# Air and Space this Week

## Item of the Week

# *R.I.P. Michael Collins*

**Originally appeared May 3, 2021**

**KEY WORDS: Michael Collins Apollo 11 National Air and Space Museum Director *Carrying the Fire***

*Apollo 11 astronaut Michael Collins passed away last week. A sad day. You almost certainly saw the news, and likely know quite a bit about this remarkable man. I hope you find comfort in my tribute to him below, and perhaps see some things about him you didn't know.*

*Prometheus, the Titan God of Fire, created Humanity from clay, then defied Zeus by stealing Fire from Olympus and **Carrying the Fire** to Humans, creating civilization. Zeus was angry, and had Prometheus chained to a rock, where Zeus' eagle would eat his liver every day (it re-grew at night). It was to be a never-ending torment, but Prometheus was ultimately rescued by the great hero, Heracles.*

Jeremiah Bernard Collins emigrated to the U.S. from Ireland in the mid-1860s. His destination was Cincinnati, where he joined up with other members of his extended family who escaped the awful potato famine days of the decade earlier. He only a boy when he made the trip, and his family believes he actually served as a drummer boy during the Civil War. One thing was certain. He had an uncommonly-good way with horses.

Collins made his way southward after the War, ending up in New Orleans, where he put his horse skills to good use working at the local livery stable, handling the burgeoning number of delivery wagons and other needs of a growing city. The stable owner, James Lawton, had a pretty daughter named Kate, and she caught young Jeremiah's eye. The feeling was mutual, they married and had eleven children. The first-born was a boy, and they named him for Kate's father, James Lawton Collins.

Young James would not grow to be a tall man, but he shared, perhaps eclipsed, his father's skill with horses. He became an accomplished polo player, and established a good reputation as an outstanding judge of horses. He enrolled at Tulane, but didn't stay there long. Kate's brother was then Mayor of New Orleans, and through his connection James obtained an appointment to West Point.

After graduation, the Philippine-American War was gearing up, and James was posted to the 8th Cavalry, where General Pershing, recognizing James' horsemanship, made him his aide-de-camp. He served in France in WWI, and after that war commanded a battalion of the First Infantry Division's 7th Field Artillery. He later served as a defense attaché in Italy, and

commanded the Puerto Rico Detachment during WWII. He retired as a Major General and passed away in 1946.

Old Jeremiah's family was Army all the way. Another of his sons, Joseph Lawton Collins, also had an exemplary career and ended up serving as the Army Chief of Staff during the Korean Conflict. Not bad for an immigrant drummer boy!

James Lawton Collins had four children, two sons and two daughters.

James Lawton Collins, Jr., was the oldest, born on November 5, 1917. Following the now-family-tradition, he matriculated at West Point in 1907, and was posted to the 18th Field Artillery Regiment on September 12, 1939. He, too, was an expert horseman, and would serve as an aide-de-camp to his father, who was then in charge of the Puerto Rico detachment. He worked his way up the ranks, and by D-Day he was a lieutenant colonel, and he went ashore at Utah Beach a week after the invasion began. He was wounded by friendly fire, but continued to serve in Normandy. He would also fight at the Battle of Aachen, the Battle of the Bulge, and other places, winning a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, a Legion of Merit, a Purple Heart, and a Croix de Guerre with palm.

JLC Junior had a really impressive career after the War, serving in a series of increasingly-important billets. He was multi-lingual, and commanded the Army Language School for two years, and then was the first director of the Defense Language Institute in D.C. He was a special assistant to General Westmorland during the Vietnam years, served as Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff, and spent three years in Germany in command of V Corps Artillery. His post-War activities added to his awards, which included the DSM with two oak leaf clusters and another Legion of Merit.

Collins was recalled to service after he retired to serve as the Army's Chief of Military History. He oversaw the preparation and publication of a number of important accounts of Twentieth Century military topics. He spent twelve years in this post before retiring a second time. He moved to the Virginia horse country and became an accomplished viticulturalist. He passed away on May 6, 2002.

How would you like to be that guy's much-younger brother? How could you possibly compete with a career record like that, or your father's for that matter.

Well, you could go to the Moon! Oh, and be a Major General to boot.

