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COSMONAUT PHAM THUAN AND VIETNAM'S ROAD TO SPACE

Abstract

Cosmonaut Pham Thuan and Vietnam's road to space

By Philippe Cosyn and Vu Trong Thu

Following a visit by Soviet cosmonaut German Titov in the early 1960s to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN), Vietnamese leaders, including Ho Chi Minh, started to take an active interest in space issues.

However, circumstances besetting the country did not allow further work in this area. In 1980, however the Soviet Union, in the framework of the Intercosmos program, offered to fly cosmonauts from friendly countries to fly aboard a Soyuz spacecraft and work alongside Soviet cosmonauts in the Salyut-6 space station. The candidates were selected among the top test pilots in the countries involved.

Vietnam was among the countries invited to take part in this venture. Subsequently, candidates were selected among jet pilots in the Vietnamese air force. The pilot ultimately chosen was Pham Tuan, a Soviet-trained flight mechanic who, in the war-years, rose through the ranks to become a celebrated MiG-21 fighter pilot.

On July 23, 1980 , Pham Tuan was launched into space aboard the Soyuz 37 commanded by Soviet cosmonaut Viktor Gorbatko, docking with the Salyut-6 space station, subsequently performing a number of scientific experiments. Following his mission, Pham Tuan was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general responsible for the defense industry. He later was put in charge of civil aviation. He is still a popular figure in his country and an active businessman.

Pham Tuan's flight was followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Intercosmos program. However, based on the experience gained in those years, Vietnam in recent years started an active space program, benefitting from the down-to-earth applications of space technology , working with international partners.