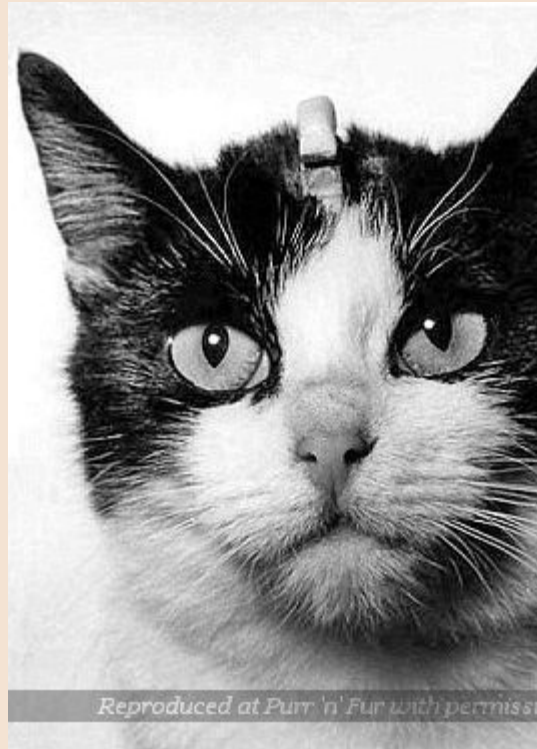


Félicette, the space cat

... and
Félix,
who
didn't
exist

(2004/2014)

(page checked
January 2026)



After first uploading this page in 2004, there was a new and unexpected twist to the story in 2014, when we learned that Félix (commonly stated as being the name of the first cat in space, including by us until that point) actually never existed!

Read more below ...

While **Félicette** may not be one of the best-known cats in the world, maybe she should be, as she became the first of only two cats that we've been able to confirm were sent into space. There was a report of a cat being used in a space launch several years earlier, in 1958/9, but we were later reliably informed that the launch was cancelled at the last minute.

Early Soviet experiments

The then Soviet Union experimented in the later 1950s with dogs in capsules on the edge of space; then in 1957 [Laika](#), a mongrel dog who became very well-known, was launched in Sputnik 2. According to what the Russians said at the time, she suffered no ill-effects while in orbit, but after a few days her batteries and air supply ran out and she died. However, the real story, only revealed more recently, is that she died from overheating and stress just a few hours into the mission. She is remembered on a memorial at Star City, outside Moscow (*right*). A number of other dogs followed in her paw-prints, up until the mid-1960s; many of them were successfully returned to Earth, but some were not. There are some Russian postage stamps honouring 'space dogs'.



A Brazilian space cat?

There were some announcements from late in 1958 in some local American newspapers (*Daytona Morning Journal*, *Spokane Daily Chronicle* were two) saying that the Brazilian Army was planning to launch a rocket that could carry a cat. The rocket — confusingly named 'Felix I' — was to be built by the Army Technical School, and the plan was that the feline, in a pressurised chamber and with recording instruments attached, would be fed oxygen during the flight and then parachuted down from the rocket's zenith, which was to be at about 70 miles high (112 km). Protests were made by US cat lovers, but in December 1958 it was reported that the flight was to go ahead on New Year's Day 1959. The cat, a tomcat

called **Flamengo**, was said to be trained and ready to go — there was even a photo of him in his chamber — but I haven't been able to find out whether the flight actually happened or what the result was. It seems odd that there was no follow-up, and the news doesn't seem to have reached the international press. Therefore I remained a bit sceptical about the information, but if the flight did take place, hopefully it was successful, as the poor cat was the pet of the project manager's daughters.

Later note: Brazilian reader Erika Flore, to whom thanks, later informed us that in fact Flamengo never did go into space. Following the protests, the rocket project 360 BD was dismantled and the man responsible for the project, Colonel Manuel dos Santos Lage, was transferred to other duties.

Monkeys and rats

Other animals — mice and various monkeys — had been used in previous sub-orbital space experiments by the USA, from as early as 1949. The first primate actually to enter orbit in space was Enos, a chimpanzee launched on 29 November 1961 and successfully recovered a few days later. During 1961 and 1962 white rats were also used in space experiments by the French; three, named Hector, Castor and Pollux by journalists, were launched at different times, with varying degrees of success.

The French feline programme

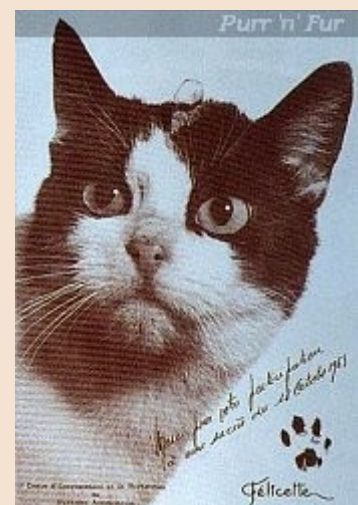
By 1963 the French government had moved on from rodents and had some 14 cats undergoing intensive training for possible space flight, with fairly arduous tasks involving a compression chamber and a centrifuge. Although they were deliberately not given names, to discourage staff from becoming too attached to them and results possibly being influenced, every effort was made to keep them comfortable and in a calm environment; they don't seem to have suffered too much, as ten of the would-be astronauts were later 'decommissioned'.

An exception to the 'no name' rule was **Scoubidou**; her implanted electrode deteriorated from polarisation and was removed, so she became the laboratory mascot and was later adopted by one of the secretaries. The photo (*right*) shows some of the French felines in training.



