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Holloman Air Force Base: Making Air and Space History

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By [Leonard David](#)

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Blast from the past. Rocket sled traveler, John Stapp, rides into the history books in December 1954. (Image credit: U.S. Air Force)

GOLDEN, Colorado – Rocket sleds, space monkeys, a record setting sky dive — and bad piloting skills of an alien-controlled UFO.

It's all part of aerospace history at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico — the site of this year's Wirefly X Prize Cup and home base for a distinctive blend of high-end aviation and the budding public space travel business.

Holloman Air Force Base is in the city of Alamogordo, a locale that has scored big-time with history making events.

"It's the 60th anniversary of the U.S. Air Force, as well as the 50th anniversary of spaceflight," explained Lt. Col. Angelo Eiland, 49th Fighter Wing Deputy Director of Staff at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico. "This opportunity to partner with the X Prize helps us round out the picture of telling the air and space revolutions that have taken place over the last 50 and 60 years, he told SPACE.com

Eiland said that Holloman has decades of being intimately involved with space.

Fastest man on Earth

Born in the early 1940s as Alamogordo Army Air Field, then Holloman Air Development Center, and later the Air Force Missile Development Center, it was during that sweep of time that many missile launches were orchestrated, such as the Tiny Tim (the first Army rocket), Rascal, V-2, the Falcon, MACE, and the Matador.

In January 1948, the Alamogordo installation was renamed Holloman Air Force Base, in honor of the late Col. George V. Holloman, a pioneer in pilotless aircraft and guided missile research.

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A seminal event at Holloman Air Force Base was the rocket propelled test sled shot of John Stapp. Strapped tight into Sonic Wind No. 1, he rocket-sledded his way into the record book on December 10, 1954 by reaching a velocity of 632 miles per hour.

Not only was it a hair-mussing experience, but Stapp deservedly earned titles like "The Fastest Man Alive" and "Fastest Man on Earth" in attaining the lickity split rail speed. From a standing start to a dead stop, Stapp sustained some 40 g's – that's 40 times the pull of Earth gravity. This milestone-making event was staged to study how gravitational stress affects the human body.

Today, specialists employ the Holloman High-Speed Test Track, including use of the gear to develop magnetic levitation (Maglev) launch concepts, among other applications.

High-dive into the desert

Yet another Holloman historical highlight is the stratospheric high-dive of Joseph Kittinger, part of a U.S. Air Force program designed to test whether pilots could survive high-altitude bailouts.

On August 16, 1960, Kittinger departed in an open balloon gondola from an abandoned airstrip near Tularosa, northeast of Holloman Air Force Base. Drifting upwards to 102,800 feet, he stepped out of the gondola to make the longest skydive from the highest altitude in history.

After a 13 minute 45 second descent, Kittinger parachuted safely into New Mexico desert and into the books for highest open gondola manned balloon flight, highest balloon flight of any kind, highest bailout, and longest free fall. During his fall to Earth, he reached a peak velocity of 614 miles per hour — 90 percent of the speed of sound.

Hamming it up

As the "space race" between the then Soviet Union and the United States heated up, Holloman's Aero-Medical laboratory engaged in several noteworthy events. The Air Force had under its wing dozens of chimpanzees at Holloman Air Force Base, putting the animals through various tests as a prelude to human space travel.

For example, there's the January 31, 1961 liftoff of HAM, a three-year-old chimpanzee, from Cape Canaveral inside a Mercury-Redstone capsule — a final check to human-rate the spacecraft and booster.

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By the way, HAM was an acronym for Holloman Aero Med, with the "monkeynaut" trailblazing a suborbital trajectory before Alan Shepard became the first American into space on May 5, 1961.

Enos was another pioneering chimpanzee. Trained at Holloman, the animal was lofted in a Mercury-Atlas capsule for a two orbit spin around Earth on November 29, 1961. That mission helped to provide an all-clear to launch astronaut John Glenn into Earth orbit on February 20, 1962.

