

Canine Cosmonaut

In October 1957, the Soviet Union sent its first unmanned satellite into space. It was called Sputnik 1. The mission was a success. It launched the world into an era of space exploration.

Soviet astronauts, called cosmonauts, wanted to send a human to space. But they were unsure if the technology was ready to support human life. They decided to use dogs to test the limitations of space flight.

The cosmonauts found stray, female dogs and trained them to go to space. They chose strays because they were heartier than pet dogs. They chose female dogs because they were smaller.

One of the strays was part husky and part terrier. Her name was Kudryavka, which means “little curly” in Russian. She passed all the training tests and was chosen to ride on the next satellite. When the cosmonauts introduced her to the public over the radio, she let out a bark. Afterward she became known as Laika, which means “barker” in Russian. In America, she was called Muttnik.

In November 1957, Laika boarded Sputnik 2. She was launched into space and became the first animal to orbit Earth. Sadly, Laika died soon after blast off because of heat and stress. The satellite with her body circled Earth 2,000 times. Then, it burned up upon re-entering Earth’s atmosphere.



In August 1960, the Soviets tried again. Canine cosmonauts Belka and Strelka became the first animals to circle the Earth and survive. Their success paved the way for cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin to become the first human in space only eight months later.

Although Laika's story is a sad one, she made it possible for the Soviets, and later the Americans, to reach new goals in space travel. She was a canine cosmonaut and a true pioneer of space flight. She is memorialized on a postage stamp in Russia, a reminder of her role in space travel and a tribute to her sacrifice.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. Who were the first animals to survive space travel?
 - a. Kudryavka and Laika
 - b. Belka and Strelka
 - c. Yuri and Gagarin
 - d. Muttnik and Sputnik

2. Why did the Soviets choose stray dogs for their space program?
 - a. Because they were smaller
 - b. Because they were obedient
 - c. Because they were heartier
 - d. Because they barked

3. What year did the first human travel to space?
 - a. 1956
 - b. 1957
 - c. 1960
 - d. 1961

4. What do you think the word canine means?
 - a. Relating to cats
 - b. Relating to dogs
 - c. Relating to space
 - d. Relating to Russia

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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