September 2024 - Issue 146

ORBIT

Astro Space Stamp Society

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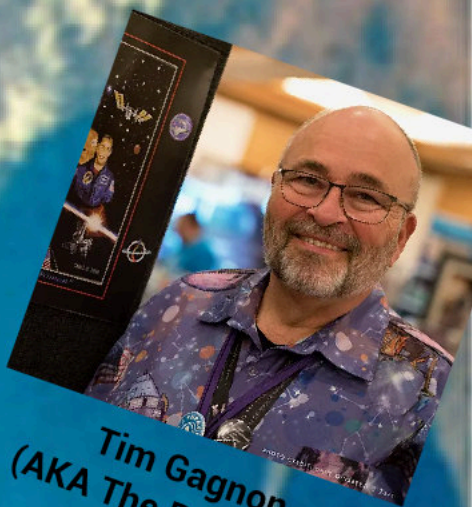

Tim Gagnon (AKA The Patch Guy)

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Editorial

As I write this editorial I'm still in England enjoying the arrival of our latest grandchild, a baby girl. This has meant that I have had to produce this issue of Orbit on an old laptop. It was not ideal, but I got this issue together. As I've been in England for an unusually long time, this means that I haven't had a chance to send out the covers to the winners of the last competition (they'll be sent out when I get home).

It also means that I haven't been able to do the last part of the Astronomy and Space Stamps catalogue. I hope to have the next part ready for the next issue.

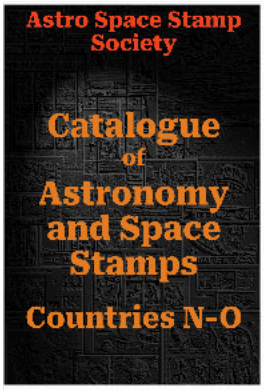
We still have a packed issue for you, with Nik Steggall taking us on a tour of America's secret space plane and Umberto Cavallaro telling us about Marina Vasilevskaya, the first Belarusian woman in space.

We welcome Jonathan McDowell, who will be giving us space reports on what is happening up on the space station and other space-related topics.

Member John Macco has sent in an article about the Apollo 15 cover scandal that appeared in the American Philatelist Society's magazine in 1972 as a supplement to the articles that have appeared in Orbit.

We also take a look at the new UN International Moon Day stamps, as well as new issues by Peter Hoffman and space patches by Tim Gagnon.

Derek



For the Catalogues of Astronomy and Space Stamps - Female Astronauts - Star Trek and Star Wars

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astrospacestampsociety@gmail.com

Marina Vasilevskaya, the first Belarusian woman in space

By Umberto Cavallaro

This article also appears in AD*ASTRA # 61 (September 2024).

Marina Vasilevskaya.

"For the first time, a Soyuz spacecraft has taken off with a flight attendant on board, although no drinks service is planned during the flight", said the media on 23 March 2024, announcing the flight of Marina Vasilevskaya, the first Belarusian woman to go into space *(see note 1)*.

The idea of sending a Belarusian cosmonaut to the ISS was first proposed in December 2021 (shortly after the flight of actress Yulia Peresild) *(see note 2)* by Dmitry Rogozin, then the bombastic head of Roscosmos. Rogozin said that he would ask Belarus to select a "girl", since such a selection would "brighten up the cosmonaut training centre"! Probably he had already forgotten the strong internal opposition to his Peresild project in Russia, with Russian space watchers wondering why Roscosmos was so committed to this project and wanted to highlight the role of women in space, when in fact they don't select them as cosmonauts, and in the more than 20 years of the ISS's life the agency has had a total of only one woman aboard the ISS.

The agreement was officially signed by Putin in April 2022 - just after the start of the special military operation in Ukraine as a symbol of friendship between Russia and Belarus, after Lukashenko's unwavering support since the start on 24 February 2022. According to the well-informed space writer Tony Quine, *(see note 3)* who was in direct contact with two female candidates for this mission, the Belarusian side apparently requested that Oleg Novitsky command the flight, as he was born in what is now the sovereign Republic of Belarus, although he has always held Soviet and then Russian citizenship *(see note 4)*.

