

SUNSET:



MOON: 90% WAXING GIBBOUS

**PEOPLE, PLACES, AND EVENTS**

# REMEMBERING TOM GEHRELS (1925-2011)

BY: [GOVERT SCHILLING](#) | JULY 12, 2011 | 6

GET ARTICLES LIKE THIS SENT TO YOUR INBOX

Email (required) \* [\(required\)](#)

SIGN UP

The first thing I saw when I entered the University of Arizona office of Tom Gehrels last April Dutchman, Gehrels always rode it from his Tucson home to the Lunar and Planetary Laborat



Tom Gehrels joined the University of Arizona in 1961 and became a leading expert on asteroids. *University of Arizona*

The second thing I saw were Indian tapestries and Buddhist artifacts, giving the office a distinctive atmosphere. At the Physical Research Laboratory in Ahmedabad, Gehrels spent a few months each year lecturing. He worked every day, presumably right up to his peaceful death on July 11th.

The third thing I saw was a frail man with light-blue, watery eyes and a friendly smile. When asked "Het gaat heel goed!" — "I'm doing very well!" In fact, he said, his health appeared to be improving.

Born February 21, 1925, Gehrels was a unique and wonderful person. Raised in the Dutch Bible Belt, he grappled with truth, reality, and the existence of God at a very early age. He was only a teenager when he became a soldier in World War II. Gehrels fled to England, where he carried out secret operations for the Dutch government-in-exile, eventually escaping a concentration camp.

After the war, Gehrels studied astronomy at Leiden University. In the late 1940s, on a sabbatical in California, where he met famous astronomer Walter Baade at Palomar Observatory. Soon he



Tom Gehrels pauses during a 1974 press conference concerning results from Pioneer 11. The close-up views of Jupiter during their flybys.

*NASA (left); NASA / Ricardo Nunes (right)*

Gehrels worked with fellow Dutchman Gerard Kuiper, first at the Yerkes Observatory, and later in his life. A pioneer in balloon-borne observations and skilled in polarimetry and photometry, he led the development of scanning photopolarimeters on the twin [Pioneer spacecraft](#) that obtained the first close-up views of Jupiter during their flybys.

As a young Dutch amateur astronomer in the 1970s, I felt nothing less than awe for this man, who led the [Palomar-Leiden asteroid survey](#) with Kees van Houten and Ingrid van Houten-Groeneveld. It was during this survey that he discovered several asteroids. (It's one of the reasons why so many Dutch people are immortalized in the solar system.)



Domes for the Spacewatch Project's 1.8-m and 0.9-m telescopes on Kitt Peak, Arizona.

In 1983, together with his Arizona colleague Bob McMillan, Gehrels founded the [Spacewatch](#) project.

Peak National Observatory for threatening near-Earth objects. I remember interviewing Gehrels when an asteroid would be discovered that would hit the Earth," I offered. "What would you do?" His response was simple and direct: "I would go and have a look, of course!"

On the shelf behind his Tucson desk is perhaps Gehrels' most enduring legacy: the 30-or-so volumes in the *Space Science Series*. Produced by the University of Arizona Press, these tomes cover almost every topic in our solar system and are considered a kind of collective bible to planetary astronomers. For his tireless involvement as the series' general editor, the Planetary Sciences honored him with the [Harold Masursky Award](#) for outstanding service to the field.



Published in 1979, *Asteroids*, edited by Tom Gehrels, was the first volume in the *Space Science Series* published by the University of Arizona Press. *S&T*: Dennis diCicco

My brief visit in April came just two weeks after a luncheon at which Gehrels was honored for his contributions to the University of Arizona. But we spoke little of that, or killer asteroids, or the *Space Science Series*. Instead, we mainly discussed his latest unconventional ideas about cosmology. Inspired by Chandrasekhar, Gehrels explored an almost mystical equation that appears to numerically connect the expansion rate of the universe to the final monograph, [Can We Do Without the Big Bang?](#), he describes his own view of Truth and the universe, including ideas concerning an "interuniversal medium", dark energy as a consequence of "old photons" and the Big Bang.

