

Apollo 11 crew: Aldrin likes spotlight, 2 shun it

July 19 2009, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



FILE - In this July 5, 1969 file photo, Astronaut Neil Armstrong, left, the first man scheduled to walk on the moon, displays a plaque that will be attached to a landing leg of the lunar module descent stage and will be left on the moon by the Apollo 11 astronauts as Col. Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin, center, holds the Apollo 11 insignia at a news conference at the Space Center. Command Module pilot Lt. Col. Michael Collins is at right. (AP Photo, file)

(AP) -- In the 40 years since Apollo 11, some of the key players, most notably Neil Armstrong, have steered clear of the increasingly bright glare of the moonlight cast by the historic lunar landing. Others have embraced it. Almost all have written books detailing not only themselves but the glory days of space.

On this anniversary of his "one small step" on July 20, 1969, Armstrong, the commander, remains an enigma, steadfastly declining almost all interviews. He did not chronicle his own life, but agreed to a biography,

"First Man," written by a historian and published in 2005.

Command module pilot Michael Collins, who circled the moon on while Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin explored its dusty surface, is just as elusive. He's not sure "recluse," though, is the right word.

"I think of the Brown Recluse, the deadliest of spiders, and I have a suntan, so perhaps," Collins wrote in a statement for NASA to get journalists and others off his case. "Anyway, it's true I've never enjoyed the spotlight, don't know why."

Aldrin, on the other hand, seems to be everywhere, plugging everything from radios to designer handbags, and signing copies of his new book.

A brief look at eight of Apollo 11's key players:

[Neil Armstrong](#), Apollo 11's commander, keeps a low profile in his home state of Ohio.

He shuns the spotlight but when he does address crowds, he is a thoughtful speaker and exceedingly modest.

"I recognize that I'm portrayed as staying out of the public eye, but from my perspective it doesn't seem that way," Armstrong said in a 2001 interview for NASA's oral history project. "But I recognize that from another perspective, outside, I'm only able to accept less than 1 percent of all the requests that come in, so to them it seems like I'm not doing anything. But I can't change that."

He added: "Looking back, we were really very privileged to live in that thin slice of history where we changed how man looks at himself and

what he might become and where he might go. So I'm very thankful that we got to see that and be part of it."

He will turn 79 on Aug. 5. He left NASA in 1971 and returned to Ohio, where he continues to live near Cincinnati. He taught engineering at the University of Cincinnati, then ventured into business.

Buzz Aldrin, the omnipresent lunar module pilot, has a new book out, "Magnificent Desolation." That was his description of the moonscape after he followed Armstrong down the ladder.

The book focuses on his post-lunar life, and his battle with depression and alcoholism.

He says it has been a challenge, since landing on the moon, to "carry on with the rest of your life." There is "this uneasiness and this uncertainty as to what I really ought to be doing."

Now 79, Aldrin lives in the Los Angeles area but is often on the road with wife Lois.

He still looks remarkably fit. In 2002, he punched, right in the face, a much bigger and younger man who was hounding him and trying to get him to swear on a Bible, on camera, that he walked on the moon. That's what he thinks of those who claim the Apollo moon landings were staged in a studio in the Nevada desert. His astronaut buddies still chuckle over it.

Aldrin, the only one on the crew with a doctorate, left NASA and returned to Air Force active duty in 1971. He's written several books, including space fiction, and is the apparent namesake of Buzz Lightyear

of "Toy Story" fame.

Michael Collins, the command module pilot who circled the moon, has written several books about space, most notably 1974's "Carrying the Fire." It's considered one of the best insider space books ever, little surprise given Collins' eloquence and wit.

Like Armstrong, Collins, 78, avoided the anniversary limelight. He did, however, release a list of the questions he's frequently asked - along with his answers - to mark the occasion.

"Did you have the best seat on [Apollo 11](#)?" he wrote. "No."

"Were you happy with the seat you had?" he continued. "Yes, absolutely. It was an honor."

He considers himself neither a hero nor a celebrity, and more than a little grumpy as he ages.

"Heroes abound and should be revered as such, but don't count astronauts among them," he wrote. "We work very hard; we did our jobs to near perfection, but that was what we had hired on to do."

Luck played a big part in his life, Collins noted.

