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German candidate selected to join European astronaut team

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Selected: German ESA astronaut Alexander Gerst

The European Space Agency (ESA) presented the new European astronauts to the public on 20 May 2009. Alexander Gerst from Germany was chosen from among 8413 candidates. Five other candidates were successful in the demanding selection process. The new astronauts will be trained at the European Astronaut Centre (EAC) located at the German Aerospace Center (Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt; DLR) in Cologne.

Alexander Gerst will join Thomas Pesquet from France, Samantha Cristoforetti and Luca Parmitano from Italy, Timothy Peake from Britain, and Andreas Mogensen from Denmark to start training. The decision to select six candidates was taken not only with a view to the flights planned as part of ESA's programmes and activities but also as part of the agreement between the Italian space agency ASI and NASA. It was taken in coordination with the Italian authorities and in agreement with the decision of the ESA Council in 2002 to establish a single astronaut corps in Europe.

The new European astronaut from Germany, Alexander Gerst, was born in 1976, studied geophysics at the University of Karlsruhe and originally comes from the town of Künzelsau in Baden-Württemberg. A thorough training, an incomparable workplace and great challenges await the chosen astronauts. The astronauts in the European Astronaut Corps are being trained for deployment on the International Space Station (ISS).

"A very good day for German aerospace"

"I am pleased about the choice of Alexander Gerst to be a member of the European astronaut team. It is a very good day for German aerospace," Professor Johann-Dietrich Wörner, Chairman of the DLR Executive Board, said. Professor Wörner added: "As a German ESA astronaut, this places Alexander Gerst in the long line of successful German cosmonauts and astronauts. From Sigmund Jähn to Thomas Reiter, Germans have always played their part in space, carrying out national and international manned space missions – missions which went to the limits of what was technically possible and have always produced benefits for humankind."

The search for the new astronauts started exactly a year ago on 19 May 2008. The process was open to applicants from all 18 ESA member states.

Ten Germans in space so far

Since 1976, 13 Germans have been selected for training as astronauts or cosmonauts. Ten of those chosen have since been on 14 missions in Earth orbit. The first one was Sigmund Jähn who in August 1978 – as a citizen of the GDR – flew to the Soviet Salyut 6 space station on the Soyuz 31 mission. The most recent German astronaut in space was Hans Schlegel, in 2008, who took the European space laboratory Columbus to the International Space Station. The most number of stays in Earth orbit can be claimed by Ulf Merbold, who flew three times in space. With two long-term missions, Thomas Reiter, now DLR Executive Board member responsible for space research and development, can look back on the longest stay. He has been to both the Russian Mir station and the ISS.

Six more Germans have been on missions into space: Gerhard Thiele, today head of the European astronaut team, Ernst Messerschmid and Ulrich Walter, today professors at the universities of Stuttgart and Munich respectively, Klaus-Dietrich Flade, currently a test pilot with Airbus, and Reinhold Ewald, today head of the Columbus team at the Columbus Control Centre in the German Space Operations Centre at the DLR site in Oberpfaffenhofen. The Spacelab D1 astronaut Reinhard Furrer was killed in a plane crash in 1995.

Germans who have flown in space:

- Sigmund Jähn, Soyuz 31/Soyuz 29 (1978)
- Ulf Merbold, STS-9 (1983), STS-42 (1992), Euromir94 (Soyuz TM-20/Soyuz TM-19)
- Reinhard Furrer, STS-61A (1985, Spacelab D1)
- Ernst Messerschmid, STS-61A (1985, Spacelab D1)
- Hans Schlegel, STS-55 (1993, Spacelab D2), STS-122 (2008)
- Ulrich Walter, STS-55 (1993, Spacelab D2)
- Klaus-Dietrich Flade, Mir92 (Soyuz TM-14/Soyuz TM-24)
- Thomas Reiter, Euromir95 (Soyuz-TM 22), ISS Expedition 13/14 - STS-121/116 (2006)
- Reinhold Ewald, Mir97 (Soyuz TM-25/Soyuz TM-24)
- Gerhard Thiele, STS-99 SRTM (2000)

Selected but did not fly in space:

- Eberhard Köllner, 1978 backup for Sigmund Jähn
- Renate Brümmer, 1993 backup for Spacelab D2
- Heike Walpot

There are currently eight active astronauts serving in ESA:

- Jean-François Clervoy, France
- Léopold Eyharts, France
- Frank De Winne, Belgium
- Christer Fuglesang, Sweden
- André Kuipers, Netherlands
- Paolo Nespoli, Italy
- Roberto Vittori, Italy
- Hans Schlegel, Germany

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