"I've been called a crackpot by cosmologists, and I can't blame them," he said, again with the characteristic humor of a man who has been misunderstood. "They've built their careers on a wrong idea, and I am an outsider. But I don't care. When I started, it happened: no one would take me seriously."

As I left the small office — which probably would have smelled of incense if Gehrels had been a priest — he suddenly frowned and looked wounded, recalling the compulsory church visits in the small town of Tucson. But then his face brightened again as he said: "Have you been there recently? They've torn it down."

In his search for understanding, Tom Gehrels encountered the frailty of humanity — constant when he tried to answer the biggest questions science can ask. He was a remarkable fellow, and I feel privileged to have met him less than three months before he died.

*Asteroid 10986 Govert, named after contributor Govert Schilling, was discovered as part of*

---

## COMMENTS

David Oesper

July 14, 2011 at 2:15 am

How unfortunate that Tom passed away just five days prior to the Dawn spacecraft entering orbit. The most prominent features on Vesta that will soon be discovered by Dawn could be named after his contributions to asteroid science.

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.



Ted Hunt

July 15, 2011 at 3:09 pm

The link to 'Can We Do Without the Big Bang?' returns a response from the U of A bookstore. The bookstore is trying to distance itself from Mr. Gehrels' unconventional views just days after his passing.

If the article IS being suppressed, I'd say that's a fine reason to read it. If anyone can forward a link to how to find it, I'm sure many S&T readers (besides me) would be appreciative.

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

David Oesper

July 16, 2011 at 12:59 pm

The S&T URL to Tom's monograph was incomplete. The U of A bookstore URL is lengthy, so

<http://tinyurl.com/6k3o3f2>

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

You must be [logged](#) in to post a comment.

coolstar

July 17, 2011 at 10:58 am

It is indeed sad news to read of Dr. Gehrels passing. I heartily second the idea that same pro essentially invented the modern techniques used in hunting for NEOs, among his other cont into a field, cosmology, that was entirely new to him.

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

You must be [logged](#) in to post a comment.

Graham W. Wolf

July 18, 2011 at 6:50 pm

Tom Gehrels is the latest in a long sad list of astro-luminaries that the world has lost in recen Sandage (amongst others).

When I started working at the Carter National Observatory of NZ in the late 1980's and fullti huge contributions to asteroidal and astrometric science... the latter being especially appreci work.

Tom comes from a long line of Dutch born astro-luminaries that go back several proud centu

recent decades:- Jan Oort, Van Der Hulst, and Gerrard Kuiper. Huygens famous quotation "I fondly recall Tom Gehrels.

Tom has left huge shoes to fill, and certainly raised the scientific bar for us lesser mortals. Th the Science. One of the true greats... sadly missed.

Graham W. Wolf Barber Grove Observatory (BGO) New Zealand

LOG IN TO REPLY

RELATED POSTS

You must be [logged](#) in to post a comment.

Tony DeSalvo



Subscribe to Sky & Telescope Magazine

SUBSCRIBE

For Contrib... by this fine man. I y... to talk to him ones... stions that new... hers are not. His cla... For Advert... here was anything t

but more importantly they cannot be disproven and the little bit that I did know... path since then and did not have the opportunity to speak with him since. He will be missed..



Sky & Telescope is part of AAS Sky Publishing, LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

the American Astronomical Society. Sky & Telescope, Night Sky, and skyandtelescope.org are registered trademarks of AAS Sky Publishing LLC. Sky & Telescope maintains a strict policy of editorial independence from the AAS and its research publications in reporting developments in astronomy to readers.

About S&T

- ABOUT US
MEET THE STAF
JOB OPPORTUN
AUSTRALIAN EI
SHOP @ SKY



Copyright ©2021 AAS Sky Publishing LLC. All rights reserved.

JOIN OUR