



The Pioneers

The Unforgotten German Spacelab Astronaut Reinhard Furrer

The story of Reinhard Furrer is one of science, courage, adventure, and tragedy—a life that seemed drawn irresistibly toward the sky.

Although often associated with Berlin because of his long career at the Free University of Berlin and his later life in the city, Furrer was actually born on 25 November 1940 in Wörgl. After World War II, his family settled in southern Germany, and the young Reinhard developed a fascination with science and exploration that would define his future. He studied physics at the University of Kiel and later at the Free University of Berlin, earning a doctorate in physics in 1972. ([Wikipedia](#))

But Furrer was never content to remain confined to laboratories and lecture halls. During his student years in divided Berlin, he participated in dramatic efforts to help East Germans escape to the West, including work connected with the famous "Tunnel 57" beneath the Berlin Wall. Even before becoming an astronaut, he was already living a life of remarkable daring. ([Wikipedia](#))

As a physicist, he built an impressive academic career, teaching in Stuttgart and conducting research in the United States. Yet he dreamed of something even bigger: spaceflight. When Germany began selecting astronauts for its ambitious Spacelab program, Furrer applied. He narrowly missed selection the first time, but his determination never faded. In 1982 he was finally chosen as one of Germany's scientific astronauts for the nation's first dedicated Spacelab mission. ([DLR](#))

That dream became reality on 30 October 1985.

Aboard Space Shuttle Challenger, Furrer launched into orbit as a payload specialist on the historic *Spacelab D1 Mission*. Together with fellow astronauts Ernst Messerschmid and Wubbo Ockels, he spent a week conducting dozens of scientific experiments in the European Spacelab module. The mission was groundbreaking: 76 experiments were performed, and for the first time a Spacelab mission was managed largely from Germany's SpaceOperations Control Center (GSOC) at Oberpfaffenhofen rather than NASA's control centers in Houston.

The launch event at DLR Oberpfaffenhofen was sponsored by the German Telecom promoting their brand new mobile telecommunications system "Telecom D1 net".

The success of the mission helped establish Europe as a serious participant in human spaceflight. ([DLR](#)).



,During the mission, Furrer studied the effects of weightlessness on materials and the human body. The crew worked exhausting 18-hour days, knowing there would be little opportunity to repeat experiments. When the shuttle returned safely to Earth after more than seven days in orbit, Furrer became the third German astronaut ever to fly in space. ([DLR](#)).

From left top: Henry Hartsfield Jr, Bonnie J. Dunbar, James Buchli, Reinhard Furrer, Ernst Messerschmid, Wubbo Ockels, Steven Nagel, Guion S. Bluford.

Back on Earth, he returned to Berlin as a professor and became director of the Institute for Space Sciences at the Free University of Berlin. Yet even after reaching space, he remained addicted to adventure and flying was his great passion.

Furrer was an enthusiastic sports (PPL) and professional pilot (CPL). He obtained his first pilot's license in 1974 and undertook many flight tours with single-engine sports aircraft, such as a flight over the Greenland ice sheet or a solo flight from Germany to [Quito \(Ecuador\)](#). From 1986 he was President of the Aircraft Owner and Pilot Association in Germany ([AOPA-Germany](#)).

On 9 September 1995, after attending an air show at Berlin's Johannisthal Airfield, Furrer boarded a historic aircraft for a flight. The plane crashed during low-altitude aerobatic maneuvers, killing both the pilot and Furrer instantly. Germany lost one of its most charismatic astronauts at the age of 54. ([DLR](#)).

Sadly, the passion that had carried him across oceans and into the heavens would also bring his life to an abrupt end.

Yet Reinhard Furrer's legacy endures. He helped transform European human spaceflight from an aspiration into reality. He was a scientist who loved adventure, an explorer who never stopped learning, and a dreamer who looked at the stars and decided that he would go there himself.

His life can perhaps be summarized by the spirit behind a remark attributed to him before he ever became an astronaut. Looking at the future of German spaceflight, he reportedly said:

“I’ll be flying on that.”

And he did.