman's' historic flight (2011, August 4) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-08-russia-forgotten-spaceman-historic-flight.html>

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