

Russian Cosmonaut Celebrates 50 Years Since Pioneering Spacewalk

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Alexei Leonov (L) and Valery Kubasov preparing to launch aboard the Soyuz.

Fifty years ago today Soviet cosmonaut Alexei Leonov made history by becoming the first man to walk in space — an accomplishment as significant in the history of spaceflight as Yury Gagarin's flight into space and Neil Armstrong's steps on the moon.

A native of Siberia, Leonov was one of the original 20 cosmonauts selected for space flights. On March 18, 1965 — almost four years after Gagarin flight — Leonov became the first man to walk in space when he crawled out of an inflatable airlock strapped to the side of his Voskhod 2 capsule.

After 12 minutes floating in space, tethered to his spaceship by a 5 meter long line, it was time for Leonov to get back inside and prepare to return home.

However, an unforeseen complication almost cost him his life. His space suit, free of external

atmospheric pressure, ballooned up in the vacuum of space, making it difficult for him to move and impossible to fit back into the airlock.

In order to get back inside Voskhod 2 and not die in space, Leonov took a bold step — he opened the suit just a bit to vent some of the air inside. The trick worked, but he lost six kilograms from sweating as he struggled to pull himself back inside.

Despite the danger he faced, he achieved two major objectives — beating the Americans to the deed and showing the world that humans could enter the vacuum of space, a crucial step for the development of moon landing programs and the International Space Station.

Leonov flew a second time in 1975, when he was the commander of the Soviet half of the landmark Apollo-Soyuz test project, the first Russian-American joint space mission.

Today, Leonov works for Alfa Bank as a vice president and sits on the board of directors. A movie about his career as a cosmonaut is due to begin filming on June 1, news agency TASS reported Wednesday.

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