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Russian and U.S. Space Legends Meet 40 Years After 'Handshake in Space' (Video)

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Former Apollo spacecraft commander Thomas Stafford (L) and his Russian Soyuz 19 counterpart Alexei Leonov pose for a picture at the Museum of Cosmonautics in Moscow, Russia, July 15, 2015.

Friday marks 40 years since the first docking of two spacecraft designed and built by two different nations as part of the Apollo-Soyuz mission.

The joint mission by the United States and Soviet Union was a high symbol of detente, marking the end of the Cold War space race and the foundation of today's 15-nation International Space Station (ISS).

Pitched by President Richard Nixon in 1972, the mission launched on July 15, 1975. Two spacecraft took off from opposite ends of the earth — the Kennedy Space Center in Florida and the ultra-secret Soviet cosmodrome in Baikonur, Kazakhstan.

Two days later, on July 17, the American Apollo spacecraft, commanded by legendary astronaut General Thomas Stafford, met its Soviet Soyuz counterpart, commanded by cosmonaut Alexei Leonov, high above the Elbe River in Germany.

It was the first time the two Cold War space programs joined in common cause, putting an end to the space race and ushering in a new era of outer space cooperation that lives on today in the form of the ISS.

"The legacy of Apollo-Soyuz is the foundation [it laid]," General Stafford told The Moscow Times on Wednesday at a celebration of the 40th anniversary of the historic mission, which was known as the "handshake in space."

Stafford said it demonstrated "that two countries, the two superpowers in the world, with different languages, different systems of measurement, and two different political systems could work together for a common goal and do it successfully, [thereby laying] the foundation for future work in space."

For All Mankind

Almost 20 years after the launch of the Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957 sparked the Cold War space race, the era of competition between NASA and the ultra-secret Soviet space program was drawing to an end.

In 1972, NASA's Apollo moon program ended after President Richard Nixon canceled the final two planned missions. Spacecraft had already been built, however, and the agency needed something to do with its surplus Apollo modules.

In the spirit of detente — a policy spearheaded by Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in the early 1970s — the U.S. president proposed using one of the Apollo ships in a cooperative space project with the U.S.S.R. as a symbol of easing tensions between the superpowers.

The two ships, which represented the cumulative work of two completely different space programs and space technologies, met in space and docked over the Elbe River, where 30 years earlier U.S. and Soviet forces converged during their push into Nazi Germany.

"We were supposed to open the hatches and shake hands over Moscow, but it happened over the Elbe because we were 20 minutes ahead of schedule," said General Alexei Leonov, the Russian cosmonaut who commanded the Soviet Soyuz half of the mission.

"Imagine that. In 1945 our fathers met on the Elbe, and in 1975 their sons met over [it]," Leonov said during the celebrations at Moscow's Museum of Cosmonautics on Wednesday.

Lasting Friendship

The legacy of the Apollo-Soyuz mission lives on today, forming the foundation of modern U.S.-Russia space cooperation. The institutional format of joint mission planning and cooperative astronaut training at facilities across the globe was pioneered in the three years leading up to the mission.

"The Apollo-Soyuz Test Project was an indispensable technical precursor of the [U.S.-Russia] Shuttle-Mir Program in the 1990s, and the current International Space Station program," said U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Tefft at the ceremony.

"The U.S. and Russia are still using significant engineering achievements of that joint project. From a human standpoint, it is highly notable that the two commanders, Tom Stafford and Alexei Leonov, have become close friends and have maintained their friendship all these years," Tefft added.

Stafford and Leonov were both legends in their home countries for their exploits during the space race.

Leonov gained world fame in 1965 when he became the first man to walk in space during the Soviet Voskhod 2 mission. Stafford was a veteran of two spaceflights during NASA's Gemini program and a flight to the moon on Apollo 10 to test the lunar lander vehicle before Neil Armstrong's Apollo 11 mission.

For Apollo-Soyuz, the two learned each other's languages. Leonov spoke in English during the mission and Stafford spoke Russian — though with a heavy Oklahoma drawl. They quickly bonded as a crew, Leonov said during a press conference on Wednesday, and took to playing jokes on each other.

Leonov told a story from the mission in which he presented Stafford and the American crew with a tube allegedly containing Stolichnaya vodka, insisting the astronauts drink it — as was Russian tradition. The U.S. crew politely refused, citing NASA regulations, but eventually the tubes were opened and discovered to contain only borscht. Leonov put the vodka label on as a joke.

So began a friendship that has lasted decades. "We keep in touch," Stafford said, "I talk to him every two or three weeks by telephone and we see each other two or three times a year. We hunt birds together, we hunt elk together."

Leonov was also instrumental in helping Stafford adopt two Russian boys, the astronaut said.

"I never knew when I flew on Apollo-Soyuz that 27 years later I would adopt two Russian orphan boys, but he helped me and he was my character witness in front of the judge when my wife and I adopted them. So he helped me a lot, he helped me pick out the two boys. They are both wonderful sons."

One of Stafford's Russian sons, Stas, is currently a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, a true sign that the Apollo-Soyuz mission bridged worlds separated by seemingly insurmountable political and cultural barriers.

Responding to a question about current tensions between the U.S. and Russia and their possible impact on the ISS program, Stafford said that "the tensions today are nothing compared to the tensions we had during the height of the Cold War."

"It never affected us working in space together," he concluded," and it doesn't affect what is going on aboard the International Space Station."

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