Following Putin's order to plan this Belarusian mission as a reward for the neighbouring country, Roscosmos had to reassign the seats on the Soyuz. It was decided that Kononenko and Chub would remain on the station for another six months. Because of this swap, Oleg Kononenko – who began his fifth space journey on September 15, 2023, aboard the Soyuz MS-24 spacecraft, will come back home in September 2024 using the MS-25 spacecraft delivered by Novitsky – on June 5, 2024 became the first person in human history to set the record of 1000 days in space and, after completing his fifth flight, will reach 1110 days, thus achieving a new record.

Belarusian Academy of Sciences

Mission Patch.

Little information has been released about the selection process of the Belarusian candidates. In June 2022, the Belarusian Academy of Sciences (AoS) stated that a programme of twelve scientific experiments was planned, without giving details, and that one hundred candidates had been identified. All candidates had to be between 22 and 35 years old, have a scientific, medical or engineering degree and relevant experience to carry out a research programme developed by the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences in cooperation with Roscosmos and the Russian Academy of Sciences.

In December 2022, six photogenic women arrived at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre (GCTC) for medical and psychological evaluation *(see note 5)*. They included two doctors, two scientific researchers and two flight attendants. Information on how this all-female shortlist was selected is very scarce, although it was reported that there was an earlier shortlist of 29 candidates,

Belarusian cosmonaut candidates, from left to right: Olga Mastitskaya, Marina Vasilevskaya, Daria Mikhnyuk, Anastasia Lenkova, Olga Gerasimova and Victoria Fidrus.

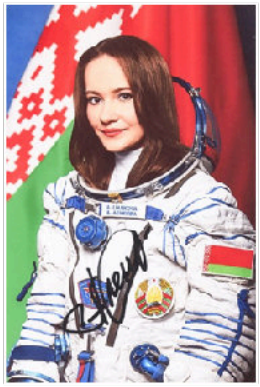
including 19 men and 10 women. Most likely, the men were later dropped to comply with Rogozin's earlier edict, even though the former head of Roscosmos had been removed from his post in July 2022, or more likely on Lukashenko's decision *(see note 6)*. It is unclear why flight attendants were even eligible to apply or be considered.

According to subsequent statements by Russian state media TASS, the candidates were selected from more than three thousand applications submitted to the Presidium of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus in a nationwide competition. Apart from the obvious inconsistency in the actual number of applicants, no news of an open call for applications had ever appeared in the media.

Most likely, scientific, medical, engineering and possibly military organisations were invited to nominate candidates, as Anastasia Lenkova confirmed in a long and very nice interview, worth reading in full *(see note 7)*. All six candidates were said to have passed the exams, which seems unlikely when compared to other similar selection groups.

Lukashenko was present at the GCTC on the final day of the selection in December 2022, and was photographed standing between Dr Anastasia Lenkova and Marina Vasilevskaya, somehow suggesting that he himself had made the selection of the final two candidates.

Outstanding Young Medical Practitioner



Dr Anastasia Lenkova.

Dr Anastasia Lenkova, 28, is a children's paediatric surgeon and radiologist at the Belarusian Republican Scientific and Practical Centre of Paediatric Surgery, where she won the Belarusian award for Outstanding Young Medical Practitioner in 2019. She previously studied and worked in hospitals in York (UK) and Moscow. She has authored several medical and academic papers and presented her work at conferences across Western Europe. It is a very

The President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, meets with the six Belarusian spaceflight candidates in Star City.

impressive CV for someone who is only 28 years old.

Marina Vitaleuna Vasilevskaya (Марына Віталеўна Васілеўская; born 14 September 1990 in Minsk) is a flight instructor and stewardess for Belavia Airlines (Belarusian national airline). She started dancing around 2002, when she was 12 years old. Shortly after graduating from school, she practised professional ballroom dancing for 15 years before joining the airline.