Félicette

The cat selected to undertake the first mission — one report said because she was the only animal that hadn't put on too much weight! — was a nice-natured black-and-white female, apparently formerly a Paris street cat, although it was suggested she'd been bought by the French government from a dealer. It seems likely she is the cat on left of the group photo (*shown above*). Whatever her origins, on the prescribed date of 18 October 1963 the cat was blasted off in a special capsule on top of a French Véronique AG1 rocket, from the Colomb Bacar rocket base at Hammaguir in the Algerian Sahara desert.



She didn't go into orbit, but in a flight lasting altogether less than 15 minutes travelled some 100 miles (160 km) into space, where the capsule separated from the rocket and descended by parachute. Throughout the flight the electrodes implanted in her brain transmitted neurological impulses back to Earth, and the French Centre d'Enseignement et de Recherches de Médecine Aéronautique (CERMA), which directed these flights, stated afterwards that the

cat had made a valuable contribution to research. The capsule and cat were safely recovered and she was photographed with the team afterwards (*above left*). The British press of the time called her the 'Astrocat'; but at some point and from an unknown source — possibly journalists — she gained the name **Félicette**.

Félicette had her 'hour of glory' when she returned safely to Paris; then she was kept at the CERMA laboratories for 2 or 3 months while checks and studies were carried out. Sadly, after this time she was put to sleep, so that further studies could be made on the electrodes that had been implanted in her brain. There was a second cat flight on 24 October, but the launch went wrong from the start, the rocket crashed, and when the module was finally recovered, quite a distance away and two days later, the unfortunate cat, which has never been named and may well have not been given a name, had died.



The non-existent Félix

Somewhere among the stories of these events of well over half a century ago, the myth emerged that Félicette was not the cat originally chosen for the space mission, but that it was a male cat called **Félix**, who managed to escape from the laboratories at the last minute — so that Félicette made the flight by default, as it were. However, in 2014 new information for this account came directly from Dr Gérard Chatelier, a skilled surgeon who worked on the space programme at CERMA at the time of the feline space flights: he told us there never was a cat called Félix, and he didn't know where that tale originated.

It's thought that the tabby cat (*left*) shown in some press images as 'Félix' is just one of the other CERMA cats that underwent training. It's now clear that Félicette is the black-and-white cat shown at the left of the photo on the previous page. The inscription on the main photo, with her paw-print, reads in French 'Merci pour votre participation à mon succès du 18 octobre 1963,' which means 'Thank you for taking part in my success of 18 October 1963.' (I don't know for whom it was intended.)

There was a superb series of images of the cats, the rocket, its launch and its recovery at the [Nos premières années dans l'espace](#) pages, accessed by clicking on 'Diaporama' for Félicette at bottom left ([link no longer valid](#)). There were sections for other animals, too. However, the Flash player required to view this site became no longer available from the end of 2020. **The images, though, have been retrieved and are at the end of this document.**

Postage stamps

The Felix myth became sufficiently well-established for him to be commemorated, and named, on three postage stamps from former French colonies some 30 years or more after the historic voyage! One, issued in 1992 by the Comoro Islands (*right*), is from a set showing various rockets and the animals Laika and Ham, another space-going chimp.

Later on, in 1997, Chad produced a series of souvenir sheets showing many aspects of space travel; the one with 'Félix' also includes Laika, as well as astronauts Armstrong, Collins and Aldrin and their Saturn V rocket (*see below*). Lastly there was a 1999 stamp from Niger showing 'Félix'.

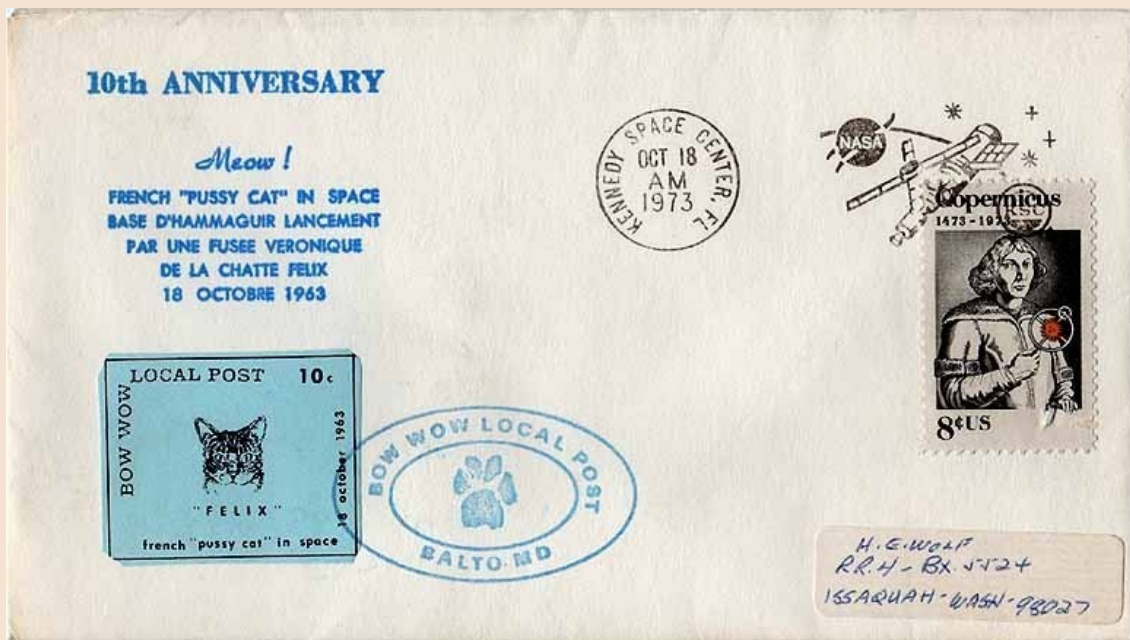
However, even if the captions on these stamps were changed to read 'Félicette', the depictions would still be inaccurate as they all show a long-haired cat, whereas Félicette was short-haired. It seems the stamp designers didn't do their research too well!



