

Gemini & Apollo Astronaut, BGEN, USAF, Ret, Test Pilot, and Author Dies at 90

The Astronaut Scholarship Foundation (ASF) is saddened to report the loss of space man Michael Collins BGEN, USAF, Ret., and NASA astronaut who has passed away on April 28, 2021 at the age of 90; he was predeceased by his wife of 56 years, Pat and his son Michael and is survived by their daughters Kate and Ann and many grandchildren.

Collins is best known for being one of the crew of Apollo 11, the first manned mission to land humans on the moon.

Michael Collins was born in Rome, Italy on October 31, 1930. In 1952 he graduated from West Point (same class as future fellow astronaut, Ed White) with a Bachelor of Science Degree. He joined the U.S. Air Force and was assigned to the 21st Fighter-Bomber Wing at George AFB in California. He subsequently moved to Europe when they relocated to Chaumont-Semoutiers AFB in France. Once during a test flight, he was forced to eject from an F-86 after a fire started behind the cockpit; he was safely rescued and returned to Chaumont. He was accepted into the USAF Experimental Flight Test Pilot School at Edwards Air Force Base in California. In 1960 he became a member of Class 60C which included future astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Irwin, and Tom Stafford. His inspiration to become an astronaut was the Mercury Atlas 6 flight of John Glenn and with this inspiration, he applied to NASA.

In 1963 he was selected in the third group of NASA astronauts. During the next seven years he served as capsule communicator for Apollo 8, the first mission to orbit the moon and following, flew in space twice; once on Gemini X, with commander John Young in March 1966, and on Apollo 11, along with command pilot Neil Armstrong, and lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin, July 1969. He retired from NASA in January of 1970.

Collins' first mission, Gemini X was a record setting flight he shared with commander John Young. This flight completed the successful rendezvous and docking with a separately launched Agena Target Vehicle and using the power of the Agena, maneuvered the Gemini spacecraft into another orbit for a rendezvous with a second passive Agena. Other notable firsts include the first target vehicle used for maneuvering thrust, first retrieval of equipment from another orbiting object, first manned spacecraft to reach an altitude of 414 nautical miles, and the first mission to complete multiple extra-vehicular Activities (EVA) as well as the first astronaut to perform two of these space walks during a flight. Collins performed a standup EVA to obtain still photography of selected star groups for astronomical studies, and a second EVA to recover a micrometeorite detection experiment from the passive Agena. Gemini X's spacecraft splashdown landed 2.6 meters from the USS Guadalcanal and became the second spacecraft in the Gemini program to land within eye and camera range of the prime recovery ship. It was after Gemini X, that Gemini Program Manager Charles Matthew said, "The Gemini Program has finally matured."

The Apollo 11 moon landing mission was Collins' second and final space flight. On July 20, 1969 history was made when spacecraft commander Neil Armstrong and lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin set foot on the moon; while they were taking their small steps/giant leaps on the lunar surface, command module pilot Michael Collins orbited the moon alone in the command module *Columbia* for 21.5 hours. This included the 48 minutes around the far side of the moon, with no radio contact with Earth or his crewmates. During these solo orbits, he experienced periods of the most profound solitude any human being has ever known. When questioned about this

experience, he expressed it to have been inspiring and exhilarating. The success of Apollo 11 depended solely on Collins and his flawless execution of a successful return trip back to Earth.

After retiring from NASA in 1970, Michael Collins was named the Director of the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C., penned a best-selling book, and in 1980 he entered the private sector working as an aerospace consultant.

It was in 1974 that Michael Collins authored the book *Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journeys* which not only gives an account of his training and voyages into outer space, but also expresses the personal side of the space program and the individuals who worked in it. Collins truly believed in the space program and the impact that space exploration has for our planet. "I really believe that if the political leaders of the world could see their planet from a distance ...their outlook would be fundamentally changed. The all-important border would be invisible, that noisy argument suddenly silenced... The earth must become as it appears: blue and white, not capitalist or communist; blue and white, not rich or poor; blue and white, not envious or envied."

May those of us who remain on this planet, be able to view our world as Michael Collins did; may we find peace. Godspeed Michael Collins, eternal peace is now yours.