



Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum 2026 Michael Collins Trophy

Nomination Guidelines

The Michael Collins Trophy has recognized extraordinary accomplishments in aviation and spaceflight since its inception in 1985. The Collins Trophy has grown in stature over the years and is now recognized as one of the most prestigious honors in the field. The Collins Trophy is presented annually at an event at the Museum in early spring.

Two Trophies are awarded each year: one for *Lifetime Achievement* and one for *Current Achievement*. Such achievements may include any of the following:

- The management of a significant project or activity.
- The execution of such a project or activity by a team, crew, or person.
- The attainment of distinction through a single extraordinary act.
- The attainment of distinction through a career of service.
- Distinguished accomplishments chronicling the history of aviation and spaceflight.

The Trophy for *Current Achievement* recognizes events or accomplishments from the beginning of 2024 to the present. The Trophy for *Lifetime Achievement* is awarded only to a living individual.

A nomination must include a brief written description of the significance of the nominee's accomplishments. One or two pages of text are sufficient. Nominations should not be lists of positions and awards. Successful nominations are thoughtful statements of the significance of contributions to the advancement of aviation and spaceflight.

Nominations are due by May 16, 2025. Please submit your nominations online at:
<https://airandspace.si.edu/michael-collins-trophy/nominate>

The following lists of previous recipients suggest the caliber of candidates that should be nominated for the Michael Collins Trophy. A persuasive nomination from a previous year is also included for reference.

Michael Collins Trophy Winners

	Lifetime	Current Achievement
2025	Margaret Hamilton	OSIRIS-REx Team
2024	Peggy Whitson	Double Asteroid Redirection Test Team
2023	Bill Anders	James Webb Space Telescope Team
2022	Wally Funk	MiMi Aung & the Ingenuity Mars Helicopter Team
2021	Gene Kranz	SpaceX Team
2020	Charles Elachi	The Hubble Space Telescope Team
2019	Charles F. Bolden, Jr.	LIGO Scientific Collaboration
2018	John R. Dailey	Shaesta Waiz, Dreams Soar, Inc.
2017	Peter C. Theisinger	South Pole Rescue Team, Kenn Borek Air Ltd.
2016	James A. Lovell	New Horizons Mission Team
2015	Stamatios M. “Tom” Krimigis	Kepler Mission Team
2014	Norman R. Augustine	Dawn Flight Team
2013	Joseph F. Sutter	Mars Science Laboratory EDL Team
2012	Burt Rutan	Cassini-Huygens Flight Team
2011	George E. Mueller	Michael T. Suffredini and the ISS Program Office
2010	Christopher Columbus Kraft, Jr.	Chesley B. Sullenberger III and the Flight Crew of US Airways Flight 1549
2009	John R. Casani and C. Gordon Fullerton	No award presented
2008	Joseph W. Kittinger, Jr.	Stardust Comet Sample Return Mission Team
2007	Robert A. “Bob” Hoover	N. Wayne Hale, Jr., and STS-121 Shuttle Mission Team
2006	James A. Van Allen	Mars Exploration Rover Team
2005	Frank N. Piasecki	Burt Rutan, Paul G. Allen, and the SpaceShipOne Team
2004	Neil A. Armstrong	Milstar Team
2003	No award presented	No award presented
2002	Stanley Hiller, Jr.	Predator Development Team, GA-ASI
2001	John H. Glenn, Jr.	Near Earth Asteroid Rendezvous Mission Team
2000	A. Scott Crossfield	Chandra X-Ray Observatory Team
1999	Simon Ramo	Breitling Orbiter 3 Team
1998	Richard T. Whitcomb	Mars Pathfinder Team
1997	Anthony W. “Tony” LeVier	Shannon W. Lucid
1996	Bernard A. Schriever	Boeing 777 Civilian Airliner Development Team
1995	Najeeb E. Halaby	X-31 International Test Organization
1994	Michael H. Carr	Patty Wagstaff
1993	Olive Ann Beech	Compton J. Tucker
1992	Francis M. Rogallo	Magellan Project Team
1991	Arthur E. Raymond	John C. Mather and Cosmic Background Explorer Team
1990	Kelly Johnson and SR-71 Design Team	Pegasus Launch Vehicle Team
1989	Edwin Land	Voyager Spacecraft Team
1988	Harold Masursky	Paul MacCready
1987	John Steiner	Dick Rutan and Jeana Yeager
1986	Frank Whittle and Hans von Ohain	John W. Young
1985	Robert R. Gilruth	Kathryn D. Sullivan and Bruce McCandless, II

