

February 2025



Time Travellers Club

Dear Club Members,

Thirty years ago, on 3rd February Eileen Collins became the first woman to pilot a Space Shuttle. Four years later she became the first to command a shuttle mission. In 2005 she commanded the first mission after the Challenger disaster.

Born in 1956 she became a US Air Force officer through Syracuse University Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps. She graduated with a BA in Mathematics and Economics in 1978. The first women had been allowed to train as pilots in 1976, all were existing Air Force officers with college degrees.

In her pilot screening class of fourteen there were ten men, and four women, in November 1978 she became the first to fly solo. Women were still not allowed to fly in operational combat missions, so on graduating she remained at flight school as an instructor. Collins now set her sights on becoming an astronaut, via the route of becoming a test pilot. In order to be accepted in to the test pilot program she needed a thousand hours of flying time, and to be a commander of an operational aircraft. Restrictions mean the only option open to her was flying transport, undertaking long range missions supplying US bases around the world. In 1984 she was upgraded to aircraft commander. From 1986 she was assigned to the US Airforce academy in Colorado working as assistant professor in mathematics, teaching courses on calculus and linear algebra, and a T-41 instructor pilot. Through the Air Force Institute of Technology, she earned a Master of Science in operations research from Stanford University in 1986, and a Master of Arts in space systems management from Webster University in 1989. That year she was accepted in to the test pilot program, the second woman to do so after Captain Jacquelyn Susan "Jackie" Parker, who graduated in 1988.

When NASA selected the next class of astronauts in 1989 she was one of 23 selected from 1945 qualified candidates. She was told of her successful selection by John Young. When he asked if she had any questions, she asked if she was to be a pilot or a mission specialist. Young laughed and told her: "Pilot! Yes, pilot. You will be the first woman to pilot the Space Shuttle!"

She flew her first mission in 1995, and shortly after returning to earth became pregnant with her first child. She had married fellow pilot James Youngs in 1983, he left the Air Force to become a commercial airline pilot to allow him to better follow Collins career. Her second child was born in 2000 after her third space mission when she was a commander.

She retired from NASA in 2006 having flown 6,751 hours in thirty different types of aircraft, and logged over 872 hours in space flights.

As her legacy, female commanders followed rapidly in Collins' footsteps. Pam Melroy (today NASA's deputy administrator) and Susan Kilrain served as shuttle pilots, Melroy becoming the second woman to command a space flight. Four women, including Italy's Samantha Cristoforetti, helmed the ISS. And three women have led SpaceX Dragon flights.

In her own words

“I advise others to take on challenges, even if you think they are too hard, even if you think you might fail. When you become an old person and look back on your life you may say, “I wish I had tried that”—you don’t want to be in that position. Give yourself challenges that are exciting, and be available to help others. There is no better feeling than helping someone else.”

The colours of your fibre were inspired by the mission patch of STS-93, the space shuttle flight where Collins was the commander. Each space mission has it’s own unique logo with the names of the astronauts, and an image representing their mission, in this case the deployment of the Chandra X-ray Observatory in to orbit.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

85% Corriedale
15% Mulberry Silk

Further Reading-

<https://time.com/collection/firsts/4883206/eileen-collins-firsts/>
<https://www.nasa.gov/history/eileen-collins-nasas-first-female-shuttle-commander/>

Documentary Film based on her autobiography to be released in 2025
<https://spacewoman.film/>

Various You- Tube interviews with Collins
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xlq3qQ8RBo>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agxVgbzjb9E>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7Ah-9K8qgo>

The Chandra X-Ray observatory
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chandra_X-ray_Observatory