

Reginald Turnill



BBC correspondent who followed the drama of the race to the Moon and banged the drum for Concorde

Reginald Turnill began his journalistic career at the age of 15 as a telephonist at the Press Association in the 1930s. He continued to work as a reporter for the news agency (after a break for war service) for a further ten years. Nothing about his work at that time suggesting the path his career was to take, but then his fortunes changed dramatically with his recruitment by the BBC in 1956.

He started as assistant correspondent on the industrial staff, with the idea that he might help to bring a little modernity to the coverage of news in the aviation field. By 1958 he had become the BBC's air and space correspondent, and a marvellous opportunity was suddenly open to him. He had landed the right job at precisely the right time.

Civil aviation was expanding exponentially as the jet age got under way. Space travel had dramatically become a reality with the launch

of the Soviet artificial satellite Sputnik 1 on October 4, 1957, about which he had written. Suddenly, the world's two leading military and industrial powers, the US and USSR, were straining every nerve to get the first man in to space and then on to the Moon. Turnill at the BBC had a front row seat for the action.

As inter-service rivalry caused disaster after disaster in the US space programme, the Soviet Union's mysterious "Chief Designer" scored success after success with the launch of ever heavier satellites — while the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev rubbed in his country's supremacy in mocking speeches that derided the much smaller American satellites as "mere oranges".

Turnill followed all this and reported on the developments that led to the Soviet Union launching Yuri Gagarin as the first man in space in April 1961, apparently to establish an unassailable lead in the space race.

He was then to report on the establishment of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) in the US and to observe at close quarters the remarkable effort of will and technical expertise that allowed the US to win the space race, with the touchdown of Apollo 11's landing module on July 21, 1969, and the astronaut Neil Armstrong making his "giant leap for mankind" on the lunar surface.

As Turnill reported on the build-up to the US's Moon landing preparations, he positioned himself close to Nasa's head of manned space flight, George Low, and from him learnt that it was to be the crew of Apollo 11 who would make the first attempt. From Nasa officials Turnill said that he subsequently learnt also that it had originally been intended that the more mercurial, outspoken scientist "Buzz" Aldrin was to have been the first man on the Moon.

In the event it was Armstrong, a man whose greater gravitas was, officials decided, more suitable for the momentous nature of the occasion, although at the time Nasa officials merely said that the change reflected the fact that it was physically easier for Armstrong to exit the lunar landing module first.

Although he had no special scientific knowledge, and was no

astronomer, Turnill was always able to use his instinct, and his experience as a news reporter from his years at the Press Association, to give drama to his coverage of the details of the space race. What he lacked in technical knowledge he made up for by his tenacity “on the story” and his unassailable conviction of the fundamental importance of developments in aerospace, in which he thought Britain should be playing its part. He was thrilled by the other aviation story of that annus mirabilis of 1969 – the first flight of Concorde.

Reginald Turnill was born at Dover in 1915. His father died when he was 4, and his mother married again. The family moved to London where he was educated at schools in Raynes Park. He began his working life as a copytaker at the Press Association in 1930, within five years graduating to become a reporter himself, spending a period on a South Coast newspaper before returning to the PA in 1938.

At the outbreak of war in 1939 he was called up and served as a machinegunner with The Middlesex Regiment. He achieved the rank of warrant officer but remained determined not to accept a commission. In 1946 he returned to the PA.

His period with the BBC covered not just the space race, but coincided with a period of dramatic advances in civil aviation with the introduction of such pioneering airliners as the giant “jumbo” Boeing 747 and the Mach 2 Anglo-French Concorde. Turnill was the BBC reporter covering Concorde’s maiden flight at Toulouse-Blagnac airport on March 2, 1969. He remained an enthusiastic proselytiser for the supersonic airliner, amid all the criticism that was levelled at it on economic and environmental grounds.

But he always thought that his greatest scoop was his coverage of the Apollo 13 lunar flight, which almost became a disaster, in April 1970. He had been covering the flight at Mission Control at the Johnson Space Center, Houston, had gone home to dinner with his wife, who accompanied him on his US posting, and then popped back to JSC to check that “all was well”. Just as he was leaving the centre finally to return home he heard the words “Houston, we’ve got a problem”, coming in from the space craft.

“I went back to my desk and stayed there for the next three days,” he recalled. In that time he was able to follow the dramatic events, as Houston and its experts wrestled to save the craft and the lives of its crew members after an explosion and the loss of two out of three fuel cells 56 hours into the mission. Turnill followed the story through to the fiery re-entry of the landing module through the Earth’s atmosphere and the dramatic, but safe splashdown of the astronauts in the Pacific.

Turnill was not best pleased to be retired from the BBC on passing 60, but he continued to broadcast on a freelance basis for the corporation, and wrote widely on aviation. Besides his own books, which included *Moonslaught: The Full Story of Man’s Race to the Moon* (1969); *Farnborough: The Story of RAE* (1980); *Celebrating Concorde* (1994) and *The Moonlandings: An Eyewitness Account* (2003), he contributed to the *Observers Book of Manned Spaceflight*, the *Observer’s Book of Unmanned Spaceflight* and, in the 1980s, edited *Jane’s Spaceflight Directory*. In 2006 he won the Sir Arthur Clarke Lifetime Achievement Award.

Turnill married in 1938, Margaret Hennings, and they had two sons.

Reginald Turnill, journalist, was born on May 12, 1915. He died on February 12, 2013, aged 97