

Obituaries

Reginald Turnill

Reporter who covered the space race from Sputnik to Shuttle and broke the drama of Apollo 13

REGINALD TURNILL, the BBC's former air and aerospace correspondent, who has died aged 97, covered the golden age of post-war aviation from jet power to the Space Shuttle; though he reported on the success of the first Moon landing, his most celebrated story was the scoop that Apollo 13 was in difficulties.

Turnill was the last journalist still present at Mission Control, Houston, when on April 14 1970 he heard the spacecraft's crew report: "OK, Houston, we've had a problem here." As his fellow journalists had all gone home for the night, it fell to him to break the story of the explosion of two oxygen tanks 204,000 miles from Earth. With the tension rising, he filed updates and recorded the engineers' insistence that they could solve the problem – even if they were not sure how. Throughout the night and all through the next day Turnill gave interviews to radio and television programmes, guiding them through the drama while his wife Margaret picked up unguarded remarks among the staff as she made him cups of tea. Finally he was able to break the happy news that the crew were returning safely.

Thirteen years earlier, on October 4 1957, Turnill had been on hand to announce "the starter's pistol for the race to the Moon" – the Soviet launch of Sputnik. He covered the space race in its entirety, travelling first to Moscow to describe Yuri Gagarin's guarded press conference after the cosmonaut became the first man in orbit in 1961, and then to Cape Canaveral for Alan Shepherd's account of his 15-minute sub-orbital "lob".

During the periods between launches Turnill found plenty to occupy him, notably the joint development of Concorde by Britain and France, with its mixture of scientific difficulties, national pride and astronomic costs. But it was undoubtedly the pictures beamed from the surface of the Moon in 1969 that proved the most intoxicating story of all.

When the grainy images of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepping out on the lunar landscape arrived in London, Turnill was told to concentrate on describing the excitement at Mission Control in Houston, where he heard the novelist Arthur C Clarke saying he had cried for the first time in 20 years and prayed for the first time in 40.

Soon, however, his expert knowledge was called upon. There was a problem in linking the landing module to the Apollo rocket for the return journey, and Turnill was able to recount in detail the emergency procedures under way. Afterwards he insisted that the phrase "all hell broke loose" be reinstated in the official record.



Turnill and (right) the scene at Mission Control, Houston, after the explosion aboard Apollo 13. Below, Britain's prototype of the Anglo-French supersonic Concorde airliner in 1968



Such reporting was often done on a shoestring. For example, when he interviewed John Glenn, the fifth man in space, Turnill had to do so in a bathroom because the BBC had not acquired the latest recording equipment. But he was happy to go to great lengths in pursuit of a story. He went up in a jet for a schools programme to experience the pressures of G-force, and also tried out the lunar rover which, he said, was like riding a farm tractor.

Reginald George Turnill was born on May 12 1915 at Dover, where his earliest memory was of being pushed under a kitchen table during an air raid. After the death of his father, a coachbuilder, his mother married a lodger who became an income tax inspector. The family moved to London, where Reg went to a series of four-guineas-a-term private schools.

At 15 he joined the Press Association news agency as a telephonist, and by 1935 had started reporting – though he left to gain experience on the *Eastbourne Observer* before returning to PA to cover politics. Although a committed socialist he found Anthony Eden and other Tories friendly but most Labour leaders hostile; the exceptions were Clement

Attlee, whose replies to questions consisted of "Yes", "No" and "Why not?", and Ernest Bevin.

On the outbreak of war Turnill became a machine-gunner with the Middlesex regiment, and was so irritated by the presumption of the officer class that he vowed never to accept a commission. By 1945 he was a warrant officer reporting courts martial for the Judge Advocate General's department in Naples.

Returning to PA he rapidly established himself as one of the agency's top reporters before transferring to the BBC in 1956. There he became assistant industry correspondent. After covering Sputnik in 1957, however, he was so enthralled with space that, in 1958, he agreed to become the corporation's air and space correspondent, with a brief to cover defence. As a result he covered bombing raids over Vietnam – only to irritate the US Air Force by pointing out their inaccuracy.

As the public enthusiasm for the Moon declined after the first landing, the BBC grumbled about Turnill still wanting to go to America. But he proved his value with the Apollo 13 trip in 1970. After the astronauts' safe return, there were no more demands

that he remain in London, and his wife received \$75 for being his editorial assistant.

Still, he was irritated by the way he was compulsorily retired from the BBC at 65, though he continued to broadcast with decreasing frequency for some years. In retirement he produced articles and books about space exploration, most notably *The Moonlandings* (2003). He wrote obituaries for *The Daily Telegraph* as well as features in which he criticised Britain's decision to drop out of the European Space Agency (which it had helped to launch), and revealed poor management in the British Interplanetary Society. He also explained the problems for pedestrians outside Buckingham Palace after he had been knocked down there.

In his late nineties his reporting prompted the repair of the clock in his village of Sandgate, Kent, after a silence of several months, and he delighted in telling his telephone company that their sympathy over his decease was premature.

Reg Turnill married Margaret Hennings in 1938. She survives him with their two sons.

Reginald Turnill, born May 12 1915, died February 12 2013