

## Laika was first living creature in space

Her name in translation means 'barker,' but in the end Laika, the first living creature in space, must have gone out whimpering.

When Soviet space scientists sent her up exactly 50 years ago this Saturday, the two-year-old mongrel was expected to live for several days. In fact, it was later revealed, she lasted only a few hours.

Soviet propaganda at the time said she would find a peaceful end through lack of oxygen after days of orbiting the Earth aboard Sputnik 2.

A Russian scientist revealed just a few years ago, however, that she was killed by overheating in her tiny capsule after only a few hours in space.

Yet, the memory of her flight in the 80-centimetre metal cylinder that was her home and coffin is immortal. And there was a small degree of luxury for the first creature in space.

The capsule had a tiny peephole, there was oxygen and food for seven days, and a cooling system - albeit one that failed under heat from the third stage of the rocket which failed to disengage.

Like the generations of humans that followed her into space, Laika underwent a stringent selection procedure. First and foremost, she had to weigh less than six kilos.

For months before the launch, she and her fellow canine candidates underwent training aimed at keeping them calm in ever-smaller cages, up to three weeks at a time. Laika's stoic demeanour won the ride.

A month before, the Soviets had shocked the West with their first Sputnik launch, to the delight of Nikita Khrushchev and the rest of the Kremlin leadership.

They were only too keen to mark the ensuing 40th anniversary of the October Revolution with Laika's flight aboard the half-tonne Sputnik 2.

It went on to orbit the Earth with Laika's body aboard for half a year before burning up in the Earth's atmosphere in April 1958. It was to be another three-and-a-half years before man went into orbit.

On April 12, 1961, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was blasted into space aboard the Vostok 1 capsule. And, in contrast to Laika, he lived to tell the tale after a single orbit.

( © IANS / India eNews)