

To: Mr. James DeSantis, Astronaut Memorial Foundation
NASA Kennedy Space Center

November 11, 1996

"Veterans Day" is a good moment to reflect on people who have died in the service of the United States, and in particular, on people who have died in the service of the manned space activities of this country. We are still trying to establish in your mind that Major Robert Lawrence was one such person.

Regarding your correspondence with Mr. Roger Blanchard of the AF Personnel Center, I want to make sure you have the "big picture" regarding whether or not he should be formally recognized as a "dead American astronaut" on the "Astronaut Memorial Foundation". A recent exchange of letters between you and the AF indicates to me that, while you are being technically accurate, you both are still missing the point.

Whether or not Major Lawrence ever earned (or deserved) "Air Force Astronaut Status" is irrelevant, since that is not what is necessary to gain recognition by the AMF, as you realize. Neither USAF Major Charles Bassett, nor USAF Captain Theodore Freeman, ever earned that status, yet they are both on the memorial BECAUSE THEY WERE KILLED IN TRAINING FOR THE ASTRONAUT PROGRAM. So they were undeniably "real astronauts" even if they did not have formal USAF "astronaut status".

Unless it is your position that both Bassett and Freeman are on the memorial erroneously and should be removed (and of course you don't advocate that, nor do I), you must accept that Major Lawrence's case is a precise analog of theirs. He was formally accepted into a genuine manned spaceflight program -- the Manned Orbiting Laboratory and its Gemini spacecraft -- and was engaged in formal training activities which caused his death. He thus meets the AMF requirements as written. But it was not helpful for Mr. Blanchard to write to you that "he was not an astronaut" when what he meant to state -- all that he was justified in stating -- is that Lawrence did not have "official USAF astronaut status". By all other standards, and in all other historical documents and reference materials, yes, he WAS an astronaut.

The only factual difference is that one group was involved in NASA's program and the other group were involved in the DoD's program, which eventually was cancelled (the younger MOL astronauts were transferred to NASA and purely by date-of-birth, Lawrence would have accompanied them had he lived). But the DoD program was a genuine manned space flight program, involving modified Gemini spacecraft and small space labs that were the operational ancestors of today's grand International Space Station.

Over-fastidious application of sharp standards seems to be a treatment reserved for Major Lawrence, but not applied to other people on the "approved" list. Aside from the already-mentioned cases of Bassett and Freeman (do you want me to get a letter from Blanchard's office explaining how THEY were not "real astronauts"?), there is 'Sonny' Carter, killed in a plane crash on his way to give a speech. As you can verify, the federal government considers that travel time does not count as official duty time for chargeable work hours (it's off-duty, personal time), so if you want to be picky, Carter was not killed while on duty.

If Bassett, Freeman, and Carter can have rules bent to allow them on your memorial, why can't the same standards be applied to Lawrence? How will you explain this when the news media asks you this question?

Please do not abandon Lawrence and his memory, and his family, by restricting yourself to the Air Force's overly narrow interpretation of standards written 35 years ago, before any Americans had even flown into orbit! You have determined the truth, that he (like Freeman and Bassett) had never achieved USAF "astronaut status", but don't stop with only that half truth: confirm what everyone else seems to already know, that Major Lawrence, like Freeman and Bassett and Carter, was a "real astronaut" who lost his life serving in an American manned space program and who, through this ultimate sacrifice, has paid for his place on all memorials devoted to our space martyrs.

James Oberg

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Robert Lawrence bio, Encyclopedia

Lawrence, Robert (Oct 2, 1935 – Dec 8, 1967) – Major Robert H. Lawrence, Jr., was the first African-American astronaut, but was killed in training prior to making a space flight. Born in Chicago, he attended Bradley University and received a BS in Chemistry and an AF ROTC commission in 1956. After completing pilot training, Lawrence served in West Germany as a fighter pilot and an instructor. He then attended Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, where he earned a PhD in physical chemistry, after which he served as a nuclear research scientist. Lawrence graduated from the Air Force Aerospace Research Pilot School at Edwards AFB in California and was selected for the Defense Department's "Manned Orbiting Laboratory" space project in 1967. The project was to involve two-man crews aboard advanced Gemini spacecraft spending one to two months docked to a small space station performing defense-related research. When that project was canceled for budget reasons in mid-1969, the younger astronauts were transferred to NASA where they formed the cadre of early Space Shuttle astronauts for missions in the early 1980's. Tragically, Lawrence was not among them because he was killed in an aircraft accident at Edwards AFB. He was the instructor pilot for another test pilot who was learning high-speed landings in a F-104 modified to fly like an aerospace plane such as the Space Shuttle. The student pilot landed hard and the aircraft began to break up and roll, and both pilots ejected. The student survived critical injuries but Lawrence died.