

World's 1st woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, turns 80

March 6 2017, by Vladimir Isachenkov



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, congratulates the first woman in space, cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, on her 80th birthday in Moscow, Russia, Monday, March 6, 2017. (Alexei Nikolsky/Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)

Russia on Monday honored the world's first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, who recalled tense moments of her pioneering mission on her 80th birthday.

Soviet officials at the time said the 1963 mission went without a hitch, and only a few years ago Tereshkova first spoke about a technical glitch that could have left her stranded in space.

"When the spacecraft reached the orbit, I realized that I wouldn't be able to return to Earth because the ship was programmed to move to a higher orbit instead of deorbiting," Tereshkova said in remarks broadcast by Channel 1 television. "I reported the situation to the mission control, they told me how to change the parameters and everything went on without trouble."

Soviet space officials started planning for a space mission by a woman soon after Yuri Gagarin became the first human to fly to space on April, 12 1961, seeing it as a way to cement the nation's lead in a race for space supremacy against the United States.

Tereshkova, a textile factory worker who liked parachute jumps, was chosen for the flight after a rigorous selection from hundreds of candidates. While heading to the launch pad, she told her relatives that she was going to attend a parachute competition—a reflection of deep secrecy that surrounded the Soviet space program.

The three-day mission made her an instant global celebrity and a poster figure for Soviet space glory. Tereshkova received a hero's welcome after the flight and was showered with awards and honorary titles.

"It was hard, but we realized that we were working to make the country's glory shine and prevent the competitors from thrusting ahead," Tereshkova said Monday. "It was a great happiness to be the first in space."

Her birthday led the news on national television.

President Vladimir Putin hosted Tereshkova at the Kremlin, praising her as "a role model for us and a symbol of service to the Fatherland."

He presented Tereshkova with a painting of seagulls over the Volga River, a reference to her call sign Chaika (Seagull) during her mission in June 1963.

"I often see my flight in my dreams," she said in televised remarks.

Tereshkova is still a member of the Russian parliament, serving as a deputy chair of committee for municipal issues. Fellow lawmakers greeted her at a photo exhibition about her flight in the lower house, the State Duma.

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