Interestingly, the philatelic cover below that I came across, produced by an American outfit called Bow-Wow Local Post to mark the tenth anniversary of a cat in space, shows a tabby cat on the blue label, so is also inaccurate.



(above) Souvenir sheet produced by Chad in 1997, one of a series showing aspects of space travel. This one shows 'Félix' and Laika, with Armstrong, Collins and Aldrin and their Saturn V rocket.



Philatelic cover by Bow Wow Local Post to mark the 10th anniversary of a cat in space — see notes in the article above.

An Iranian space cat?

As a final footnote, in September 2013 the Iranian Space Agency (yes, there is one ...) claimed that it was considering sending a Persian cat into space, having successfully launched and recovered a monkey from a space mission in February 2013. This latter news was greeted with scepticism by the scientific community, as 'before' and 'after' photos of the monkey clearly showed different animals ([see links below](#)).

Very many thanks to Dr Chatelier, in his 80s in early 2014, who most kindly responded to our enquiry, answered our questions and gave permission for photos to be used. We hope we've now set the record straight concerning

this fascinating story. Acknowledgements also to Jean-Xavier Bardant from France and 'altoreno2' from Italy for past contributions.

Links *(checked January 2026.)*

- ❖ FLIGHT magazine, 1959: photo and caption referring to the Brazilian 'Felix I' mission appeared in the [January 1959 issue](#) .*(archived copy)*
- ❖ *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, 31 Dec 1958: [Brazil Getting Ready to Fire Cat in Space](#).
- ❖ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 Oct 1963: [Space cat back alive](#).
- ❖ Dr Gérard Chatelier's own pages (in French) are no longer available where they were in 2014, when we were in contact with him, but some seem to have been transferred [here](#), although they aren't complete. The Internet Archive's *Wayback Machine* has a number of the original pages, but (as is often the case with Wayback) it's possible that not all the content was archived. The link here goes to the [archived index page](#).
- ❖ NASA, Jan. 1998: [A Brief History of Animals in Space](#).*(archived copy)*
- ❖ Colin Burgess, 2009: [They Rode the Rockets](#).
Burgess is co-author of the 2007 book *Animals in Space: From Research Rockets to the Space Shuttle* (see *New Scientist* [review](#) for further details).
- ❖ Wikipedia: [Animals in space](#).
- ❖ *Daily Mail*, Nov 2012: [One small step for man's best friend](#) .*(archived copy)*
- ❖ *Guardian*, Sep 2013: [Iran may put persian cat in space](#).
- ❖ *Universe Today*, Oct 2013: [Is Iran Really Planning on Sending a Cat Into Space?](#).
- ❖ YouTube: A 10-minute French video about the training of the cats, the measurement of brain activity and the rocket launch. There are English subtitles except for the last couple of minutes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-tpmvGRoyw> (2016)
- ❖ Wikipedia: [Félicette](#)

Update, Dec. 2019

More than 50 years after her ground-breaking foray into space, Félicette was finally recognised with a memorial sculpture, by British artist Gill Parker, unveiled on 17 December 2019 at the International Space University in Strasbourg, France. It stands in the Pioneers' Hall, next to one of Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. The initiative came from Londoner Matthew Guy, who came across Félicette's story and decided she deserved to be honoured; the original plan had been to place the memorial in a Paris cemetery where there were stray cats, but that seems not to have worked out. As it was, a crowd-funding campaign raised 49,000 euros for the 1.75 metre-tall bronze statue, which shows a cat looking up to the stars while seated on the globe.

[The original plan](#) (Oct. 2017: interesting short video) | [The reality](#) (Sept. 2019)



- ❖ Kickstarter campaign: A statue to Félicette, the first cat in space

- [Description and information](#) (Feb. 2021 -archived copy)
 - [Completion update](#) in January 2020 (archived copy), images of statue and its unveiling
- ❖ France 3, Sep 2019: in French, [Pourquoi Félicette, le chat spatonaute, aura sa statue à Strasbourg, 60 ans après son voyage dans l'espace](#) OR see Google translation to English: [Why Félicette, the astronaut cat, will have her statue in Strasbourg, 60 years after her space trip](#)
- ❖ Space.com, Nov 2017: [First Cat in Space to Receive a Proper Memorial](#)
- ❖ Smithsonian Magazine, January 2020: [Félicette, the First Cat in Space, Finally Gets a Memorial](#)

