

Nation says goodbye to moonwalker Neil Armstrong (Update)

September 13 2012, by Seth Borenstein



Carol Armstrong, center, her son, Eric, right, and daughter Molly Van Wagenen hold their hands to their hearts during a memorial service celebrating the life of Neil Armstrong at the Washington National Cathedral, Thursday, Sept. 13, 2012. The pioneers of space, the powerful of the capital, and the everyday public crowded into the Washington National Cathedral for a public interfaith memorial for the very private astronaut. Armstrong, who died last month in Ohio at age 82, walked on the moon in July 1969. (AP Photo/NASA, Bill Ingalls)

(AP)—Americans bid farewell Thursday to Neil Armstrong, the first

man to take a giant leap on to the moon.

The powerful of Washington, the pioneers of space, and the everyday public crowded into the Washington National Cathedral for a public interfaith memorial for the very private astronaut.

Armstrong, who died last month in Ohio at age 82, walked on the moon in July 1969.

"He's now slipped the bonds of Earth once again, but what a legacy he left," former Treasury Secretary John Snow told the gathering.

Apollo 11 crewmates Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins and Mercury astronaut John Glenn and about two dozen members of Congress were among the estimated 1,500 people in the cavernous cathedral. A moon rock that the Apollo 11 astronauts gave the church in 1974 is embedded in one of its stained glass windows.



Former astronauts Buzz Aldrin, center, Annie Glenn, and her husband, astronaut, and former Ohio Sen. Sen. John Glenn, second from right, take part in a memorial service for Apollo 11 astronaut Neil Armstrong, Thursday, Sept. 13, 2012, at the National Cathedral in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci, Pool)

"You have now shown once again the pathway to the stars," Eugene Cernan, the last man to walk on the moon said in a tribute to Armstrong. "As you soar through the heavens beyond even where eagles dare to go, you can now finally put out your hand and touch the face of God."

Cernan was followed by a slow and solemn version of the song "Fly Me to the Moon" by singer Diana Krall. The service also included excerpts from a speech 50 years ago by John F. Kennedy in which he said America chose to send men to the moon not because it was easy, but because it was hard. The scratchy recording of the young president said going to the moon was a goal that "will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we're willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone."



Apollo 17 mission commander Gene Cernan, the last man to walk on the moon, looks skyward during a memorial service celebrating the life of Neil Armstrong at the Washington National Cathedral, Thursday, Sept. 13, 2012. The pioneers of space, the powerful of the capital, and the everyday public crowded into the Washington National Cathedral for a public interfaith memorial for the very private astronaut. Armstrong, who died last month in Ohio at age 82, walked on

the moon in July 1969. (AP Photo/NASA, Bill Ingalls)

Shortly after that speech in 1961 at Rice University, Armstrong, not yet an astronaut but always a gifted engineer, was already working on how to land a spaceship on the moon, NASA administrator Charles Bolden recalled. Snow talked of the 12-year-old Armstrong who built a wind tunnel. But most of Armstrong's friends and colleagues spent time remembering the humble Armstrong. Snow called him a "regular guy" and "the most reluctant of heroes."

NASA administrator Charles Bolden, a former astronaut, said Armstrong's humility and courage "lifted him above the stars." Bolden read a letter from President Barack Obama saying, "the imprint he left on the surface of the moon is matched only by the extraordinary mark he left on ordinary Americans."



Singer Diana Krall holds hands with astronaut, and former Ohio Sen. John Glenn during a memorial service for Apollo 11 astronaut Neil Armstrong, Thursday, Sept. 13, 2012, at the National Cathedral in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci, Pool)

Armstrong commanded the historic landing of the Apollo 11 spacecraft on the moon July 20, 1969. His first words after stepping onto the moon are etched in history books: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Armstrong insisted later that he had said "a" before man, but said he, too, couldn't hear it in the recorded version.

Armstrong and Aldrin spent nearly three hours walking on the lunar surface and left behind a plaque that read: "Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the moon. July 1969 A.D. We came in peace for all mankind."

In all, 12 American astronauts walked on the moon before the last moon mission in 1972.

Armstrong was a U.S. Navy aviator. He joined NASA's predecessor agency in 1955 as a civilian test pilot and later, as an astronaut, flew first in Gemini 8 in 1966. After the moon landing he spent a year in Washington as a top official at the space agency, but then he left NASA to teach aerospace engineering at the University of Cincinnati. He later was chairman of two electronics companies, but mostly kept out of the public eye.

A private service was held earlier in suburban Cincinnati for Armstrong, who will be buried at sea.

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