The IFR mourns for its Honorary President

Prof. Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger

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† 25. 5. 2008
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Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger, 94, of Huntsville died Sunday May 25, 2008. Ernst Stuhlinger was born in 1913 in Niederrimbach, a small farmer's village in southern Germany where his father was the schoolteacher. He attended high school and university in Tuebingen. Studying physics under Professor Hans Geiger, he graduated in 1936 with a dissertation in cosmic ray physics, and then continued working on cosmic rays and nuclear physics at the Technical University of Berlin. In 1939, he joined the German atomic energy program under Professor Heisenberg. Two years later, he was drafted into the German Army; after spending 18 months as a private first class at the Russian front, he was transferred to Wernher von Braun's rocket development center at Peenemunde, where he worked on the development of guidance and control systems. At the end of World War II, von Braun and 126 of his coworkers, including Stuhlinger, were invited by the U. S. Army to continue their rocket development work in the United States, first at Fort Bliss, Texas, and from 1950 on in Huntsville. Under the auspices of the U.S. Army, the team grew quickly, developing the Redstone, the Jupiter, and the Pershing missiles. On Jan. 31, 1958, the von Braun group, together with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., launched Explorer I with a modified Redstone rocket. During those years he wrote his famous book on Ion Propulsion for Spaceflight, a profound book conceiving a far advanced propulsion technology for rockets at a time where, in global terms, industry had just grown out of the V2 principles and begun to understand how to design and use chemical propulsion for heavy launchers on a large scale production.

In 1961, another modified Redstone launched the first American astronaut, Alan B. Shepard, into space on a ballistic trajectory. In 1960, von Braun's team was transferred to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration at the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville. Stuhlinger's main areas of work included the planning of satellite projects, instrumentation for scientific space investigations, studies of electric space propulsion systems, and the organization of in-house research projects. In 1968, Stuhlinger was appointed associate director for science at the G.C. Marshall Space Flight Center. After retiring from NASA in 1976, he joined the University of Alabama in Huntsville, teaching astrophysics and space sciences, and working on a project to develop and test electric automobiles. During those years, he spent several months at the universities of Munich and Heidelberg under the Alexander von Humboldt research award program, where he worked out project plans for space probes to asteroids and comets with electric propulsion systems. Later, he joined Teledyne Brown Engineering in Huntsville as a senior research associate and participated in project studies related to materials processing in space, instrumentation for space-borne experiments, rocket-propelled space planes, and manned missions to Mars. Stuhlinger was awarded honorary degrees from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and the Technical University of Berlin. He was the recipient of numerous other awards and honors. Survivors include his wife, Irmgard Stuhlinger; sons, Tilman Werner Stuhlinger of Tucson, Ariz., and H. Christoph Stuhlinger of Monticello, Ark.; daughter, Susanne Schmidt and husband Siegfried of Heidenheim, Germany; grandsons, Andreas W. Schmidt of Aachen, Germany, and Alexander E. Schmidt of Hannover, Germany; sister, Elisabeth Schmidt of Ludwigsburg, Germany; numerous nieces and nephews; and a host of friends and associates.

Together with Wernher von Braun and others he was co-founder of the German International Promoting Association for Spaceflight – Hermann Oberth – Wernher von Braun e.V. (IFR) in 1969 in Salzburg, Austria, for which he acted as vice president for many years. In spite of the large geographical distance between the IFR homebase in Germany and his residence in Huntsville he was very active and engaged in consulting the IFR in all far reaching aspects of future spaceflight matters. Over many years until he recently passed away he was the highly revered Honorary President of the IFR. We, the IFR, mourn for Ernst Stuhlinger, the highly merited witness of spaceflight times and extraordinary and high-ranking scientist and will hold his memory in honour.