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Gemini & Apollo Astronaut, Brig Gen, USAF, Ret, Aeronautical Engineer & Test Pilot Dies at 93

The Astronaut Scholarship Foundation (ASF) is saddened to report the loss of an American pioneer, James Alton McDivitt, Brigadier General, USAF, Ret., and NASA astronaut has passed away at the age of 93; he is survived by his wife Judy, four children, Michael, Ann, Patrick and Kathleen, two step children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

McDivitt is best known for being the first astronaut to command his first spaceflight, serving as command pilot paired with co-pilot Ed White, who made the first U. S. spacewalk, on Gemini IV (June 1965), and commanding the first manned test flight of the lunar module alongside crewmates command module pilot Dave Scott and lunar module pilot Rusty Schweickart on Apollo 9 (March 1969).

Jim McDivitt was born in Chicago, Illinois on June 10, 1929. In 1951 he joined the Air Force, received his pilot wings and completed combat crew training in 1952. He flew 145 combat missions in F80's and 86's with the 35th Bombardment Squadron during the Korean War. In 1953 he returned to the States to Dow Air Force Base in Maine, to serve as pilot and assistant operations officer with the 19th Fighter Interceptor Squadron. He continued his service at Tyndall Air Force Base in Advanced Flying School, and subsequently at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey as Flight Commander with the 332nd Fighter Interceptor Squadron. 1957 saw McDivitt's return to school to the University of Michigan where he completed his Bachelor of Science, Aeronautical Engineering in 1959.

After graduation, he was sent to Edwards Air Force Base in California as a student test pilot; there he completed test pilot school and Aerospace Research Pilot School. In July of 1962 he joined Manned Spacecraft Operations and logged over five thousand flight hours. Notably, Jim McDivitt flew in the capacity of chase pilot for Robert M. White during White's historic X-15 flight (July 17, 1962) where he reached an altitude of 59.5 miles and became the first person to be awarded astronaut wings based on the USAF definition of outer space.

On September 17, 1962, NASA announced its second group of astronauts, also known as The New Nine which included Jim McDivitt. While the Original 7 (Mercury) had been selected to accomplish the task of orbital flight, the new challenges of rendezvous and lunar landing led to the selection of candidates with advanced engineering degrees as well as test pilot experience.

Gemini 4 saw McDivitt as the first astronaut to command his first flight. He along with co-pilot Ed White launched on June 3, 1965 and spent four days circling the earth 66 times. While McDivitt kept command, Ed White performed the first American spacewalk. When he had to tell White it was time to come back inside the capsule, Mission Control, along with the whole world heard him sigh as he said, "It's the saddest moment of my life." Gemini IV's long duration at the time, spacewalk and on-board experiments set the tone for the rest of the Gemini program. The flight garnered great excitement and all its daily activities were recorded in worldwide newspapers; this gave a glimmer of hope and a bit of reprieve to the turbulent tone set by the Vietnam War.



McDivitt commanded his second spaceflight, Apollo 9 from March 3 – March 13, 1969. This was a 10-day orbital test flight of the lunar module (LM)-the first manned test flight of the LM as well as the first rendezvous between the LM and the command and service modules and a two-person EVA. McDivitt alongside Command Module Pilot Dave Scott and Lunar Module Pilot Rusty Schweickart, set many firsts and executed testing that would enable NASA to move forward with the future lunar missions. This mission proved the LM worth of crewed spaceflight.

That same year he took the job of Manager of the Apollo Spacecraft Program and served as Program Manager for Apollo 12, 13, 14, 15 & 16. He retired from NASA and the United States Air Force in 1972, worked at Consumers Power Company as their Executive Vice President and in 1975 joined Pullman Inc, becoming their President. He continued with Rockwell International and became Senior Vice President, Operations and International in 1995. He loved his family and the outdoors and continued to enjoy life only slightly more leisurely, while still traveling about the country speaking on the importance of space, technology and exploration.

Jim McDivitt's space career spanned two programs, Gemini and Apollo, and his untiring dedication to moving the United States forward in exploration and technology played a huge part in aiding the United States in reaching the moon. We salute you for all your service to the United States, and for your chapter in our nation's history. Godspeed Commander!

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Media Contact:

Caroline Schumacher

Astronaut Scholarship Foundation

407-403-5901 | caroline@astronautscholarship.org