It is easy to see why Anastasia would be considered the perfect candidate to carry out the programme of medical and scientific experiments that the Belarusian Academy of Sciences was apparently planning. But for some reason she was considered more suited to the back-up role, and Marina Vasilevskaya was given preference over her.

Planned Experiments

Subsequent statements reduced the number of planned experiments to nine, and then, in early February 2024, to just five scientific studies and two public works in the fields of medicine, biology, physiology and remote sounding of the Earth. Since their assignments were announced in May 2023, Vasilevskaya and Lenkova's contact with the

Commander, Russian cosmonaut Oleg Novitsky (centre); cosmonaut from Belarus, Marina Vasilevskaya (right); flight engineer, US astronaut Tracy Caldwell-Dyson (left).

media has been very carefully managed. They have given only a handful of interviews, to selected Belarusian state-controlled media. On each occasion, Lukashenko or a member of his family was involved.

Left - Four women met in space in March 2024: Jeanette Epps, Tracy Caldwell Dyson, Loral O'Hara, Marina Vasilevskaya. Right - four women in space in April 2010: Stephanie Wilson, Tracy Caldwell Dyson, Naoko Yamazaki and Dorothy Metcalf-Lindenburger.

One of the first official tasks of the two cosmonaut candidates was to receive a flag from the Belarusian Olympic Committee - chaired by Lukashenko's eldest son Viktor - to take to the ISS *(see note 8)*: a propaganda move, given that Belarusian teams, like Russian ones, were banned from the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Originally planned for 13 March 2024 from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, the launch to the ISS had been postponed to 21 March 2024. On board the Soyuz MS-25 were veteran cosmonaut Oleg Novitsky, NASA astronaut Tracy Caldwell-Dyson and Marina Vasilevskaya. The space station, a symbol of post-Cold War international cooperation, is one of the last remaining areas of cooperation between Russia and the West amid tensions over Moscow's military action in Ukraine.

Launch cover signed by the crew of Soyuz MS-25.

Aborted Launch

About 20 seconds before the scheduled launch, the safety system triggered an automatic abort after a voltage drop in a power source failed to initiate the start of the engine ignition sequence. "No launch!"

This aborted launch was a major mishap for the Russian space programme *(see note 9)*. Dyson and Vasilevskaya were the first two women to launch together aboard a Russian spacecraft, although neither was Russian.

One is reminded of the post-flight press conference a few years ago when two women (NASA astronaut Peggy Whitson and South Korean spaceflight participant Soyeon Yi) landed together for the first time on 19 April 2008 aboard Soyuz TMA-11. Commenting on the rough re-entry of the Soyuz, the then head of Roscosmos, Anatoly Preminov, referred to a naval superstition that it was bad luck to have women on board a ship: *"In Russia we have a kind of omen for such occasions, but thank God everything turned out well. Certainly, we will try to somehow avoid a preponderance of women in a crew".*

Needless to say, this comment once again pointed out that female cosmonauts are not very popular in Russia, and sparked new controversies *(see note 10)*.

Cover prepared for the original launch, signed by Marina Vasilevskaya and Tracy Caldwell-Dyson.

Expedition 70

The Soyuz spacecraft successfully blasted off two days later, on 23 March 2024. However, due to the accident, ballistic conditions did not allow for the planned 3.5 hour ultra-short two-loop docking and the traditional two-day approach to the ISS had to be used.

The crew was greeted by the Expedition 70 crew, including Jeanette Epps and Loral O'Hara. It was the second time in history that four women met in space on the International Space Station, and the second time that Tracy Caldwell Dyson was one of

them, both times arriving at the ISS aboard the Russian Soyuz.

"Marina, you opened the door for Belarus to be in space," Russian mission control said from Moscow. *"So have a great and safe mission. Enjoy your work, your time off. We are very proud of you. All the people of Belarus are proud of you".* Marina and Oleg spent approximately 13 days aboard the orbital complex as a part of the 21st ISS visiting expedition.

