

Donald “Deke” K. Slayton

OA-4 Mission SS Deke Slayton II



A decorated U.S. Air Force pilot and NASA astronaut, the late Donald “Deke” K. Slayton was a champion of America’s commercial space program. To salute Slayton’s significant lifetime contributions to American leadership in space, Orbital ATK has named its Cygnus spacecraft for the OA-4 mission the SS Deke Slayton II.

A Pilot is Born

Slayton entered the USAF in 1942 and earned his wings one year later. He flew 63 combat missions over Europe and Japan during World War II. When the war ended, he left the USAF and completed his bachelor’s degree in aeronautical engineering from the University of Minnesota. After working for two years with Boeing Aircraft Corporation, he was recalled to active duty in 1951 with the Minnesota Air National Guard where he served as a flight test officer, technical inspector, fighter pilot and experimental test pilot until April 1959.

A New Calling: Space

In 1959 he joined NASA and was later named one of the original astronauts for the Mercury program. He was scheduled to pilot the Mercury-Atlas 7 mission, but ultimately was reassigned due to a heart condition. Over the next several years, Slayton served as the first chief of the Astronaut Office, and later, Director of Flight Crew Operations. He had a decisive role in choosing the crews for the Gemini and Apollo programs, including the decision of who would be the first person on the Moon.

In March 1972, Slayton received a clean bill of health and was restored to full-flight status. He made his first space flight in July 1975 as Apollo docking module pilot of the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project mission which culminated in the first historical meeting in space between U.S. astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts, laying the foundation for joint experiments and mutual assistance in future space explorations.

Following this flight, Slayton served as Manager for Approach and Landing Test Project, where he helped NASA verify the capability to ferry the Space Shuttle aboard a 747 jet. He later served as Manager of Orbital Flight Test until his retirement from NASA in 1982.

The Birth of Commercial Space Exploration

After his retirement Slayton was named president of Space Services Inc. of America (SSI) which sought to open space to the commercial market. During a time when privately financed space exploration was nonexistent, SSI became a pioneer in developing commercial launch services. Slayton managed the design, development and marketing of the company’s Conestoga family of suborbital launch vehicles. On Sept. 9, 1982 SSI made history with the launch of the first privately funded space launch vehicle, Conestoga 1. Making headlines around the world, the launch of Conestoga 1 blazed the trail for the next generation of commercial space industry entrepreneurs.

In addition to his key role with SSI, Slayton also served as chairman of Space America Inc. and was the first member of the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Commercial Space Transportation Advisory Committee (COMSTAC). Throughout his lifetime, Slayton won numerous awards and honors, including the Distinguished Flying Cross, three NASA Distinguished Service Medals, the NASA Exceptional Service Medal, the World War II Victory Medal, the National Defense Service Medal (with star), the Wright Brothers International Manned Space Flight Award, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Space Award among others.