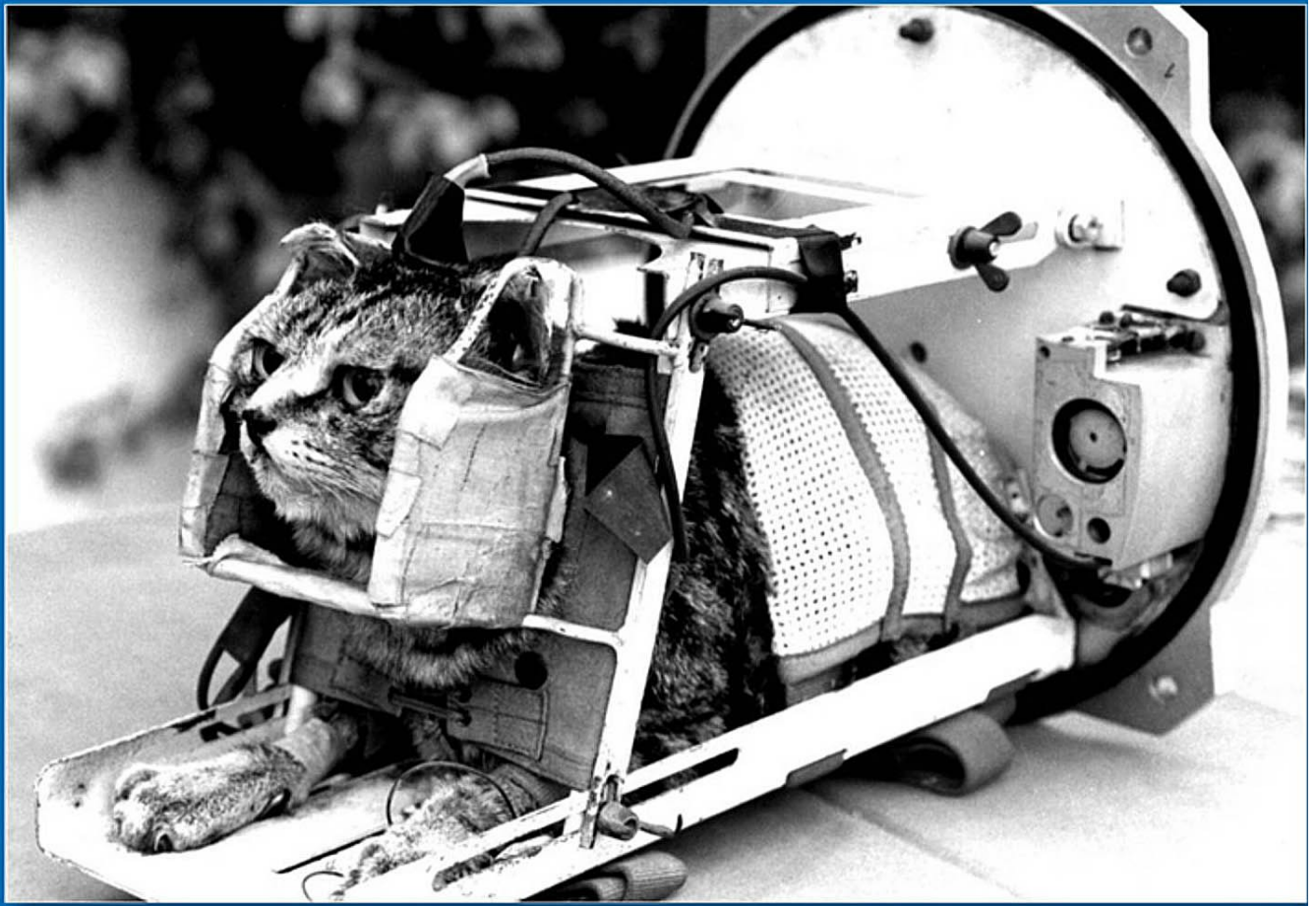
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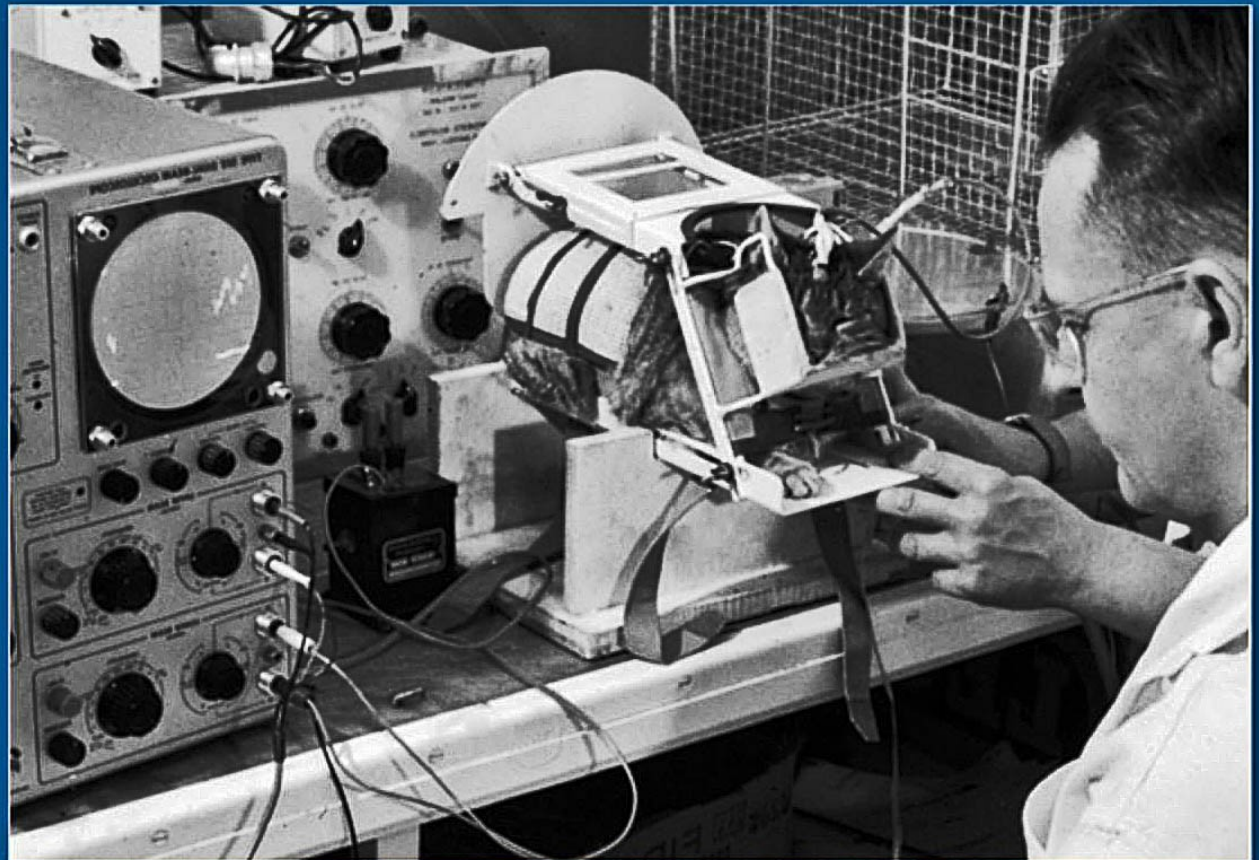
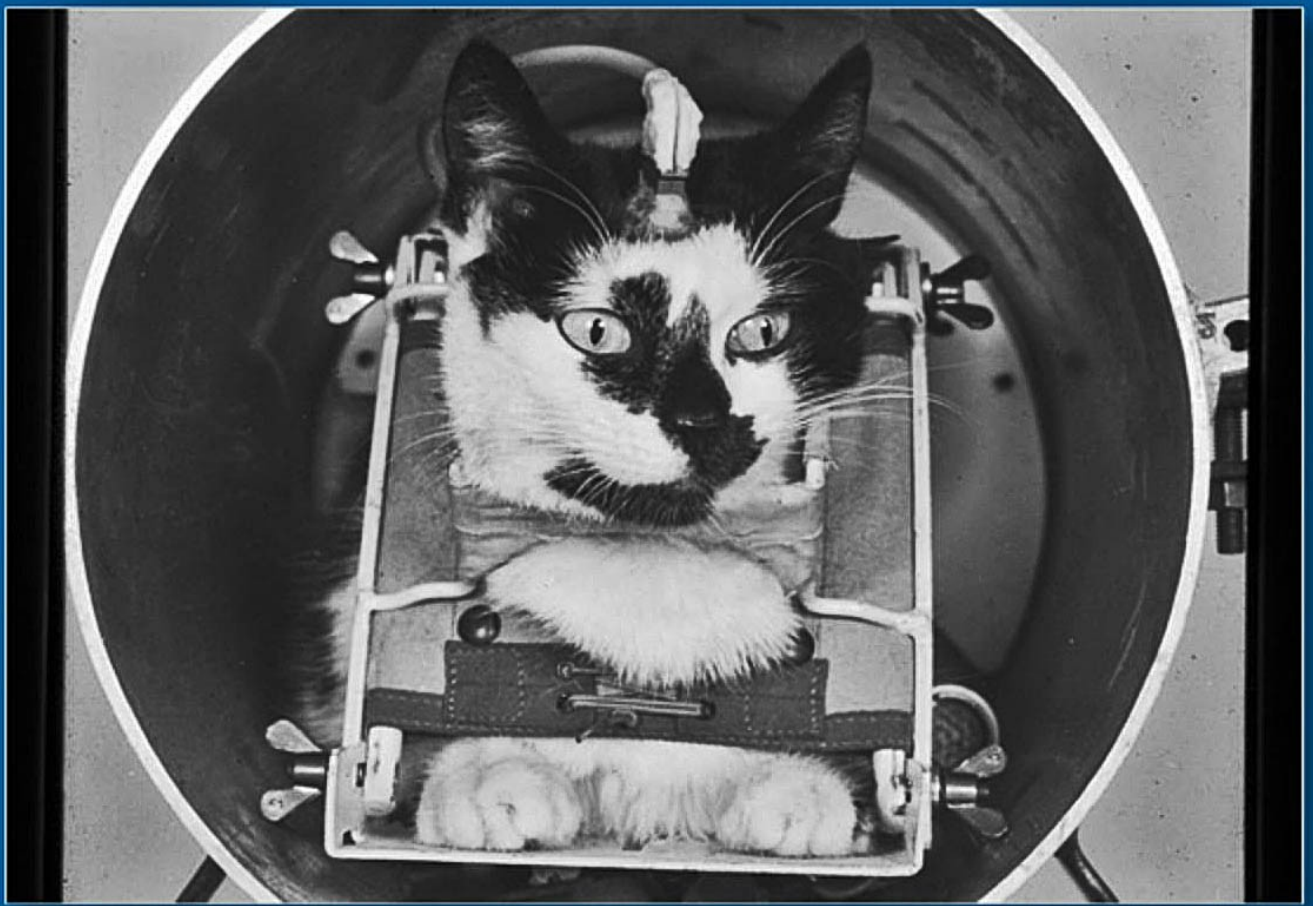
Update, 2022: a book

