

# Hurrah for *Schirra*

Astronaut Wally Schirra spoke with *International Watch* just two months before his death. Schirra notably wore the first Omega Speedmaster in space during his 1962 Mercury flight, the first of many missions for the so-called "moonwatch."



Apollo 7 mission patch.  
**Right:** Wally Schirra (NASA Photo)



**V**intage chronograph collector Chuck Maddox spoke with Astronaut Walter "Wally" Schirra for *International Watch* on February 17th in Los Angeles. The meeting, made with assistance from Omega's U.S. office in Weehawken, NJ, occurred just a few months before Schirra died of natural causes at the age of 84 on May 2. It was likely among his last face-to-face interviews.

Schirra was one of the original Mercury mission astronauts and is the only astronaut to have flown Mercury, Gemini and Apollo missions. He was selected as commander of Apollo VII to put NASA's lunar program back on track after the Apollo I disaster. Schirra logged a total of 295 hours and 15 minutes in space. He teamed with CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite as a commentator for that network's space program coverage from 1969 to 1975.

**Chuck:** Are you a watch collector?  
**Wally:** Not really, I have about seven or eight though. A classic one, Vacheron Constantin, from Bob Hope, I have this gorgeous one from Omega [a 1969 Special edition, one of the first 28 given to astronauts on duty from 1969 to 1972; 39 were made]. And I have a Breitling that they gave me at the National Aviation

Hall of Fame on the 100th anniversary of Aviation. All the honorees who were brought in got a watch from Breitling. Well, we had more fun when we came back from the Smithsonian. Everybody was all shook up when we finally found out that John Glenn flew a Heuer stopwatch (see *iW*, November 2006, pp. 122-130). Scott flew a Breitling,

and I flew the first Omega. We had actually bought our own Omegas. And then Gordon Cooper flew an Omega after me and then they [NASA] made it official for Gemini.

**Chuck:** Since you were the first person to wear a Speedmaster into space, were you aware of how the Omega was brought into NASA?



Apollo 16LM pilot Charlie Duke, Chuck Maddox and Wally Schirra.  
**Right:** Dauphine hand Speedmaster similar to Schirra's "first flown" Speedmaster. Wally's original is on display through 2010 at the Johnson Space Center in Houston.



Did you bring it in or was it someone else?

**Wally:** Well they [NASA] saw it. Deke Slayton and I were both working on the mission and Deke was replaced and Scott Carpenter took that mission. I took the next mission. So Deke had an Omega and I had an Omega. We bought them, and NASA had nothing to do with it, we just bought them and checked them. We took them to the Cape and Pan American Airlines was the custodian of all the technical stuff at the Cape. They took the watches and made them super-accurate. All six different positions, and I'd go into mission control and say "Hmmm... your clock is off about two seconds!" This was before the atomic clocks were out and so we had a lot of fun with that. Well, after that, I flew it [the Speedmaster] and Cooper flew it, they said, "we might as well make this regulation."

**Chuck:** Great, when did this first happen, when you and Deke bought your watches?

**Wally:** In Houston.

**Chuck:** ...about 1961?

**Wally:** Well, that'd have to be, well the mission was a... probably early 1962.

**Chuck:** Did anyone other than you and Deke [Slayton] have any input into the selection?

**Wally:** Well Gus [Grissom] did too, because he was one of us. Sheppard and Grissom didn't fly with any watches.

**Chuck:** Right!

**Wally:** That's the other interesting part. So the first one up actually was Glenn with that Heuer stopwatch. That's in the museum in San Diego [Air and Space Museum], by the way.

**Chuck:** "The clock is ticking", yeah. [Referring to the caption of the display in the museum in San Diego]. Was there any special training on how to use the chronographs?

**Wally:** No, we worked with them so much, there are all kinds of pictures of us playing with them. The real key was presetting them to T plus 20 seconds. Before we got

into the spacecraft, before we tied up everything, we'd advance the stopwatch to twenty seconds. And then after liftoff, they'd say "Standby - Mark!" and you'd start the watch again because you were too busy with hands on switches to start the watch then.

