## First Black Astronaut

Arnaldo Tamayo-Menez

By Robert Fikes, Jr.

When Lt. Col. Guion S. Bluford roared into orbit on August 30, 1983 he was hailed by most of the media, particularly the black press, as the world's first black in outerspace.

Perhaps it was because the true "first," Lt. Col. Arnaldo Tamayo-Mendez, was a resident of a communist country, that he has not received the attention he deserved in the U.S., especially among black Americans.

On September 18, 1980 the Russian Soyuz-38 spacecraft was launched from its Baikonur pad into orbit around the earth. The announced mission was to link up with the Salyut-6 space laboratory where a series of scientific experiments would be performed and then return safely back to the USSR.

For nearly eight days the two-man crew of Soyuz-38 experienced the unique and exhiliarating experience of space travel, but their successful mission also had apparent social and political significance which was not a large number of Cuban airmen as one of two widely publicized at the time.

According to Torres Yribar, president of the Cuban Academy of Sciences, Cuba began its space research activities in 1964.

But for more than a decade scientists there had been analyzing data provided by meteorological satellites to assist them in monitoring industrial pollution and the effects of climate on sugar cane production.

Their research efforts took a giant step forward with the launching of Soyuz-38 manned by veteran Russian cosmonaut Yuri Romanenko and co-piloted by a Cuban of African ancestry, Arnaldo Tamayo-Mendez, who would emerge a modern day hero to his

Born January 29, 1942 in Guantanamo, Tamayo-Mendez was orphaned at age one and adopted by foster parents. At age thirteen he shined shoes and sold vegetables on the streets of the city.

After the Revolution in 1959 he became affiliated with the Association of Young Rebels and, later, the Revolutionary Work Youth Brigades which allowed him to pursue his education at a technical college studying aviation technology.

Upon deciding to become a jet pilot, he journeyed to the USSR in 1961 where he underwent flight training before returning to Cuba a year later, assigned to the Playa Giron Brigade of the Guard. Further experience and training vaulted him to the rank of Lt. Colonel.

In March of 1978 when he was selected from



jeep at the extreme left, waving to the

4. The occasion was his triumphant voyage into space celebration.

finalists to train as a cosmonaut, he had already logged more than 14,000 hours in

In that same month Tamayo-Mendez and fellow Cuban cosmonaut-to-be, Jose Amando Falcon, began their general space training with candidates from other socialist countries at the Zvezdny Gorodok Center in "Star Town," nickname for the Tyuratam launch complex in southern Russia where they spent the next two and a half years of intense preparation.

in September 1979 Romanenko and Tamayo-Mendez were teamed up for the Soyuz-38 mission. The Russian Yevgeny Khrunov was paired with the Cuban Jose Amando Falcon to serve as the backup crew.

Later in the afternoon of Thursday, September 18, 1980 Tamayo-Mendez appeared with Romanenko before a host of newsmen and photographers before being whisked off to the launch pad.

Approximately two hours before blast off the Salyut-6 crew of Leonid Popov and Valery Ryumin which had been orbiting the earth for the past 51/2 months were alerted to prepare for two visitors.

At precisely 1911:04 Greenwich mean time the Soyuz-38 spacecraft left the launch pad on its A-2 carrier rocket and nine minutes later was in earth orbit.

On September 19, the crew of Soyuz-38 and that of the Salyut-6 successfully docked in space. It was Tamayo-Mendez who first opened the internal hatches and entered to

greet Popov and Ryumin.

After the traditional welcoming celebration of bread and salt the cosmonauts received congratulatory messages from Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev and Cuban President Fidel Castro stressing the point that joint space ventures prooted by the Intercosmos program would enhance mutual good will between the two nations.

In no mood to commence the serious scientific experiments ahead, Romanenko and Tamayo-Mendez then proceeded to execute a series of somersaults for their television audience on earth, demonstrating their adjustment to the rather pleasurable sensation of weightlessness.

Later, at approximately 160 miles above earth Tamayo-Mendez peered down at his homeland whose shape he said reminded him of a "large fish with fins." On a cloudless night he was able to observe the shimmering city lights of Havana.

On Saturday, September 20, the four cosmonauts aboard Salyut-6 relaxed. Tamayo-Mendex complained that he did not feel as well as he had felt on the first two days of the mission and was advised by doctors to curtail his activities.

The balance of time the Soyuz-38 crew was aboard the space laboratory was largely spent conducting some 27 resarch experiments, mostly of Cuban origin and design.

The cosmonauts returned to be greeted with the usual fanfare which follows the completion of an eventful mission.



In 1909, a black man was on top of the world.

The man was Matthew Henson.

As a member of Admiral Peary's expedition, he planted the American flag at the North Pole on April 6th, 1909.

Henson is one of many black Americans to break new ground. The second book published by a woman in America was written by a black woman, Phillis Wheatley, in 1773. She was commended by President Washington.

In 1893, at Provident Hospital in Chicago, Dr. Daniel Hale Williams performed the first successful heart operation.

Seventeen years ago, Thurgood Marshall was appointed Justice to the Supreme Court by President Johnson.

Black History Month is a time to honor accomplished men and

women of the past. And a time to look ahead to many accomplishments in the future.