

Phoenix Mars Lander Team Wins 2009 Swigert Award for Space Exploration



John L. 'Jack' Swigert Jr., command module pilot on Apollo 13. (Photo: NASA)

Winning an award given in memory of the American space hero is 'a tremendous honor,' Peter Smith says.

By Lori Stiles, University Communications, February 19, 2009

The Space Foundation has awarded its 2009 John L. "Jack" Swigert, Jr., Award for Space Exploration to NASA's Phoenix Mars Lander team "in recognition of the technical developments that led to one of the most startling and meaningful discoveries of the new millennium," the Space Foundation announced today.

The award will be presented at the foundation's 25th National Space Symposium to be held in Colorado Springs, Colo., on March 30.

It honors the memory of Jack Swigert, the Apollo 13 command module pilot on the 1970 manned lunar-landing mission crew that successfully returned to Earth despite great hardship caused by an electrical explosion that crippled the spacecraft.

"It is a tremendous honor to win this award that honors a great American space hero who had a bold vision, but was given slim odds for success," said Peter H. Smith of The University of Arizona's Lunar and Planetary Laboratory, principal investigator for the Phoenix Mars Mission.

The team that designed, developed, landed and operated the Phoenix Mars Lander was a collaboration of the UA; NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory; Lockheed Martin Space Systems; the Canadian Space Agency; the University of Neuchatel, Switzerland; the universities of Copenhagen and Aarhus, Denmark; Germany's Max Planck Institute; and the Finnish Meteorological Institute.

"The Phoenix Mars Lander's confirmation of water on the Red Planet is one of the most important discoveries of our time," Space Foundation Chief Executive Officer Elliott Pulham said in a news release announcing the award. "The exploratory spirit of Jack Swigert is evident in the winning team's ceaseless and well-choreographed pursuit of this noble goal."

The Phoenix Mars Lander became only the sixth spacecraft to land successfully on Mars when it touched down on May 25, 2008. The lander surpassed its original three-month mission, lasting five months in the Martian northern plains, digging up scientific "firsts" along the way.

The lander mission "significantly advanced the body of knowledge about Mars while validating NASA's 'follow the water' strategy for extraterrestrial exploration," the Space Foundation announcement said.

"In addition to acknowledging the outcome of the Phoenix Mars Lander mission, the award also recognizes the management of the program," Pulham said. "This is the first NASA mission to employ a management structure with a single lead scientist from an academic institution."

The Phoenix Mission is the first specific mission to receive the Swigert Award. Previous recipients include the NASA Mars Exploration Team, then-President George W. Bush, the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the astronomical observatories and researchers of the California Institute of Technology, and the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency.

The Space Foundation, an international nonprofit organization based in Colorado Springs, was founded in 1983, a year after Swigert's death. It promotes such space-related endeavors as the National Space Symposium, major industry events, and educational enterprises that bring space into the classroom. The foundation conducts research and analysis and government affairs activities from its Washington, D.C., office and has field representatives in Houston and Cape Canaveral, Fla.

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