

Today in science: Yuri Gagarin's birthday

Yuri Gagarin was a Russian pilot who in 1961 became the first human to travel to space.

Yuri Alekseyevitch Gagarin was born on March 9, 1934 and died in an air plane crash in 1968. He would have been 83 now. He became the first human ever to travel into space on April 12, 1961, flying into orbit around Earth for 89 minutes in Russia's Vostok 1 spacecraft. He circled the Earth once and flew as high as 327 km. The entire mission, from launching to landing lasted 108 minutes.

In our time, people around the world still honor Yuri, with an annual celebration called Yuri's Night, aka the World Space Party. It happens each year on April 12 – anniversary of Yuri historic first venture into space.

Yuri was born on a small farm west of Moscow. His father was a bricklayer, a carpenter, and a farmer. His mother was a milkmaid. He was the third in a family of four children. After the war, the family moved to Gziatsk. Gagarin was inspired to become a pilot while still a teenager. When a Russian Yak fighter plane was forced to land in a field near his home, the praise those pilots received left a deep mark on the young Gagarin. He wanted to be like them. He worked in a factory that melts metals in special furnaces and pours the molten metal into moulds for making products. He was singled out for his skillfulness and sent to the Saratov Technical School to further his studies.

. There he had the chance to join a local flying club. He learned to operate a plane, and flew by himself for the first time in 1955. That same year, he also graduated from school, and was recruited by the Soviet Army. At the advice of his flying mentor, he joined the Soviet Air Force, and went on studying at the Orenburg School of Aviation, where he was taught to fly MIGs.

During his studies at Orenburg, he also met his future wife, **Valentina Ivanova Goryacheva**, who was a nursing student at the time.

In November, 1957, when he graduated from Orenburg with honours he married Valentina. **The couple had two girls, Yelena, and Galina.**

In 1959, after the Russians succeeded at photographing the far side of the moon for the first time with Luna 3, Yuri and a few other men were accepted for cosmonaut training in 1960, after a lot of selections. Gagarin was then known for his good humour, perseverance, and calm.

On April 12, 1961, the Russians amazed the world by launching Vostok 3KA-3 (Vostok 1) from the Baikonur Cosmodrome with Yuri Gagarin aboard. **Vostok means East in Russian - East for Sunrise, and for the Rise of the Space Age.**

Gagarin became an international celebrity. **Nikita Khrushchev awarded him with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.** However it is rumoured that Gagarin didn't handle his fame very well.

In 1962, he was appointed as a deputy of the Soviet Union, and he was elected to the Central Committee of the Young Communist League. Later the training centre was named for him. The following year he started extensive training to become a fighter pilot. He died on March 27, 1968 in a crash of a MiG, flying from the Chkalovski Air Base. His ashes are stored in the Kremlin Building, Moscow.

AK, with EarthSky Notes.



"Let's go! (Poyekhali!)"



Gagarin in Sweden in 1964.

