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## Media

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# Reginald Turnill obituary

Correspondent for the BBC at the height of the space race



Reginald Turnill was in Houston covering the Apollo 13 mission when Fred Haise, from a distance of 204,700 miles, told Mission Control: 'OK, Houston, hey, we've got a problem here'

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### Nigel Fountain

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Over the course of a long and distinguished career, the BBC journalist Reginald Turnill, who has died aged 97, chronicled the disasters, thwarted aspirations and triumphs that marked the transition from the jet age to the space era. In January 1957, soon after he joined the BBC, Turnill's assignments as assistant industrial correspondent included spending time 2,000ft underground, reporting for the Home Service (now Radio 4) from the new Bevercotes colliery in Nottinghamshire. But by October that year he was covering the launch of the Soviet Union's Sputnik 1, the

world's first satellite, an event that sparked his interest in aerospace and led to his appointment as the BBC's air, space and defence correspondent.

Twelve years on, in July 1969, he was alternating between Nasa's Cape Kennedy launch site in Florida (now known as Cape Canaveral) and Mission Control in Houston, Texas. His assignment then was the Apollo 11 mission, and the landing of the first people on the moon, [Neil Armstrong](#) and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin. It was the high tide of Turnill's "moon landing years" - but [his biggest story](#) would begin later, on 13 April 1970. That evening, in Houston, Turnill had wrapped up his day's reports on the Apollo 13 moon mission and was about to leave the almost deserted press area. It was then that Fred Haise, from a distance of 204,700 miles, and heading to the moon with his fellow astronauts Jim Lovell and Jack Swigert, told Mission Control: "OK, Houston, hey, we've got a problem here." There had been an explosion in Apollo 13's oxygen tank two - the main power supply was crippled.



In July 1969, Reginald Turnill was alternating between Nasa's Cape Kennedy launch site in Florida and Mission Control in Houston, Texas, for the Apollo 11 mission

"This was the start of the sort of drama in space," Turnill wrote later, "that media newsdesks dreamed about." With his wife Margaret, who had accompanied him on that occasion, fielding incoming calls, he spent the next four days covering that epic of human endurance, the return to Earth of the three astronauts.

He would write that he had covered "every step in Nasa's steady progress towards launching men towards the moon" - all the US's manned space missions, together with the unmanned interplanetary voyages. His efforts included developing a working relationship with Wernher von Braun, the sometime Nazi rocket engineer who became father of the US moon programme, and whom Turnill described as "the 20th-century Faust".

It took the journalist two years to bring himself to shake his hand of the "most confident man I have ever met".

Alongside the space programme, the other great love of Turnill's career was the Anglo-French Concorde project. He told BBC listeners in 1972 that he was "astonished at the malevolent ignorance of the campaign" against the supersonic airliner, and wrote in 1994 that he considered it "one of the major achievements of the 20th century". "It was fitting," he wrote in 1994, "that Concorde first flew in 1969, paralleling the US's achievement in landing the first men on the moon."

In his youth, Turnill had been a devotee of the Victorian atheist William Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man*, and of the writings of HG Wells - whom he interviewed in the 1930s. He was, perhaps, an archetypal questioning, self-made Wellsian. He was uncomfortable with any penny-pinching by the BBC, within which, he said, he had always been regarded as "among the 'other ranks' rather than

the officers".

Alongside the grand projects, Turnill's journalism took in the minutiae and grand shambles of Britain's aerospace and defence policy; the Viscount airliner's success, lukewarm reactions to the French-sponsored Airbus, the aborted rocket programme and consequent dependence on the US, the early 1970s Rolls-Royce nationalisation crisis, and interminable rows about new London airports.

Turnill was born in Dover, Kent. His father died before Reg was four, his mother remarried, and he was raised and educated - at private and state schools - in Raynes Park, south-west London. By 1930, the 15-year-old Turnill was working in Fleet Street as a Press Association news agency telephonist. After a spell as a junior reporter on the Hastings Observer, he returned to PA as a staff reporter. In 1938 he married Margaret Hennings. During the second world war, as a warrant officer-cum-journalist, he reported on the invasion of Italy and war across France, the Low Countries and Germany. In 1946 he returned to PA and remained there until joining the BBC in 1956. When the first edition of the Today programme was aired in October 1957, Turnill was on hand.

To his displeasure, he was retired by the BBC on his 60th birthday, but continued to freelance for the corporation, working with John Craven on Newsround - he had the ability to communicate with young people without condescension. Well into the 21st century, he was writing for the Guardian and other news organisations. When I last spoke to him, the indefatigable nonagenarian was still discussing outlets for his work.

His books include *Moonslaught: The Full Story of Man's Race to the Moon* (1969), *The Language of Space* (1970), *Farnborough: The Story of RAE* (1980), *Celebrating Concorde* (1994) and *The Moonlandings: An Eyewitness Account* (2003). In 2006 he received the Sir Arthur Clarke lifetime achievement award.

Turnill is survived by Margaret, their two sons, Graham and Michael, and two grandchildren.

- Reginald George Turnill, journalist, born 12 May 1915; died 12 February 2013

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