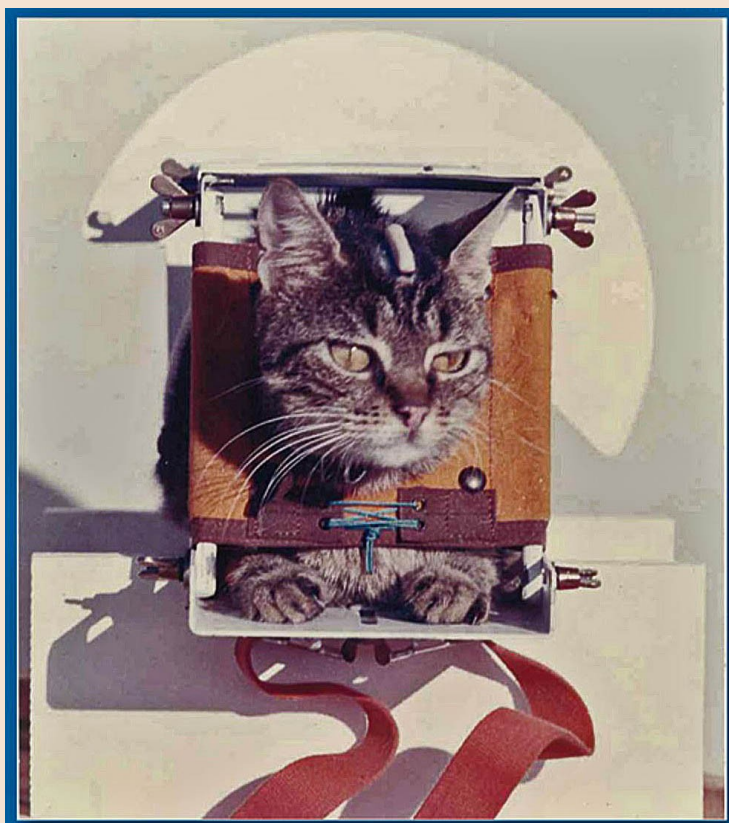
In 2022, following on from the unveiling of her statue, Félicette gained further recognition with the publication of a book, a slim volume by Stuart Atkinson entitled *Félicette, the Space Cat*, ISBN 9798859 884452. It was self-published, as Stuart says in his Introduction that, despite approaching numerous agents and publishers, none was interested in producing it. About half the book deals with Félicette, her possible origins, her training, the flight, the recovery and what followed; it's not sugar-coated, but tells the cat's story and what she may have experienced. The remainder of the book mentions other well-known cats, including some fictional ones, and has various musings about what the future might hold in terms of further forays into space by cats.