James Lawton Collins' younger son, Michael, was born on October 31, 1930, in Rome, during his father's service as a military attaché. His childhood was that of a serviceperson's child, with lots of moving from posting to posting. Being almost 13 years younger than his brother, he obviously had no chance to be involved in WWII. His mother wanted him to become a diplomat, not a warrior, but he held with the family tradition and received an appointment to West Point (not only did his father, uncle, and brother take this route, another uncle and a cousin followed suit). He graduated in the Class of 1952. Future astronaut Ed White was a classmate, but they did not know one another at that time.

The early mid-50s was a time of transition for the U.S. Army, particularly the Army Air Corps. The U.S. Air Force Academy (outside my window), was under construction, but USMA graduates were eligible for commissions in the newly-created service branch. There were pros and cons to this decision. There were a LOT of high-ranking young men in the AAC due to the expansion of the service in WWII, so promotions were going to be very slow for the next decade or so in the Air Force. On the other hand, Michael had a greater-than-normal appreciation for the changes that would come in the military as aeronautical advances continued to take place. Plus, being in the new branch would help him avoid whispers of nepotism since his uncle and brother held high rank. He had just missed action in Korea.

Collins' decision required him to become a pilot, ASAP. He dove right in with basic flight training in the T-6 Texan before converting over to jets. He was proving to be a capable and confident pilot, and was selected for advanced training at Nellis AFB, flying the F-86. In January, 1954, he was posted to the 21st Fighter-Bomber Wing at George AFB, where he trained on both air-to-ground attack and nuclear weapon delivery. He became quite adept at the former. He did have one dangerous event during this period. He flew in a NATO exercise in 1956 where his aircraft suffered a fire that forced him to eject. Fortunately, successfully.

Collins met his wife at this time, and they were married in 1957. They would have three children in the ensuing decade.

A few dull postings followed, but they required him to fly a lot of hours, which made him eligible to apply for admission to the Air Force's Experimental Test Pilot School at Edwards AFB in late 1960. He made it, along with future astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Irwin, and Tom Stafford. He loved this billet! They flew progressively more-capable jets, ending up with the F-104 Starfighter.

When John Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth, Michael was motivated to put in an application for the second group of astronauts to be selected. Many, many examinations of all kinds followed, but the competition was fierce, the candidates supremely-well qualified, and the end result was a "no."

Collins then turned back to Edwards, seeking additional training in the hope of serving in the X-15 and X-20 (DynaSoar) projects. Three other classmates here became astronauts, too, Charles Bassett, Edward Givens, and Joe Engle. Bassett would die in a plane crash with fellow astronaut Elliot See, and Givens would die in a car crash before he received a flight assignment.

The flying Collins got to do was challenging, but at times downright fun. They weren't allowed to fly their Starfighters faster than Mach 2, so they'd get up fairly high, push their speed to the red line, then cut throttle and pull back hard on the stick, competing with one another as to who could zoom climb the highest. The winner (not Collins) could make it to 90,000'!

NASA's third astronaut call came in June, 1963. Collins again applied, and this time, he made it.

Collins would later write what is widely-regarded as one of the best astronaut memoirs produced, and it wasn't an "As Told To" kind of book. I read my copy some years ago, and dusted it off to prepare this piece. It is a most interesting book, and I was struck by the amount

of attention he paid to Deke Slayton's crew selection process. I had "The Right Stuff" flashbacks several times!

The Original Seven, of course, had Project Mercury covered. The second and third groups were slated for subsequent flights, with some senior participation by the Mercury guys. The third group folks began getting missions later in the Gemini sequence. Slayton liked to assign a crew as back-ups to a flight (for which they had to take the same training as the prime crew), then they would fly the third flight after that, using the time taken by the two intervening flights for in-depth training for theirs.

Collins' first assignment was a plum (since he was the first in his group to get one): he'd fly as backup pilot with Ed White as back-up mission commander on the *Gemini 7* mission. This would set them up to be the prime crew on *Gemini 10*. The prime crew for *Gemini 7* was Frank Borman and Jim Lovell in the pilot role. *Gemini 7* was a success, but Ed White was moved to the Apollo program (cue ominous music). Collins was assigned to the *Gemini 10* prime crew as expected, and Gemini veteran John Young took White's place as mission commander, with Lovell and Buzz Aldrin as back-ups.

