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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 23, 2017

Paul J. Weitz, Commander of the Maiden Voyage of Challenger, Dies at 85

ORLANDO – Paul J. Weitz, the retired astronaut and naval aviator who returned from retirement to command the maiden voyage of the space shuttle Challenger in 1983, died Monday (Oct. 23) at his home in Flagstaff, Az., according to friends. He was 85.

“Paul Weitz’s name will always be synonymous with the space shuttle Challenger. But he also will be remembered for defying the laws of gravity – and age. Before it became commonplace to come out of retirement, Paul was a pioneer,” said Curtis Brown, board chairman of the Orlando-based Astronaut Scholarship Foundation and an astronaut and veteran of six space flights. “He proved 51 was just a number.”

Few people even knew that he was already a space veteran. One of the 19 astronauts selected by NASA in 1966, he served as command module pilot on the crew of Skylab-2, the first manned Skylab mission. It spent 28 days in space from May 25 to June 22, 1973. The crew logged nearly 673 hours. Plucked from the ranks of the Navy where he had served in the Vietnam War, Weitz returned to the service to finish out his time. He retired in July 1976 at the rank of captain after a 22-year career, including a Distinguished Service Medal and Commendation Medal for combat flights.

After earning his degree in aeronautical engineering and commission in 1954 from the Navy ROTC at Penn State, he was awarded his flying wings two years later after completing Navy flight school. In 10 years, he logged more than 7,700 hours of flying time, with 6,400 hours in a jet aircraft. He also earned a master of science in aeronautical engineering from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. In 1966, NASA selected him for the Skylab mission.

Weitz described his first foray into space as surreal, choosing to simply stare at the earth from his new vantage point. “Nearly all my time was spent at the window,” he told The New York Times in April 1983 as he prepared to launch the Challenger from Kennedy Space Center on April 4.

The Challenger’s crew conducted several missions and prepared for future space walks before returning to earth on April 9, 1983. This flight had given Weitz a total of 793 hours in space. Three years later, the Challenger was destroyed in flight killing all seven astronauts on board.

Weitz later became deputy director of the Johnson Space Center in Houston when he retired from NASA service in May 1994. He moved to Flagstaff after retirement.

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Paul Joseph Weitz was born in Erie, Pa., on July 25, 1932. He graduated from Harbor Creek High School in Harborcreek, Pa., which later renamed the school's stadium after him. He is survived by his two children, Matthew and Cynthia.

Based in Orlando, the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation annually funds scholarships up to \$10,000 50 students with support from astronauts from the Mercury, Gemini, Apollo, Skylab, Space Shuttle and Space Station programs who participate in this educational effort. ASF also accepts other contributions.

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