

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

NASA Celebrates Legacy of First Black American Astronaut

NASA celebrates Robert H. Lawrence, Jr. on the anniversary of his death in December

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Member

Fifty years ago, a tragic accident ended the groundbreaking career of Major Robert H. Lawrence, Jr., a Chicago native and stellar Air Force pilot who became America's first Black astronaut.

On Dec. 8, 2017 — the 50th anniversary of his death — NASA honored his often-ignored legacy and contributions to the agency.

Earlier this year, the Chicago Crusader reported about the lack of visibility of NASA's first Black American astronaut and helped to raise awareness about Lawrence's incredible journey.

In planning a story for its annual Black History Month edition, Chicago Crusader staffers discovered that little was being done to honor Lawrence, while NASA held memorials to mark the 50th anniversary of three, White astronauts who perished in a fire aboard



Members of the Omega Psi Phi fraternity join NASA in marking the 50th Anniversary of the death of Major Robert H. Lawrence, Jr. at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., on December 8.

the Apollo 1 space module, during a preflight test.

The *Crusader* story lauding Lawrence's achievements was published in dozens of Black newspapers after the National Newspapers Publishers Association (NNPA) carried it on its newswire.

Born in 1935 to the late Gwendolyn Duncan and Robert H. Lawrence, Sr., the future Air Force pilot was a man ahead of his time. Long before magnet and STEM programs

were part of the high school curriculum, Lawrence excelled in math and science.

At 16, he graduated with honors from Englewood High School and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Bradley University. He married the late Barbara Cress from the prominent Chicago Cress family and entered the Air Force at age 21 before earning a doctorate in physical chemistry from Ohio State University, becoming the first astro-



Robert Henry Lawrence, Jr. was the first African American astronaut.

naut at NASA to earn a doctorate degree.

As a United States Air Force pilot, Lawrence accumulated over 2,500 flight hours. In June 1967, Lawrence graduated from the U.S. Air Force Test Pilot School (Class '66B) at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif. In that same month, he was selected by the USAF as an astronaut for their Manned Orbital Laboratory (MOL) program, thus becoming the first Black astronaut.

Lawrence died while

training another pilot, Maj. John Royer, to perform the "flare" maneuver — an operation that Lawrence had already mastered — in the F-104 Starfighter.

According to NBC News, "Lawrence's memory languished in obscurity" partly due to the fact that, the Pentagon only recognized someone as an "astronaut" if they actually flew to an altitude above 50 miles.

However, Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Va.) mounted a campaign that forced

NASA to put Lawrence's name on the Space Mirror Memorial in 1997 — 30 years after Lawrence's death.

"On Dec. 8, 1997, on the thirtieth anniversary of his death, Lawrence had his name unveiled on the Florida memorial," NBC News reported.

The ceremony recognizing Lawrence, earlier this month — although spirited, at times — was a somber one for the 300 guests that included dec-

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2018 Drum Major Celebration

Join the Beloved Community as we honor the women and men of Oregon who embody the spirit and service of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 13
Salute to Greatness
Luncheon & Awards Ceremony
12:00 – 2:00pm

SUNDAY, JANUARY 14
Empower the Dream
Interfaith Speaker Series
2:00 – 4:00pm

Mayor Ted Wheeler • Senator Margaret Carter • Senator Lew Frederick
Multnomah County Commissioner Loretta Smith • Portland City Commissioner Nick Fish
Portland Spiritual Leaders

Reservations & Details: www.vafbcpx.org

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