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THE MOD PAYLOAD SPECIALISTS – WHEN BRITAIN HAD AN ASTRONAUT CORPS

Abstract

In December 2015, Major Timothy Peake launched to the International Space Station, becoming the United Kingdom's first official astronaut. Before him, several Britons have flown to space – either under private contract or as NASA astronauts. But in the 1980s, a group of four UK military astronauts were set to fly the Union Flag in space. In 1984, the UK Ministry of Defence announced that the Skynet 4 series of military communications satellites was to be launched by a US space shuttle. President Ronald Reagan had invited the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to field British astronauts to fly as payload specialists on the flights launching the Skynet satellites. Consequently, the MoD selected four astronauts, one each from the Royal Airforce, Royal Navy, British Army and one MoD civil servant: Squadron Leader Nigel Wood, Commander Peter Longhurst, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Farrimond and Christopher Holmes. The four commenced training at NASA and were to launch into space on the space shuttles launching the Skynet satellites and oversee their deployment. The British military astronaut candidates familiarized themselves with the Skynet satellites and trained as part of the NASA payload specialist program at Johnson Space Center in Houston. In 1986, Nigel Wood was scheduled to fly on the STS-61H mission, deploying Skynet 4A, with Farrimond serving as back-up. The Challenger disaster in January 1986 unfortunately disturbed this schedule and eventually led to the mission's cancellation. The four astronauts then resumed their careers in the British Armed Forces. One of the four, Richard Farrimond, later became involved with British Aerospace Space Systems and its successor companies, further working on the Skynet program. In 1991, Helen Sharman became the first British citizen in space, flying to the Soviet space station Mir. This is intended to have a look on a sometimes overlooked chapter in the history of "official" UK human spaceflight.