**Chuck:** And you're all set and being pushed down by the thrust of the rocket.

**Wally:** Shepard said, "liftoff clock has started", but that was the clock on the instrument panel.

**Chuck:** Right.

**Wally:** In my case it was liftoff, I forget how the sequence went, it was all written out, but at T plus 20 seconds I started the stopwatch.

**Chuck:** What other timers were there on board? Were there panel mounts? Stopwatches?

**Wally:** There was a panel mount that could be updated from the



**Left:** Schirra prepares to exit Gemini VI capsule aboard recovery carrier USS Wasp. (NASA)  
**Above:** Mercury Seven (front row) joins with Gemini “new” Nine. Schirra is seated front and center while Tom Stafford, Schirra’s Gemini VI pilot, stands second from right, back row. (NASA photo)

ground. And it had elapsed time. In fact I went back to the space and rocket center in Huntsville. Now my spacecraft [his Mercury spacecraft] is in Florida at the Hall of Fame. In Huntsville, Ed Buckbee [first director of the Alabama Space and Rocket Center] had the hatch off so I could look in, and I reached in and wound the clock “ticka-ticka-ticka-ticka”... It started running!

**Chuck:** That’s great.

**Wally:** Well, Cooper had trouble with his, and he used his Omega stopwatch to countdown to retrofire.

**Chuck:** Were there other stopwatches?

**Wally:** That was it. Well, Cooper took a second watch because he was up for over 24 hours.

**Chuck:** Do you have any other related watch stories?

**Wally:** I have a great story. The seven of us were reporting in at Langley AFB and this one engineer, Harold Johnson, came in wearing a 24-hour watch and said “We’re all going to work in 24-hours now, so you all will wear this 24-hour watch.” We put it on, threw our watches off. Within a week we’re all going crazy trying to read this 24-hour watch. We were all military men, we could think 24, but we couldn’t read 24. So about a week later he came in and we said “Harold what time is it?” And he then does this. [Wally hikes up his left sleeve, looks, and then hikes up his right sleeve]. “It’s about 12:30.” [Laughter] He’d just switch arms. [Chuck notes that this is likely the salient reason why NASA did not use the Breitling Cosmonaute after Scott Carpenter’s Aurora 7 Flight.]

**Chuck:** Was there any specific tasks or events that went to a specific timing device. For example, did you time burns with your stopwatch [or the Speedmaster].

**Wally:** Everything is on time, yeah. All earth orbit missions are on time, intervals of time. Of course you don’t worry about local time.

**Chuck:** Right.

**Wally:** In particular, on Apollo we were up there for eleven days. We said “To heck with you guys! We’re not going to Houston time, we’re going to set our own time zone.”

**Chuck:** Did you rely on as much or more on instructions from mission control about when to start burns and stop burns? Did you watch the timers or the watches?

**Wally:** We had both so if you didn’t have communications you’d have a timer all set. Shepard counted me down for Mercury. And I said, “that was a pretty good count Shep,” because later I was to land and he said the carrier was out of position by three miles. We’re going five miles a



**Above** Apollo 7 crew: CM pilot Don Eisele, Commander, Walter M. Schirra Jr. and LM pilot, Walter Cunningham. **Right:** Gemini 6 successful second liftoff attempt. (NASA photos)



second, so a second can set you off a long distance.

**Chuck:** Was there a different feel to the earlier missions compared to the later missions?

**Wally:** I'm sure that's true. The Gemini lift-off, for example, had a false liftoff [referring to the first launch attempt of Gemini 6A, on December 12, 1965, when the Gemini Titan was automatically shut down one second after launch]

**Chuck:** Right.

**Wally:** And I knew it, because I had liftoff on my Mercury-Atlas and I said we didn't have a liftoff. You'd eject normally, but the mission rule was to eject. I said, "No, we haven't lifted off". They said OK.