Extraterrestrial oddity

There's also an extraterrestrial oddity that features Holloman – one that involves that supposed July 1947 UFO crash in neighboring Roswell, New Mexico.

It turns out that the base was the prime spot to handle balloon launches for classified Department of Defense programs. An aspect of that effort made use of anthropomorphic dummy drops in several U.S. Air Force initiatives.

In the 1990s, the Air Force pointed to a hush-hush, top secret government undertaking — code named Project MOGUL that utilized long-range balloons to carry out reconnaissance duties over the Soviet Union. More to the point, the U.S. military insisted that purported UFO debris in Roswell and alien pilots are little more than the recovered wreckage of a MOGUL balloon and its equipment, coupled to witnesses that have misinterpreted past events due to the "fog of time."

Of course, UFO true-believers maintain that the cover-up of a busted up flying saucer and captured aliens remains in full-force in the 21st century.

Expo travel

Today, Holloman Air Force Base is at the forefront of military operations, with its F-117 "stealth" aircraft and serving as the training center for the German Air Force's Tactical Training Center.

On October 27-28, from 10:00 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day, Holloman Air Force Base is the place to be for the Holloman [Air & Space Expo](#), in collaboration with the Wirefly X Prize Cup. The free event will comprise more than twenty different aircraft displays and space-related events.

Continuous aircraft demonstrations from the F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighter, P-51 Mustang, NASA's Super Guppy cargo aircraft and the F-22 Raptor — the newest U.S. Air Force fighter that will be stationed at Holloman in 2009 — will be on-hand. For its part, the Wirefly X Prize Cup, among an array of festivities, will conduct the Northrop Grumman lunar lander competition with teams vying for mega-cash rewards.

If you're ready to travel, Holloman Air Force Base is located in New Mexico's Tularosa Basin between the Sacramento and San Andreas mountain ranges. The base is about 10 miles west of Alamogordo, New Mexico, on route 70/82; 90 miles north of El Paso, Texas; 70 miles east of Las Cruces, New Mexico.

For detailed information and updates regarding the 2007 Wirefly X Prize Cup, go to the Internet web site: <http://space.xprize.org/x-prize-cup/>

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Leonard David is an award-winning space journalist who has been reporting on space activities for more than 50 years. Currently writing as Space.com's Space Insider Columnist among his other projects, Leonard has authored numerous books on space exploration, Mars missions and more, with his latest being "Moon Rush: The New Space Race" published in 2019 by National Geographic. He also wrote "Mars: Our Future on the Red Planet" released in 2016 by National Geographic. Leonard has served as a correspondent for SpaceNews, Scientific American and Aerospace America for the AIAA. He has received many awards, including the first Ordway Award for Sustained Excellence in Spaceflight History in 2015 at the AAS Wernher von Braun Memorial Symposium. You can find out Leonard's latest project at his website and on Twitter.



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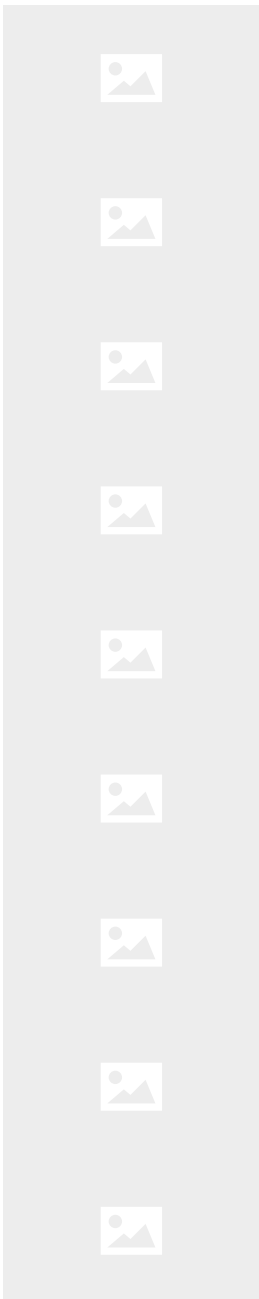
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