

This Day in History... September 17, 1976

NASA Unveils *Enterprise*

On September 17, 1976, America's first space shuttle, the *Enterprise*, made its debut public appearance.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, NASA and the Air Force researched different ways of flying winged vehicles back from space and landing them similar to an aircraft. From this research they built six different prototypes and flew 223 glide tests that would help them to develop the concept of the first space shuttle.

Plans for America's first two shuttles were approved and contracts awarded on July 26, 1972. One shuttle would be a test ship built without engines or a heat shield, making it incapable of spaceflight, while the other, the *Columbia*, would be the first shuttle to make it into space.



Stamp pictures the fictional ship that inspired the naming of the *Enterprise*.

Initially, the test ship, designated OV-101, was to be named *Constitution*, and presented to the public on Constitution Day, September 17, 1976. However, fans of the television show *Star Trek* launched a massive letter-writing campaign requesting that the shuttle be named after the starship from that show, the *Enterprise*. President Gerald Ford received hundreds of thousands of letters, and was also partial to the name, so he encouraged NASA to change it.

After the shuttle was completed, it was ready to be unveiled publicly. The rollout was still held on September 17, 1976, in Palmdale, California. However, because of the connection to *Star Trek*, series creator Gene Roddenberry and several cast members were invited to take part in the dedication ceremony.

The following year, the *Enterprise* began a series of flight tests that would prove invaluable to the future shuttle program. Most of these tests revolved around approach and landing. These tests proved that the shuttle could fly in the atmosphere and land like a plane even though it didn't have power, similar to a glider. The *Enterprise* was also subjected to vertical ground vibration tests.

Initially, NASA planned to refit the *Enterprise* so it could be used in space, but they found it would be too costly. Instead, the *Enterprise* was retired and sent to the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. It was later sent to New York as part of the Intrepid Sea, Air, & Space Museum.



America's first space shuttle, was authorized in 1972 and called the "world's first reusable spacecraft."



Stamp issued for the 50th anniversary of *Star Trek*.

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