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*An interest in flying led to space missions*



General Thomas P. Stafford — 1986

## *A Western Oklahoman in Space*

By Richard Garrity

What is it like to be in the space program and fly within eight miles of the moon? A January, 1986 interview with General Thomas P. Stafford of Weatherford, Oklahoma, provided in-depth answers to this question.

General Stafford was born in Weatherford on September 17, 1930. As a child, he set his sights upon the moon. When he slept outside in the summer, the moon looked so close he thought that someday man would fly to the surface.

It had always been his ambition to fly. His home was on the flight path of the American Airline's DC 3's. He couldn't afford flying lessons, but he was able to get his first few rides with Jessie Duncan of Weatherford.

He attended and graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis as Second Lieutenant. As he was more interested in planes than ships, he volunteered as a test pilot to be able to fly higher and faster.

In 1962, he was selected by NASA to participate in the Gemini and Apollo projects. Before the flight of Gemini 6 in 1965, he was given intensive training for the orbit. During this time the future pilots had hundreds of hours in the simulator, which was a copy of the space ship. While aboard, the pilots experienced any possible conditions which they might encounter in flight. His co-pilot in training was Walter M. Schirra.

The crews were carefully selected for their ability as test pilots. There were few conflicts between the members as the importance of the mission overcame any personalities.

On December 15, 1965, Thomas Stafford and Walter Schirra were launched upon the Gemini mission. They were to rendezvous with Gemini 7, which had been in orbit twelve days. The result was the first successful space rendezvous.

Gemini 6 was a small vehicle with crew quarters not much larger than the front seat of a Volkswagen bug. It was impossible to move in the injection seat during the entire trip. Any movement would put the head against the ceiling. Feet were jammed into the foot well with one foot upon the other. The

craft was in its orbit in five minutes.

During the blast-off, there wasn't any time for fear. During the long training period, the astronauts were completely programmed to be in full control during the blast-off. If any pilot was thinking about personal risks, he didn't belong in a space capsule costing hundreds of millions of dollars. His ambition was to have a good mission and no errors.

Weightlessness didn't begin until the engines were stopped and the craft was in orbit. To combat floating, the crew members were strapped lightly to their seats. Dishes, books, food, and tools had patches of velcro attached to them to keep them in place. If not secured, pencils would drift into space. Loose objects would eventually collect on the air ducts. Some would be permanently lost. Stafford said that a person could lose an elephant.

On June 3, 1966, Command Pilot Stafford and Eugene A. Cernan were launched in the Gemini 9. They rendezvoused with a target vehicle which had been aloft for three days. The contact failed because the docking shroud didn't deploy to allow the meeting. Radar on the Gemini locked in on the target at eighty to one hundred miles. From there, the crew programmed the advance. Gemini 9 remained aloft for three days.

Aloft, the capsule orbited the earth in 90 minutes. This resulted in about 53 minutes of daylight and 30 dark. Aluminum panels were placed over the windows, and lights were lowered to darken the ship. Assorted noises of motors disturbed sleep. NASA usually had a wake-up call.

On May 18, 1969, Apollo 10 was launched from Cape Kennedy for an orbit of the moon. General Stafford was the command pilot. Eugene A. Cernan and John W. Young were copilots. It was to be a flight of nine days.

In three days it reached the moon to begin 31 orbits. Before Apollo's trip to the moon, unmanned satellites had viewed, crashed, and landed on the moon. This provided information for all phases of landing excepting the landing itself.

While Apollo 10 was in orbit around the moon, Stafford and Cernan boarded the Lunar Module and descended to about eight miles to get pictures and make observations. Temperatures on the moon ranged from -240 to +240 degrees. During the eight hours in the module, they circled the moon four times.



Thomas Stafford and the crewmen from the Apollo-Soyez test project — 1975

After the flight, the module returned to the command ship, docked, and Stafford and Cernan entered the Apollo. The module was dispatched as a dead object to circle the sun forever.

At that time the Apollo 10 was America's largest space ship. It was possible to float about in a limited manner. Water and oxygen were carried on board. Oxygen and hydrogen powered the motors. This combined to manufacture water. The excess was dumped into space to become snow or ice. Sometimes it would condense within the ship and float about until it lodged. Air pressure was about five pounds as compared to fourteen pounds at sea level.

When the mission was completed, the Apollo 10 landed in the Pacific east of the American Samoan Islands. They were greeted by Navy frogmen and taken aboard the Navy Aircraft Carrier "Princeton" where they had a ceremony and cut a cake.

General Stafford logged his fourth space flight as Apollo Commander of the Apollo-Soyuz Project (ASTP) mission July 15-24, 1975, in a joint space flight between the American astronauts and the Soviet cosmonauts.

He has logged 507 hours and 43 min-

utes in space flight and wears the Air Force Command Pilot Wings. He has flown over 110 different types of aircraft and has more than 7,100 flying hours.

He is married to the former Faye L. Shoemaker of Thomas. They have two daughters: Dionne Kay and Karin Elaine. His mother, now 92, still lives in Weatherford. The city of Weatherford has named its airport after him. In addition, a building is being constructed next to the airport to house his collections. His home street is also named after him.

Presently General Stafford works in Oklahoma City as a technical advisor for many major aerospace firms. He is on the board of directors of several major corporations and often goes abroad to advise foreign countries. He works out of an office in the Defense Technologies, Inc.

When asked the question, "Now that you have completed these space missions, would you try it again?" Stafford answered, "If possible, I'd go tomorrow!"