



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Apollo Astronaut, Col, USMC, Ret, Fighter Pilot, Physicist and Author Dies at 90

The Astronaut Scholarship Foundation (ASF) is saddened to report the loss of another great “star sailor.” Ronnie Walter (Walt) Cunningham, Col, USMC, Ret., and NASA astronaut has passed away on January 3, 2023, at the age of 90; he is survived by his wife Dorothy (Dot), two children, Brian and Kimberly, and grandchildren.

Cunningham is best known for serving as Lunar Module Pilot for the historic Apollo 7 mission, the first test flight of NASA’s moon landing program. NASA’s hard reset after the Apollo 1 fire had reinvented the U.S. space program; Apollo 7 demonstrated the space worthiness of the Apollo command and service modules, paving the way for Apollo 8’s voyage to the moon and the Apollo 11 lunar landing. Without the success of Apollo 7, we would not have made the timetable set by John F. Kennedy, to land on the moon by the end of the decade.

Walt Cunningham was born in Creston, Iowa on March 16, 1932. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in physics from UCLA, as well as a Master of Science degree also in physics; he completed a Doctorate in Physics, with the exception of his thesis. He then enlisted in the Navy in 1951 and began his flight training. In 1953 he took a commission with the United States Marine Corps, flying 54 missions as a fighter pilot in Korea. Cunningham served in the USMC reserve squadron from 1956-1975. From 1960-63 he worked on classified defense studies for the Rand Corporation, just prior to joining NASA.

Walt Cunningham received the call that he was one of 14 astronauts chosen by NASA when they chose their “Group 3.” This was the first group to waive the test pilot background in trade for military jet fighter aircraft experience. Along with fellow astronauts Walter (Wally) M. Schirra, Jr. and Donn F. Eisele, Walt was initially assigned for the backup crew of Apollo 1 and the prime crew of Apollo 2; all this changed due to the Apollo 1 disastrous fire which subsequently cancelled the Apollo 2 mission.

After much research and ground tests, on October 11, 1968, the historic Apollo 7 mission was launched, with Wally Schirra serving as the Commander, Don Eisele serving as Command Module Pilot, and Walt serving as Lunar Module Pilot. History was made as the Saturn 1B rocket lifted off from Launch Complex 34 for the first time with humans on board. For eleven days (longer than a journey to the moon and back) the mission accomplished what it set out to – to thoroughly test the Apollo command and service modules’ systems in order to clear the path for the proposed lunar orbit mission. “She is riding like a dream” the crew radioed to mission control; Apollo 7 was a grand success. To this day Apollo 7 holds the world record for being the longest and most successful first test flight of any new flying machine.

Cunningham's last assignment at NASA’s Johnson Space Center was Chief of the Skylab branch of the Flight Crew Directorate. Here he was responsible for the operational inputs for five major pieces of manned space hardware, two different launch vehicles and 56 major onboard experiments that comprised the Skylab program.



“Walt Cunningham was part of the ever-important team who paved the way, enabling America to reach the moon-an achievement many never thought possible. This special group of “All American Boys,” these courageous space-flight elite, proved our country could and would put a human on another celestial body,” expressed Curt Brown, Astronaut Scholarship Foundation Chairman, “his accomplishments have meant so much for the space program at its Apollo era birth, as well as being such an amazing space advocate in all his years following his work in the astronaut office; we have lost a true pioneer.”

Walt Cunningham will be forever remembered by ASF for his no-nonsense approach and his straight shooting which earned him respect with everyone he met. His passion for science, even beyond space flight, kept him actively involved with the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation’s scholars, and for this we are eternally grateful. Ronnie Walter “Walt” Cunningham, you can be sure that your compadre Alan Bean has saved your seat and has a cheeseburger waiting, and your interrupted kinship may now continue into eternity. Godspeed Sir!

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