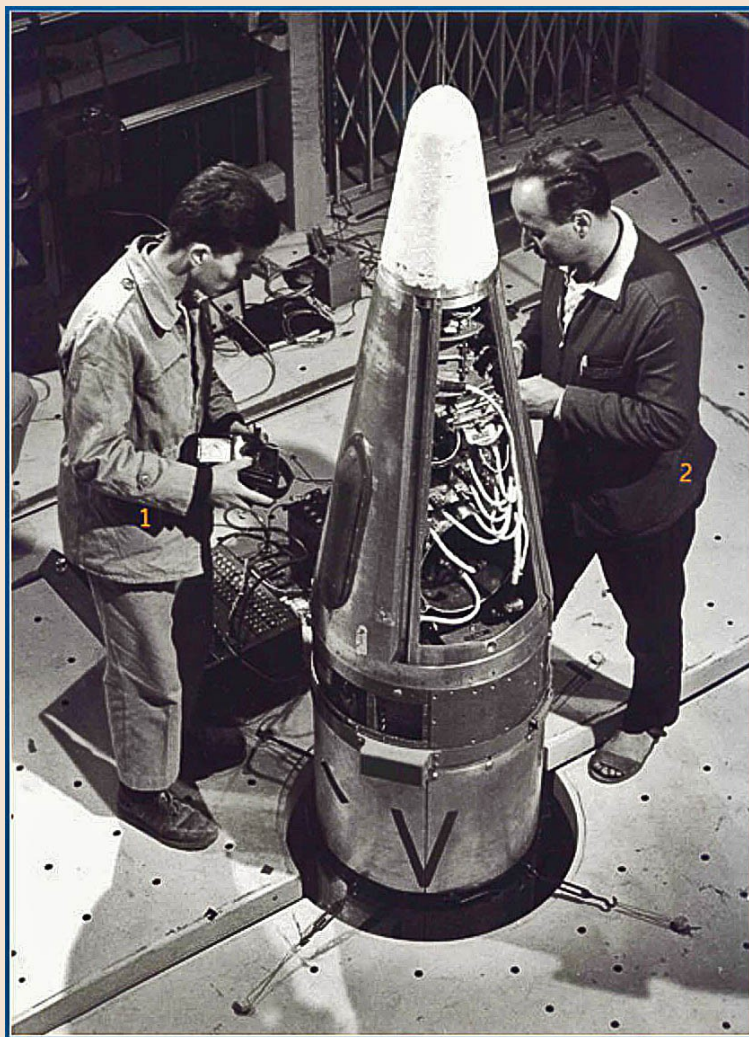


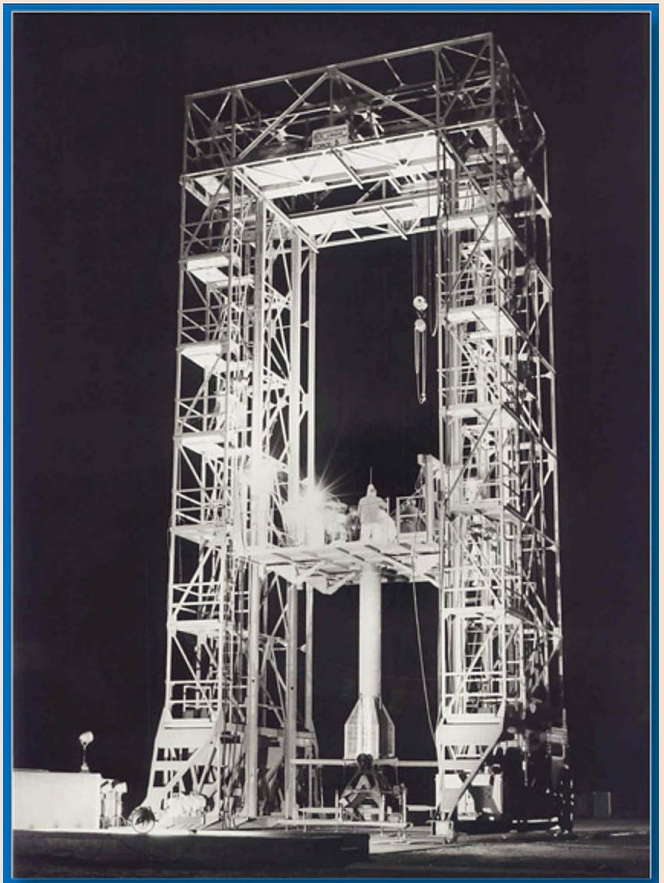
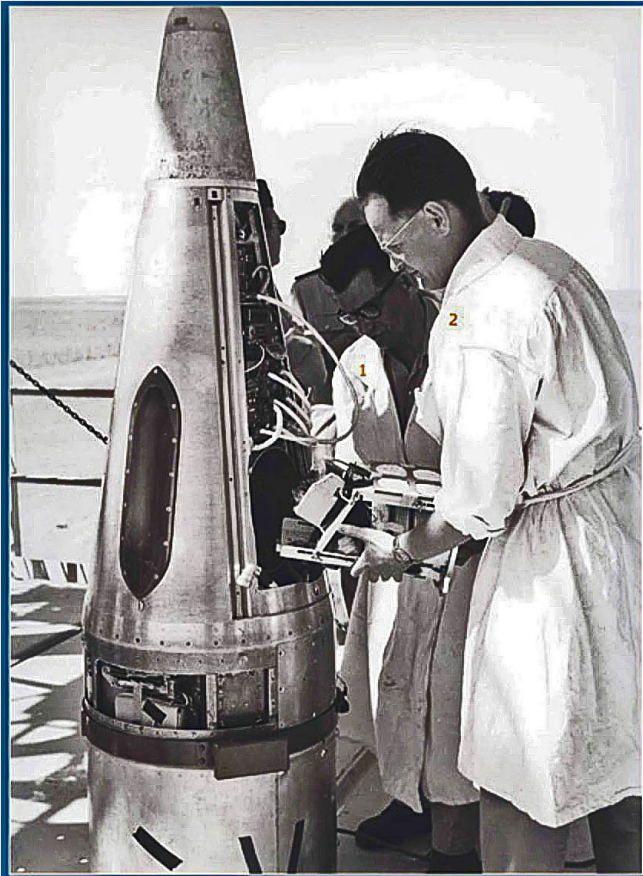






