

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.