**Chuck:** And you stayed with the rocket...

**Wally:** Tom [Stafford] bought it. When you probably shouldn't have. By mission rules we shouldn't have, but I knew better.

**Chuck:** Do you think quartz watches are suitable for EVA [Extra-Vehicular Activity] use or space use?

**Wally:** They work very well... No problems apparently.

**Chuck:** I've read somewhere that supposedly in space battery-powered watches drain twice as fast as they do on earth.

**Wally:** I can imagine why, I know it gets very cold.

**Chuck:** I was doing research on Fortis watches for an article and that's one of the things the Russians discovered, that battery powered watches drained the batteries twice as fast.

**Wally:** I don't have any data on that.

**Chuck:** What other watches would you consider for the role that the Speedmaster has been used in?

**Wally:** No, I don't think that there are any preferences. I found that was the one that did what I

needed and it worked perfectly. So I used it. Oh, I know how the other watches showed up. I had an issued watch in Gemini, and an issued watch in Apollo. So, those watches went back into the system again so technically there were three watches [that Schirra wore in space].

**Chuck:** In the final preparations for a mission or a liftoff, was a procedure for prepping the Speedies other than as you mentioned advancing the chronograph twenty seconds. Did someone wind the watches or did you turn them in a week or two before hand so they could make sure they were running properly and accurately?

**Wally:** No, we kept running them; we wore them.

**Chuck:** You wore them?

**Wally:** They may have done that later, I'm not sure, that's a good point. Probably, Pan-Am may have

**Right:** Wally greets Dr. Werner Von Braun during a pre-flight briefing.  
**Below:** Preparation of Wally's Sigma 7 Mercury capsule at Hangar 5, Cape Canaveral. (NASA Photos)



had custody of it until a few hours before, but we wanted to be sure. We wound them up so it was wound.

**Chuck:** Were they set to Houston or Mission time?

**Wally:** That's a good question. It was probably set to Cape [Canaveral] time. We probably changed it to another time zone once we got into orbit because we didn't want to get up at Houston time. Or Washington time.

**Chuck:** Move it back an hour so you'd get an extra hour's sleep!

**Wally:** What we actually did was when the mission had a particularly important event like rendezvous, we'd wake up three hours

before that. So we were ready for it, rather than stay up for 12 hours and do rendezvous. So we'd make that like 10 o'clock in the morning. We'd go back three hours and it'd be 7 o'clock, whatever that was, our local time on board.

**Chuck:** Were astronauts required to turn over their Speedmasters for service or maintenance at any time or at any interval?

**Wally:** I don't recall that, no.

**Chuck:** In general, in your opinion how did astronauts view the chronographs? Did they like them? Did they not like them? Did most astronauts see it [The Speedmaster] as another part of their kit?

**Wally:** Just part of the program.

**Chuck:** They didn't see it as emblematic of being an astronaut?

**Wally:** By no means.

**Chuck:** It was just another of tool to get the job done?

**Wally:** Exactly.

**Chuck:** Which space missions did you consider the most hazardous?

**Wally:** Hazardous? All three! Oddly enough the Atlas was the most hazardous booster, and the four of us who flew on Atlas have a 100% success. Isn't that amazing when you think of it?

**Chuck:** Yes.

**Wally:** Well we saw Atlas blow up

a couple of times. That got our attention. And the Saturn, it never had a problem. It's amazing when you think of it.

**Chuck:** What do you think of NASA's current plans for space exploration?

**Wally:** Pretty well screwed up. Oh, I have a couple of arguments I've recorded recently, and one of them is that we don't know how a human can endure the long duration of a trip to Mars and back. The moon *and back* or to Mars *and back*—one word. This could be a two-and-a-half to three-year mission. You have not enough room in your vehicle for exercise devices.