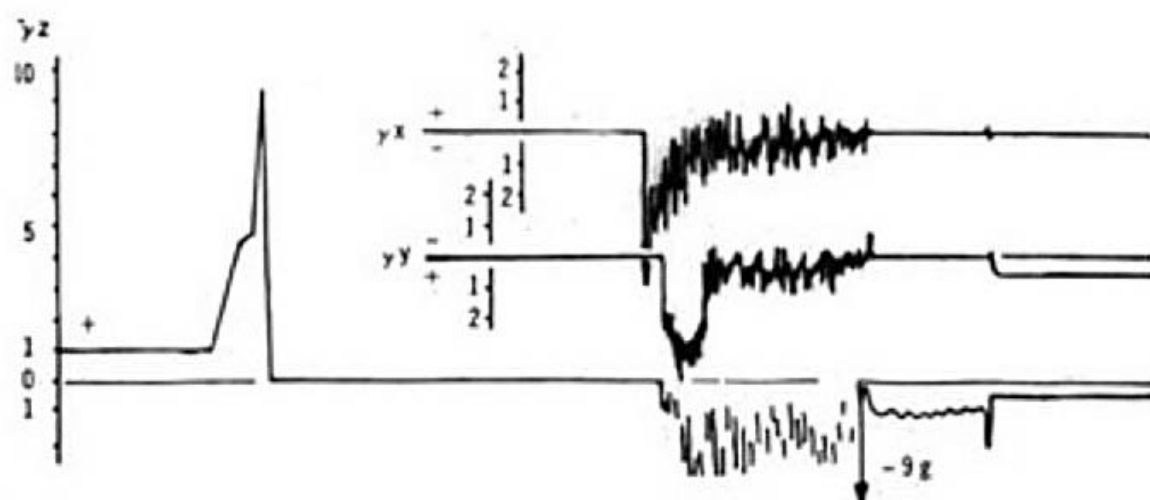
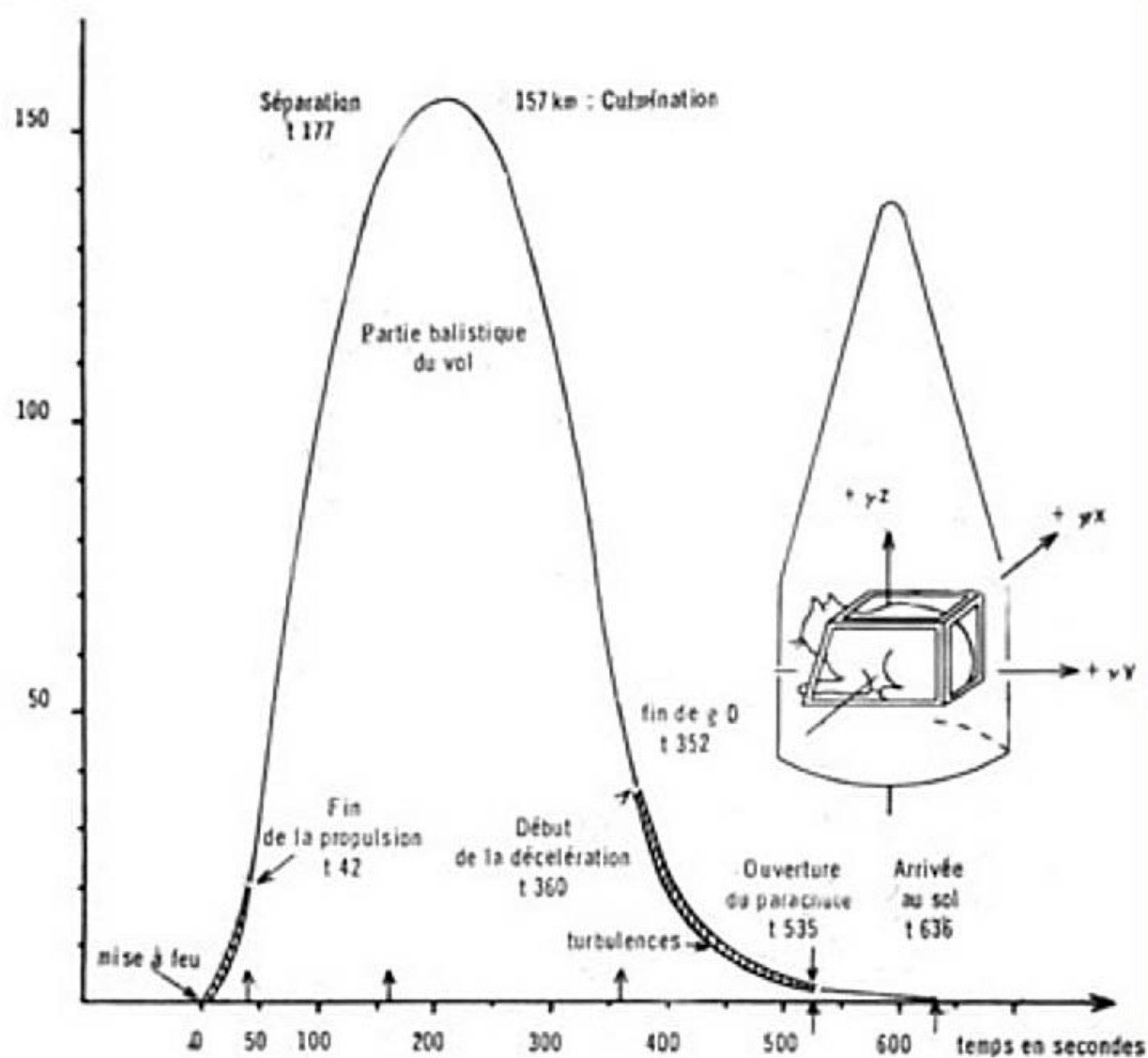


