

The chimp that took America into space



Ham's 16-minute flight meant he beat Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into space by 10 weeks. Photograph: Nasa

Fifty years ago tomorrow an African-born astronaut made it into [space](#) ahead of Soviet pioneer Yuri Gagarin. His name was Ham, a chimpanzee born in July 1957 in the rainforests of what was then the French Cameroons. He was bought by the US Air Force to be used in early space flight experiments for \$457 – not a bad investment as it turned out.

In the same year that Ham was born, the Soviet Union stunned the world with its Sputnik missions, which put the first artificial satellite and then the first animal – a dog called Laika – into orbit. The US responded by forming [Nasa](#) and preparing a crack team of chimps to pave the way for a manned mission. "Ham easily stood out as the best of the bunch," recalled his trainer Edward Dittmer.

On 31 January 1961, Dittmer dressed Ham in a nappy, waterproof pants and a spacesuit, fitted him with sensors to monitor his heart rate, breathing and body temperature and sealed him into the capsule of the 25-metre-long Mercury-Redstone 2 spacecraft. During Ham's 16-minute ordeal, he experienced some crushing forces on take-off and re-entry and weightlessness for more than six minutes. But apart from his evident terror, he seemed unharmed. He'd beaten Gagarin into space by a clear 10 weeks.

Afterwards, Ham retired to the US National Zoo in Washington DC. There, he enjoyed a celebrity lifestyle, pampered by keepers, receiving mail from adoring fans and answering some of it with his fingerprinted autograph. In 1980 and vastly overweight, Ham moved to North Carolina Zoo, where he died in 1983.

Still the property of the US military, his carcass was delivered to the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology for a postmortem. A proposal to make a museum exhibit of his stuffed skin caused controversy so it was cremated and buried beneath a bronze plaque at the International Space Hall of Fame in Alamogordo,

New Mexico. His bones, however, were preserved and now form part of the research collection at the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington DC. Space geeks will be pleased to learn that in 1998 a thoughtful forensic anthropologist took a cast of his pelvis and will sell you a reproduction for just \$167. Bargain.