Example Nomination

Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Michael Collins Trophy

Current Achievement

Lifetime Achievement **XX**

Name of Candidate or team: **Col. Joseph W. Kittinger, Jr.**

Briefly summarize the accomplishments of this nominee:

Joseph Kittinger was born in Tampa, Florida, July 27, 1928, graduated from high school in Jacksonville, Florida, and attended the University of Florida. He entered the USAF as an aviation cadet in March 1949, was commissioned in March 1950, and served for the next three years with the 86th Fighter Bomber Squadron in Germany. On June 2, 1957, while assigned to the Air Force Missile Development Center (AFMDC) at Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico, Kittinger flew a balloon to an altitude of 96,000 feet in the first of the Air Force Project Manhigh ascents, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

While serving with the Aerospace Medical Research Laboratories, Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio, Kittinger was appointed Test Director of Project Excelsior, investigating equipment and techniques that would allow aircrew to survive bail-out from very high altitudes. During this project he completed three high altitude jumps from a balloon gondola--from 76,400 on November 16, 1958; 74,700 on December 10, 1958; and 102,800 feet on August 16, 1960. On the last occasion he was in freefall for 4.5 minutes, experienced temperatures as low as -94 degrees Fahrenheit, and reached a velocity close to the speed of sound. Forty-six years later, he continues to hold the world record for the highest parachute jump, the longest freefall, and the fastest speed achieved by a human being in free fall. His work on Project Excelsior earned Kittinger an oak leaf cluster to the Distinguished Flying Cross, the J.J. Jeffries Award of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, the Leo Stevens Parachute Medal and the Wingfoot Lighter-Than-Air Society Achievement Award. President Eisenhower awarded him the C.B. Harmon Trophy on October 3, 1960.

On December 13-14, 1962, Kittinger and astronomer William C. White rose to an altitude of 82,200 feet over Holloman AFB, New Mexico in a Project Stargazer balloon. The pair remained at altitude for the next 18.5 hours, checking variations in brightness of stars caused by the atmosphere.

Kittinger volunteered for three combat tours in Vietnam, serving as commander of the famous 555th "Triple Nickel" Tactical Fighter Squadron flying the F-4 Phantom II during his final tour. After downing a MiG 21 on May 11, 1972, he was shot down and spent 11 months as a POW.

Following his retirement as a Colonel in 1978, Kittinger worked as an engineer with Martin Marietta Aerospace but continued to fly airplanes and balloons. He won the Gordon-Bennett balloon races in 1982, 1984, and 1985 before accomplishing his most ambitious feat, a solo balloon crossing of the Atlantic. Taking off aboard the balloon, *Rosie O'Grady* on September 14, 1984, he traveled over 3,500 miles at altitudes ranging between 10,000 and 17,000 feet. Although beset by cold, fatigue, and tricky winds, he successfully completed the historic flight in

3.5 days. Crash-landing in northern Italy on September 18, he set a record for the longest solo balloon flight as well as a distance record for this class of balloon. Kittinger continues to fly, competing in the 2004 Gordon Bennett balloon race.

Briefly describe the significance of this accomplishment to aerospace:

Joseph W. Kittinger, Jr., exemplifies the best traditions of military test flying. His most important achievement was to pioneer the use of high-altitude balloons to test equipment and techniques that would save the lives of crew members forced to abandon their aircraft at extreme altitudes. His experience not only demonstrated that survival was possible under those conditions, but led to the development of procedures still in use today. He is arguably the most important balloonist active since 1945. Beyond all of that, as a fighter pilot, POW and record setter, he is a genuine American hero.