Cosmonaut Marina Vasilevskaya, who only worked in the Russian orbital segment of the ISS because she wasn't trained for the US orbital segment, completed seven work assignments on the ISS: Two social and educational experiments and five scientific researches, as confirmed by Ivan Bucha, Deputy Head of the Department of Aerospace Activities of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (NASB), and while the mission was still underway, political scientist Pyotr Petrovsky wanted to emphasise on the Belarusian Investigative Centre website that *"a Belarusian cosmonaut cannot be classified as a space tourist on the ISS, as she is doing research". "Belarus has truly become a power with its space program. And not just a space power, because, anyway, every country can buy a ticket and launch its space tourist. But there is a difference between flying as a tourist and performing a specific research mission"(see note 11).*

Marina and Oleg returned to Earth aboard the Soyuz MS-24 with NASA astronaut Loral O'Hara on 6 April 2024 and had a "comparatively soft landing" *(see note 12)* about 150km southeast of the city of Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan.

Family and friends ready to welcome Marina Vasilevskaya back to Belarus.

Relatives and Friends

After a short rehabilitation, she flew to Minsk on 11 April. Her special plane landed at Minsk National Airport in the morning and Marina was greeted with the traditional bread and salt. *"I am very happy to set foot in my homeland,"* she said on arrival. Then, reports the Belarusian National Press Agency, 'she was warmly and honourably received by her relatives and friends, as well as representatives of the Belarusian scientific community, who greeted her with flowers and smiles' (see note 13).

In a solemn ceremony at the Palace of Independence, President Aleksandr Lukashenko awarded the first cosmonaut in the history of sovereign Belarus with the Medal of the Hero of Belarus, the highest distinction awarded only once for exceptional services to the state and society in connection with the feat performed in the name of freedom, independence and prosperity of the country. Then aboard the presidential aircraft she flew, with President Aleksandr Lukashenko and Oleg Novitsky, to Moscow where they were solemnly received in the Kremlin by Vladimir Putin on April 12, the Cosmonautics Day *(see note 14)*.


Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin meet with Marina Vasilevskaya and cosmonaut Oleg Novitsky in the Kremlin.

"It is symbolic that the meeting with the cosmonauts of Belarus and Russia is taking place on Cosmonautics Day." – Aleksandr Lukashenko said, once again expressing gratitude to Putin for cooperation and support in the field of space – *"This is nothing new for you, but this is a big deal for us, because our first female cosmonaut flew into space. The first cosmonaut of independent Belarus. And Oleg is also ours: he was born near Minsk. His mother lives there, we have met recently. This is symbolic. Therefore I am very grateful to you. I am saying this not because you are hosting me. Had you not given the go-ahead then, this flight would not have happened. Thank you for Marina and thank you for Oleg being the commander of this flight. This is what our unity is about: he was born in Belarus, served in the Soviet Union (pilot, test pilot), became a cosmonaut in Russia."*

After returning to Belarus, Marina Vasilevskaya started a tour through the schools. *"Flying into space is an outstanding event for our country;* – she said – *I would like to continue my space career. I am happy, glad and proud that this project has become a reality."*

She wants to share her space experience with Belarusian young people. *"I would really like to share my space experience and popularise cosmonautics and science in general; I would like to visit kindergartens, schools, and junior classes in order to give a boost to our country in the space industry in the future."*

Marina takes part in a lot of events. She added that she feels the support of the Belarusian people and this gives her energy: *"A lot of people invite me to share my space experience. I am doing this for the benefit of my country, my people."*

Notes

(1) It is notable that the Belarusian media refer to Marina Vasilevskaya as 'cosmonaut', whilst the Russian media calls her 'spaceflight participant'.

(2) See Umberto Cavallaro, "Yulia Peresild – The First Actress in Space" , in ORBIT n. 133 (Jun . 2022)

(3) See https://spacesleuth2.blogspot.com/2024/01/belarusian-iss-visiting-mission-planned.html

(4) Oleg Novitsky was the Soyus MS-18 cosmonaut who in October 2021 brought back to Earth the Actress Julia Peresild and the movie director Klim Shipenko from the ISS.

