Sputnik I
- Launch of the Space Race -

The U.S.S.R. launched Sputnik I into orbit on October 4, 1957. It was the first-ever artificial satellite and marked the start of the "Space Race" between the United States and the Soviet Union. Approximately two-feet across and weighing 184 pounds, Sputnik was a metal sphere with four antennas and was programmed to send radio signals back to Earth.

Sputnik, which means "fellow traveler" in Russian, provided researchers with information on the temperature and density of the top of the atmosphere, until its battery power was drained after only 21 days in space. Despite the lack of battery power, it remained in orbit for a total of 96 days and then fell back into Earth's atmosphere and burned up upon re-entry.

Following the success of Sputnik I, the Soviet Union went on to develop and launch three other Sputnik satellites. Only two reached Earth's orbit and one remained in space for nearly two years. The U.S.S.R. deployed additional, similarly designed satellites in the following years. However, they are not considered Sputnik satellites, as they were given different names.

All of the Sputnik missions occurred during the Cold War between the U.S.S.R. and the United States. The U.S. government, concerned that the Soviets had a satellite in orbit above the Earth, quickly made the development of space technology a national priority. Alarmed by the technological advances of the Soviets, the U.S. government established the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1958 and passed the National Defense Education Act. America then launched its first satellite, Explorer I, on January 31, 1958.

In 1997, 40 years after Sputnik I was launched into space, Tommy Bartlett, Inc. acquired an exact replica of the craft. The satellite is currently on display, with an original Russian Space Station MIR core module and a replica of NASA's Mercury Space Capsule, at the Tommy Bartlett Exploratory in Wisconsin Dells, Wis.