

Martin County's Astronaut

Youngsters often grow up aspiring to be baseball or football players, actors or actresses, or perhaps even astronauts. These are goals and dreams that will elude most; however, one young man from Martin County actually fulfilled his dream of becoming an astronaut.

The cold war era of the 1950s intensified on October 4, 1957, with Russia's launching of the unmanned satellite, Sputnik. It was the world's first artificial satellite and the first man-made object to be placed into the Earth's orbit. Sputnik's launch came as a rather unpleasant surprise to most Americans. The American public considered space to be the next frontier, a natural extension of the innate tradition of American exploration and explorers throughout history.

The U. S. Space Program intensified from that point forward and culminated with Apollo 11 and astronauts Neil Armstrong, "Buzz" Aldrin, and Michael Collins. On July 20, 1969, Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon's surface while uttering his iconic quote: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

Martin County's connection to the space program is Sherburn native and NASA Astronaut Dale A. Gardner. Gardner was born in Fairmont, spent part of his time growing up in Sherburn, and graduated Valedictorian of his class from Savanna Community High School in Savannah, Illinois, in 1966. He then went on to receive a Bachelor of Science Degree in Engineering Physics, magna cum laude, from the University of Illinois in 1970.

After graduating from college he entered active duty with the U. S. Navy Aviation Officer Candidate School. Upon being commissioned as an Ensign, he was selected as the most promising naval officer from his class. In 1970 he began Basic Naval Flight Officer training in Pensacola, Florida. He graduated from this program with the highest academic average ever achieved in the history of the squadron at that time.

Gardner was selected by NASA as an Astronaut Candidate in January of 1978 and reported to the Johnson Space Center in July of 1978. He completed the training period in August of 1979 making him eligible for assignment as a mission specialist astronaut. He later served as the Astronaut Project Manager for the flight software in the shuttle onboard computers leading up to the first flight in April of 1981. He served as a support crew astronaut, a mission specialist, and logged 337 hours in space including 225 orbits of the earth and two space walks. In total, he logged more than 2,300 hours flying time in more than twenty different types of aircraft and spacecraft.

Gardner flew shuttle missions in 1983 and 1984 and was also selected to be a member of the first shuttle mission to launch from Vandenberg Air Force Base into a polar orbit; however, this project was cancelled as a result of the Challenger accident. In addition, in 1984 he was involved in a shuttle mission salvaging two satellites that were in the wrong orbits and brought them back to earth. He went on two spacewalks totaling twelve hours and he was also the first to go outside of a space vehicle by utilizing a backpack all the while being unattached to his spacecraft.

Gardner retired from the Navy in 1990. He worked for TRW, Inc. in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and was later associated with Northrup Grumman's Colorado Springs operations. After that he joined the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colorado, as the Associate Director for Renewable Fuels Science & Technology. Gardner retired in 2013 and passed away in February of 2014.¹

NASA Astronaut Dale Gardner represents another example of a Martin County native that accomplished exemplary distinction in his chosen field. He distinguished himself by being one of thirty-five candidates chosen from a field of 8,079 applicants to the U. S. Space Agency's shuttle program.² Gardner was the recipient of a multitude of special honors, he was academically gifted, he achieved significant accomplishments in his chosen profession, and most importantly he made a positive difference in the lives of Americans and our society as a whole.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Russ & Dottie Peterson, Dale Gardner's aunt and uncle, for the photo included with this article and additional information about Dale Gardner's life and accomplishments.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

¹ <http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/htmlbios/gardner-da.html>

² Fairmont Sentinel, January 19, 1978.



Russ & Dottie,
Come on down and
see us! Maybe we
can take in an Oilers
or Astros game!
Dale

Dale A. Gardner





Navy Lt. Dale Gardner