(5) The Polish site nashaniva.com (in Russian) reports:
"This is how Ivan Bucha, deputy head of the department of aerospace activities of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, describes his first meeting with Marina (then only spaceflight candidate):
- Marina wore a beautiful, spectacular dress, high-heeled shoes, loose hair.
And at the same time, not a single word about her level of education – and yet their acquaintance happened during this interview. Taking it out of context, you might think that you are talking about the casting for "Miss Belarus". https://nashaniva.com/ru/340600

(6) As referred to in the official belta.by website "The Belarusian head of state personally oversaw the entire process of the selection of candidates and their training" (https://eng.belta.by/economics/view/russias-leningrad-oblast-satisfied-with-belarus-gas-infrastructure-equipment-proposals-159329-2024/).

(7) https://medvestnik.by/persona/anastasiya-lenkova-khirurg-tot-zhe-kosmonavt-no-kosmos-dlya-nego-sosredotochen-v-tele-cheloveka (in Russian).

(8) See www.noc.by/en/news/belarus-noc-president-meets-with-belarusian-cosmonaut-candidates/

(9) See www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-03-21/russias-space-agency-aborts-launch-of-3-astronauts-to-the-international-space-station-all-are-safe.

(10) See Umberto Cavallaro "Women Spacefarers. Sixty Different Paths to Space", Springer Intl 2017, p. 324.

(11) https://investigatebel.org/en/fakenews/belarusian-astronaut-research-mission

(12) The press release recalls that "the shock of landing is comparable to the crash of a car against a truck. One can bite his/her tongue and even dislocate the jaw at this moment" (https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-first-cosmonaut-back-on-earth-how-did-her-journey-to-the-stars-end-157312-2024/).

(13) https://www.sb.by/en/cosmonaut-vasilevskaya-warmly-and-honourably-welcomed-back-to-belarus-.html

(14) https://president.gov.by/en/events/vstrecha-s-kosmonavtami-marinoy-vasilevskoy-i-olegom-novickim-v-kremle-1713005503

Long March 11 - CZ-11 - first sea Launch

The Long March 11, (長征十一號運載火箭) or Chang Zheng 11, is also known as the CZ-11H when launched from the sea. It is a Chinese four-stage solid fuel carrier rocket of the Long March family. It has a short launch time and can be launched from either a road vehicle (CZ-11), or from ships (CZ-11H). It is probably based on the DF-31 ballistic missile. The vehicle can be cold-launched from a launch tube mounted on a road vehicle, or from a sea-launching barge. During launch, a dark coloured compressed gas is ejected from the launch tube and mushrooms out as the rocket emerges, before the rocket's first stage engines are ignited.

The first sea launch of the Long March 11 was the seventh launch of the CZ-11, which took place on 5 June 2019 from a converted barge stationed in the Yellow Sea. It was also China's first use of sea launch technology. It launched seven satellites, including five commercial satellites and two experimental technology satellites.

The satellites launched were Bufeng-1A and 1B, Jilin-1 High-Resolution 03A, Xiaoxiang-1-04, Tianqi-3, Tianxiang-1A and 1B, into low earth orbits inclined at 45 degrees to the equator. The launch platform was a specially modified barge, the Tai Rui.

VIPs were able to watch the launch from the international ro-ro passenger ship Bohai Diamond Pearl moored close to the launch site.'

The commemorative cover for the seventh Long March 11 rocket launch. It was canceled aboard the passenger ship 'Bohai Diamond Pearl'.

Seventh launch of the Long March 11 rocket and the first sea launch, from the Tai Rui launch platform.

A special envelope was made and postal staff carried a special commemorative postmark on board the ship. Only 70 of these covers were stamped. The content of the commemorative postmark in Chinese was,

"长征十一号运载火箭首次海上发射，渤海钻珠号观礼船搭载纪念"

which translates into English as "Long March 11 rocket first launched from sea floating platform, 'Bohai Diamond Pearl' observing ceremony ship commemorated for on boardpost".

The use of the floating platform could potentially allow near-equatorial launches, and it also eliminates the need to evacuate land areas downrange for stage drop zones.