Everything was going well until the *Gemini 9* prime crew, Charles Bassett and Elliot See, died in a crash of their T-38. Their backups, Tom Stafford and Gene Cernan, replaced them, and Lovell and Aldrin moved up to be their back-ups. Alan Bean and C.C. Williams moved up to be the *Gemini 10* back-up crew. Alan Bean you know about (if you don't, see here); not long after *Gemini 10*, C.C. Williams died in a tragic plane crash (October 5, 1967). He was on his way to see his father, who was dying of cancer, when a mechanical failure caused his T-38 to crash violently. He'd been the first bachelor astronaut, but that changed in mid-1964 when he married Jane Elizabeth Lansche. He had one child, and Beth was pregnant with another. [I had the great pleasure of working with Beth when I post-Doc'd at the Lunar and Planetary Institute. She was a wonderful colleague, a whirlwind at work, and a very charming person.]

*Gemini 10* launched on July 18, 1966. An Agena docking vehicle had been launched a bit earlier for *Gemini 10* to rendezvous and dock with. They did so successfully, and used the Agena's engine first to reach a higher orbit than previously achieved by a crewed spacecraft, then again to allow a rendezvous with the Agena docking vehicle launched for the malfunctioned-shortened mission of *Gemini 8* (remember Neil Armstrong saving the day on that one here). Collins became the first astronaut to spacewalk twice during a single mission. *Gemini 10* had a few problems, but was largely successful.

There were only twelve Gemini missions, so Collins' next assignment would have to be Apollo. There was considerable juggling of the assignments, with Slayton deciding that each mission commander would have to be a veteran astronaut, and the command module pilot should also be a veteran if possible, since they would be flying the capsule alone while the other two astronauts descended to the Moon. Collins was originally slated for the back-up crew of Apollo 2, which was ultimately canceled. More juggling. Collins was then assigned to Frank Borman's crew for what would become *Apollo 8*. Things were further complicated by the tragic *Apollo 1*

fire, and the deaths of Gus Grissom, Ed White, and Roger Chaffee. The way things worked out, it fell to Michael to be the one to tell Martha Chaffee she was now a widow.

Another glitch came in 1968, when Collins suffered a herniated spinal disc, which required fusion surgery. This knocked him off Borman's crew, but since he had trained extensively for that flight, he served as the CapCom (capsule communicator) for the mission. That mission was a spectacular success, and shortly afterward, the *Apollo 11* crew was announced. Neil Armstrong would command, Buzz Aldrin would be the lunar module pilot, and Michael Collins would be the Command Module Pilot.

I am sure you are all aware of the success of *Apollo 11*! But can you imagine, when the other two were walking on the surface of the Moon, and you were in its shadow, how lonely it must have been. Collins didn't think so, and performed the myriad of housekeeping chores needed to keep the capsule and its supporting systems working properly.

After the ticker tape parades, the state dinners, the seemingly-endless accolades, and the whirlwind tour of 22 different countries, Collins' life began to return to some semblance of "normal." But where does one go after they've been to the Moon? And where after NASA canceled the final three planned Moon missions?

This was 1969, and remember your history. The protests against the Vietnam War were growing in intensity (although Kent State still lay a year in the future). President Nixon urged him to take a position in the State Department as the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. Perhaps Nixon figured Collins' *Apollo 11* fame would protect him from some of the turmoil. What he found was a situation not unlike today's, where instead of helping, "talk serve(d) mainly to mirror one's beliefs, to reinforce existing prejudices, to lock out opposing views." Collins retired from active duty when he took the State Department position, but remained active as a senior officer in the USAF Reserve.

He hated the job. His special skills, training, and public stature were grossly underutilized. I would suspect he more than once contemplated his future while remembering his uncle, and how his love for history moved him to postpone retirement for a 12-year stint as the Army's Chief of Military History.

At this juncture, a fortuitous (for everyone) set of events coalesced to affect Collins' future. This was the very early 70s. The war against the war was reaching its climax. Kent State was on everyone's mind. The Nation's Bicentennial was just around the corner. And the Smithsonian, and Congress, were coming to a "crossroads."

Immediately after WWII, "Hap" Arnold and other key military figures pushed for a museum to commemorate the USA's victory, particularly the role played by air power. They arranged for a number of important planes and other artifacts be set aside. Congress agreed, well, a bit. They passed an authorization bill to create a National Air Museum under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, on August 12, 1946.