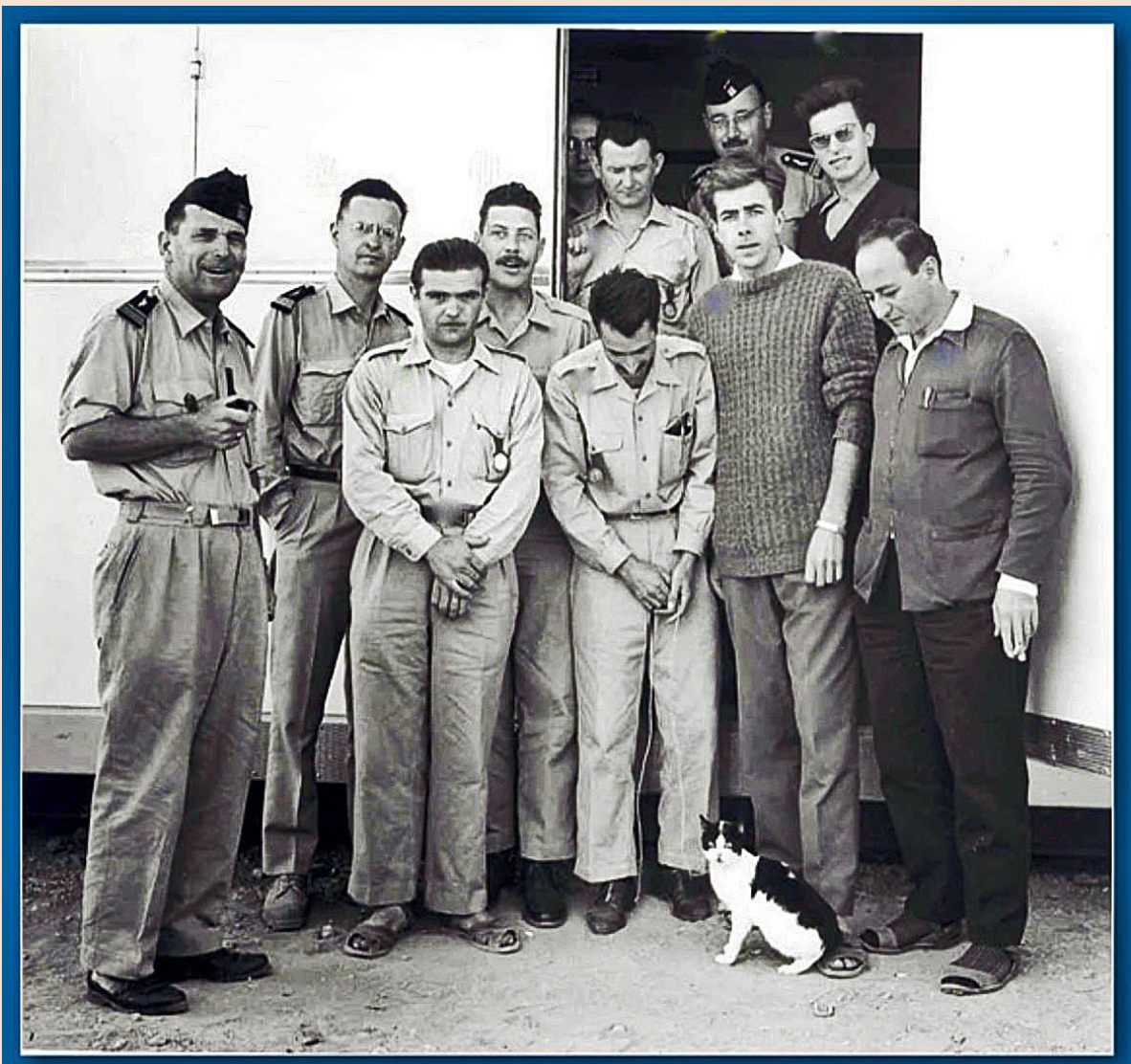






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