

# *Dr. Donald D. Flickinger, 89, A Pioneer in Space Medicine*

By **Henry Fountain**

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Dr. Donald D. Flickinger, an early expert on space medicine who as a World War II flight surgeon parachuted into the Himalayas to rescue downed fliers and later helped select the first seven Mercury astronauts, died on Feb. 23 at Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, where he lived. He was 89.

The cause was congestive heart failure, said his wife, Marilyn.

Dr. Flickinger, who retired from the Air Force in 1961 as a brigadier general and later was a consultant to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and other agencies, "was a pioneer in high-altitude medicine," said Robert Hotz, a former editor in chief of Aviation Week and Space Technology.

Dr. Flickinger was particularly interested in the problems of bailing out of an airplane at high altitudes. He developed ejection equipment that included a small supply of oxygen for the initial descent and a barometric release mechanism to insure that the parachute did not open until later, in air that was thick enough to breathe. The goal, Mr. Hotz said, "was so you could bail out without dying on the way down."

Mr. Hotz first encountered Dr. Flickinger in World War II in the "Hump," the southeastern range of the Himalayas from India through Burma to China, or "500 miles of the roughest country on earth," as Mr. Hotz described it.

Dr. Flickinger was an Army officer in his 30's, a Stanford-trained surgeon with a penchant for jumping into rugged jungle whenever Allied planes went down on the supply route to China. He would tend to the injured and help them hike to safety, a journey that sometimes took weeks.

Along the way, there was the threat of encounters with Japanese troops and the more exotic dangers posed by local tribesmen, said to savor human flesh. The young flight surgeon would always make sure he packed a supply of trinkets.

"Flickinger had parachuted in so many times that he knew the headmen," Mr. Hotz said. "They would welcome him with open arms because he always brought goodies."

Dr. Flickinger's most renowned mission came in August 1943, when he and two other men parachuted in after a plane made a crash landing 100 miles from the nearest Allied base. Among the 21 people on board was the CBS radio correspondent Eric Sevareid.

"These men didn't have to jump into this wilderness," Mr. Sevareid wrote in a dispatch filed over a hand-cranked wireless as survivors and rescuers were still trying to reach the base some three weeks later. "I confess that I ran to them on the hillside that evening, my eyes filled with tears of gratitude."

After the war, in the newly established Air Force, Dr. Flickinger became director of "human factors" in the military's program to put a man in orbit. He began by sending animals into space, including a mouse strapped into the nose cone of a modified ballistic missile, and monkeys in capsules.

Later, he and Dr. Randolph W. Lovelace 2d selected seven young military aviators to be the nation's first astronauts, subjecting them to a racking series of physical examinations and tests at Dr. Lovelace's clinic in Albuquerque, N.M., chronicled by Tom Wolfe in "The Right Stuff."

The astronauts, selected in April 1959, took part in the Mercury program, which led to the nation's first orbital flight in 1962. The Mercury project was followed by Gemini and then Apollo, culminating in mankind's first landing on the moon in July 1969.

Dr. Flickinger knew what he was seeking when it came to humans, and he found it in test pilots.

"There is the aggressive response to stress, as we find in the tiger, and the docile response, as exhibited by the rabbit," he said in a 1958 newspaper interview. "We're looking for tigers."

**Dr. Flickinger's first two marriages ended in divorce. Besides his wife, he is survived by a son from his first marriage, the Rev. Don Flickinger of San Jose, Calif.; a daughter from his second marriage, Daphne Ann Bradford of Marblehead, Mass., and two grandsons.**

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