But Congress failed to pass an appropriation bill that would allow the building of the museum needed to house and showcase the planes and artifacts available!

Interest generated by the launch of *Sputnik 1* was not sufficient to spur the appropriation. Neither was the donation to the NAM of Shepard's and Glenn's Mercury capsules. The nascent collection was moved to the Arts and Industries Building in 1963. The museum expanded its scope, and its name, becoming the National Air and Space Museum in 1966. Still no appropriation. *Apollo 11* spiked public interest further. Still no bucks. Senator Barry Goldwater, a retired USAF major general, pushed hard in the Senate for funding, especially in a speech there in in May, 1970. STILL no appropriation.

Senator Goldwater was many things, but a quitter was not one of them. And he picked up a powerful ally along the way. One Michael Collins. Oh, and growing public support, too. The Senator and the history-oriented Astronaut pushed very hard, and finally, Congress relented and appropriated a total of $40 million in support. This was significantly less than the amount desired, and would force some serious "value engineering." Economies were necessary, and one would come back and bite NASM, forty years and 350 million visitors later.

But who should lead the enormous effort of creating and filling a large museum, on a short time fuse? Who else: Michael Collins!

The tasks Collins faced were formidable, indeed. He had to: Oversee the planning and construction of the new building, ensure that it would open in time for the Bicentennial, hire museum staff, oversee the construction of the galleries the new museum would contain, and found the still-extant Center for Earth and Planetary Studies, one of the three academic units at NASM. Collins soft-pedaled the magnitude of the task when he said it was a "monumental effort" requiring tons of "dedicated teamwork and plain hard work."

He accomplished all tasks brilliantly. NASM opened on time, had over a million visitors in its first month, and quickly established itself as one of the top four museums in the world in terms of visitorship (two of the other three are Smithsonian units: The National American History Museum and the National Museum of Natural History. The Louvre rounds out the quartet).

**CODA:** The opening of the National Air and Space Museum on July 1, 1976 was a very big deal. Not only was it the Nation's Bicentennial, and the *Viking 1* spacecraft was poised to make the very first soft landing on Mars. What better way was there to officially open the building than by having the ceremonial ribbon be cut by a replica of the Viking sampling arm, actuated by a signal from the *Viking* spacecraft? That's exactly what they did! President Ford was in attendance, as was VP Nelson Rockefeller and Chief Justice Warren Burger. See the references for links!

Collins somehow found the time to author (without assistance) arguably the best of the astronaut (auto)biographies, ***Carrying the Fire***, in 1974. I find the comparison of going to the Moon and stealing Fire from the Gods to be quite beautiful.

Collins retired from the Air Force Reserves in 1982, with a rank of Major General.

Collins was absolutely the right guy in the right place at the right time. He had the necessary combination of education, training, experience, military rank, fame, and political savvy to balance all of the many competing forces buffeting the new museum during its creation and

formative years. He held the Directorship until 1978, when he promoted to become Undersecretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

Collins was as non-idle in "retirement" as his uncle. After the Smithsonian, he was the VP at a major aerospace company, and then formed his own consulting agency. He also wrote several other books, including one for children, and enjoyed painting watercolors.

Collins' wife passed in 2014, and Michael Collins passed last week, on April 28.

God Speed, Michael Collins!

**REFERENCES**

Collins, Michael, *Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journey*, (40th Anniversary Edition, 2009), Strauss and Giroux, ISBN 978-0374531942

JSC Oral History, October, 1997: https://historycollection.jsc.nasa.gov/JSCHistoryPortal/history/oral_histories/CollinsM/MC_10-8-97.pdf

NASA Statement from MC July 15, 2009: https://www.nasa.gov/home/hqnews/2009/jul/HQ_09-164_Collins_statement.txt

*Apollo 11* Mission Report: https://www.hq.nasa.gov/alsj/a11/a11MIssionReport_1971015566.pdf

Project Gemini: https://history.nasa.gov/SP-4203/toc.htm

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Collins_(astronaut)

NASM: Reflect On His Legacy: https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/remembering-michael-collins

NASM: Statement from Interim Director: https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/carrying-fire

**Opening of the National Air and Space Museum**

Video clip (narrated by NASM's Don Lopez!): here

SI Archives: https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_396616

NASM Stories: https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/new-milestones

Last Edited on 2 Ma7 2021