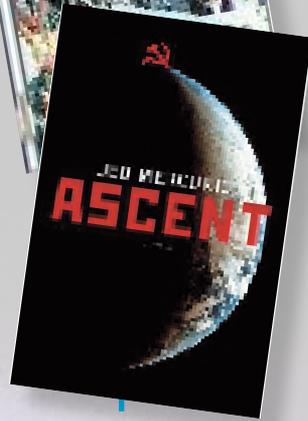
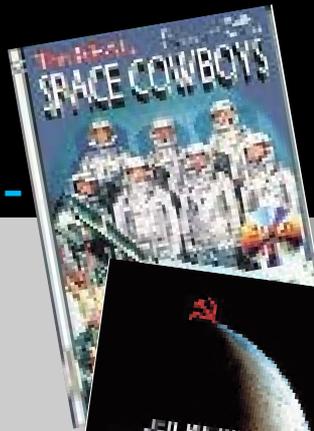
**Wally:** At any rate, to go to Mars and back you have radiation, which is a monster problem. Two, you have timing. The time is going to be real critical. You can't use satellite watches up there when the satellites are back here somewhere. Three, you need a ton of water to drink a year. Now where's all that water coming from?

**Chuck:** And you have to lift all that out of the gravity well.

**Wally:** Yeah and I keep saying "They are going to try to find water on Mars"? Seventy percent of the earth's surface is water and only one percent of the water on this planet is palatable. If you find water on Mars or the Moon is that going to be palatable?



Schirra recommended these books for fans of space exploration and NASA exploits.



Wally Schirra (seated) and Tom Stafford, going through suiting up exercises prior to their Gemini VI launch. (NASA photo)

**Chuck:** Right.

**Wally:** These are big, big problems. And they are not addressing it. They're talking about going to the moon and building a moon colony. A lot of the astronauts are talking about that. Now on the moon, the dust can be a real nightmare. It's crystalline glass almost; it'll cut up all the bearings and the seals. So we're worried about that.

**Chuck:** Do you ever wish you'd flown more missions? Do you ever wish you had had a fourth mission?

**Wally:** I was hoping to get a lunar mission. But once I got the first Apollo mission, I knew that was the end of it. That's the kiss of death to command, well, not kiss of death in that sense, but end of the line if you command an Apollo mission. And no one who commanded an Apollo mission had a second one except for Stafford, which was Apollo-Soyuz.

**Chuck:** If you could have your choice of spacecraft past or present to fly on a mission, what would it be? What mission would you fly and why?

**Wally:** Gemini 6 all over again. That was a thrill. For one, we surpassed the Soviets finally. That in itself was a big event.

**Chuck:** Do you have any advice for any youngster who might be interested in a career in the space sector?

**Wally:** Oh! I wish they would do that. Of course we have the scholarship foundation, the NASA Scholarship Foundation. I'm active with Give Kids the World, which is a sequel to Make-A-Wish. We're trying to get the kids excited about math, engineering, and science.

**Chuck:** John Glenn's been back up into space. If NASA called you Monday morning and said, "We want you to go", would you want to go?

**Wally:** One, I'm not that old. Two, I didn't need the flight time - I've had 300 hours. No, it would take three years to get to the point where I was able to command a shuttle mission, and I don't want to be a straphanger. That's what I called John, he was a straphanger. And test pilot's and fighter pilots are very proud of their heritage. But I don't blame John for going, it was a heck of a good idea.

**Chuck:** If you were to come out with a new astronaut timepiece,

would there be anything you'd suggest?

**Wally:** Yeah lots of things. Sure, updating. Automatic movement, although you got to keep moving [to keep automatic movements working], but I think that'd be the way to go rather than winding it. Electrical, as you say, might very well be hurt by the environment.

But the interesting thing about time is that it's not an easy thing to work with.

**Chuck:** Thank you very much for your time!

**Wally:** For your time? You didn't mean to say that, did you (laughs)? C

*Chuck Maddox, an authority on vintage chronographs, has avidly followed man's exploration of space since watching Apollo 7's launch telecast at the age of six. He hosts a collection of articles at <http://home.xnet.com/~cmaddox/cm3articles.html> and a blog at [www.chuckmaddoxwatch.blogspot.com](http://www.chuckmaddoxwatch.blogspot.com).*