"Usually, you find yourself either too young or too old to do what you really want, but consider: Neil Armstrong was born in 1930, [Buzz Aldrin](#) 1930, and Mike Collins 1930. We came along at exactly the right time. We survived hazardous careers and were successful in them. But in my own case at least, it was 10 percent shrewd planning and 90 percent blind luck. Put LUCKY on my tombstone."

As for "any keen insights?" His response: "Oh yeah, a whole bunch, but I'm saving them for the 50th."

Collins left NASA in 1970 and became the first director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum in Washington. He now splits his time between Boston and Florida's Gulf Coast.

It was Charlie Duke's voice that was heard by Armstrong and Aldrin after they landed on the moon.

Duke was the capcom, or capsule communicator, in Mission Control for the big event. As soon as Armstrong reported from Tranquility Base that their lunar module, Eagle, had landed, Duke radioed: "You got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We're breathing again. Thanks a lot."

Duke flew to the moon on Apollo 16 and became the 10th man to step onto the lunar surface. He left NASA in 1975 and went into business. He regrets not having stuck around NASA longer and flown the shuttle.

"I look back now and I wish I had stayed," he said in a 1999 interview for NASA's oral history project. "The shuttle turned out to be a tremendous flying machine. Not as cheap as we expected it to be, but certainly a good machine."

Now 73 and living in New Braunfels, Texas, Duke is a motivational and inspirational speaker. He has his own Web site, <http://www.charlieduke.net>, where he is selling autographed copies of his 1990 book, "Moonwalker."

Christopher Kraft was director of flight operations at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston. Like his colleagues, he celebrated with cigars and U.S. flags following Apollo 11's safe splashdown at mission's end.

He left NASA in 1982 and served as a consultant to various companies.

Kraft, 85, detailed his life as NASA's original flight director in his 2001 book, "Flight: My Life in Mission Control." He created Mission Control, directed the Mercury and Gemini flights, and helped put men on the moon. He went on to serve as director of Johnson Space Center from 1972 to 1982.

"There's only one flight director. From the moment the mission starts until the moment the crew is safe on board a recovery ship, I'm in charge," he wrote in his book. "No one can overrule me. Not my immediate boss ... Not his boss ... Not even Jack Kennedy, the president of the United States ... They can fire me after it's over. But while the mission is under way, I'm Flight. And Flight is God."

He still lives in Houston, and is as outspoken and opinionated as ever.

Gene Kranz was the flight director on duty at Mission Control in Houston when Armstrong and Aldrin landed on the moon.

Kranz went on to serve as lead flight director for Apollo 13 and, decades later, was portrayed by actor Ed Harris in the film "Apollo 13." For the record, he never uttered "failure is not an option" during Apollo 13; the phrase came from Hollywood. He liked it so much, though, he made that the title of his 2000 book.

"The words I used: 'OK, we've never lost an American in space, we sure as hell aren't going to lose one now. This crew is coming home,' " Kranz said in an Associated Press interview in 2000.

Kranz retired from NASA in 1994.

Now 75, he still lives in Houston. He gives motivational speeches and occasionally addresses NASA's work force.

As launch commentator, Jack King was the voice of Apollo.

The NASA public affairs official counted down the historic launch of Apollo 11, after doing the same for hundreds of previous rocket launches, including Gemini and the earlier Apollo flights.

"Twelve, 11, 10, 9, ignition sequence start. Six, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, zero, all engine running. Liftoff! We have a liftoff, 32 minutes past the hour. Liftoff on Apollo 11."

King, a former newsman, was so excited, he said "engine" instead of "engines." He had no script and stuck to the bare facts.

All these years later, King said he would not change his commentary. He still enjoys hearing it.

"I wish I had a penny for every time it was used," he observed Wednesday, the eve of the 40th anniversary of Apollo 11's launch. He was at the Kennedy Space Center for shuttle Endeavour's liftoff.

King, who left NASA in 1975, still works in the space business, in internal communications for United Space Alliance, NASA's shuttle

contractor. He lives in Cocoa Beach, Fla., and declined to give his age.

Rocco Petrone, director of launch operations at Kennedy Space Center, retired from NASA in 1975 and went into industry. He died in 2006 at age 80 at his home in Southern California.

On the Net:

NASA: www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/apollo/index.html
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