



A Night WITH The Apollo

By Charles Smith

The recent passing of Apollo 15 astronaut Al Worden reminded me that I had the pleasure to spend an intimate evening with Colonel Worden and two of his fellow Apollo astronauts last year at the Space Center Houston. For those of you in my generation, you will remember the Apollo program and the excitement of science fiction rapidly becoming science fact.

On September 12, 1962, President John F. Kennedy thrilled a Nation by presenting the challenge to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) by setting a goal of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to Earth before the end of the decade. From this, the Apollo program was born. In all, 32 American astronauts were chosen for the Apollo program. Three astronauts perished during the attempted take off of the ill-fated Apollo 1 mission. The remaining 29 all flew in the Apollo program with 12 of them to be the chosen ones to walk on the moon. Today, more than 50 years after the first lunar landing, of the 29 men who flew in the Apollo Lunar Program, more than half have passed away.

Fifty years ago, on July 20, 1969, at 20:17 UTC, the Apollo 11 spacecraft landed on the Moon. Commander Neil Armstrong became the first human to walk on the Moon on July 21 at 02:56 UTC, and lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin joined him 19 minutes later. Command module pilot Michael Collins remained alone in lunar orbit in the Columbia command module.

For those of us fortunate enough to have experienced this momentous occasion, this was an exciting time, capping a decade of dedication to a goal that seemed almost unreachable. With one small step, suddenly anything became possible.



Space Center Houston

Having the good fortune to attend the National Leadership Conference with the FBI National Citizens Academy Alumni Association (FBINCAAA) in Houston during August 2019, there was no better time to visit Space Center Houston than in the immediate afterglow of the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon. The FBINCAAA is a non profit organization separate and apart from the FBI, but which exists to support a community outreach mission of the FBI. The FBINCAAA annual banquet dinner was arranged to be held after hours at Space Center Houston which was closed to the public for this special event. Expectations were high as we had been told special guests from the space program would be in attendance.

Space Center Houston is located 26 miles south of Houston, and immediately adjacent to the Johnson Space Center. The Johnson Space Center is best known for being the main NASA center for training of astronauts as well as the location of NASA's mission control for all manned space flights. Space Center Houston is operated by a non-profit organization which works with NASA for public information and education about the space program. Space Center Houston is filled with exhibits, mod-

els, artifacts and simulators which are both educational and fun. Upon approach to Space Center Houston, one of the actual 747 aircraft used to transport the space shuttles comes into view, complete with a full-scale model of the Space Shuttle Independence in its transport position, piggybacking on top of the 747. The Space Shuttle program ran from 1981 to 2011. This up-close and personal look at one of the iconic 747 airplanes with its amazing space vehicle cargo was quite thrilling, and brought back memories of the first time any of us saw an earth-bound aircraft carrying a spacecraft from either California or Texas to its launch destination at the historic launch pads of the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Upon entry into the Space Center, I stood in awe of the exhibits and memorabilia of the space program. It was at that point I learned that 3 Apollo astronauts were joining us for the evening, along with numerous other NASA personnel, including multiple current and former astronauts, past Directors of the Johnson Space Center, Apollo Flight Controllers and multiple other NASA personnel. The evening was almost surreal with letters of greetings and congratulations to our FBINCAAA group from President Trump and Senator Ted Cruz as well as a video greeting from U.S. Ambassador to NATO - Kay Bailey Hutchison. Our local FBINCAAA hosts and Space Center Houston literally rolled out the red carpet.

As many of you may recall, due to the tragedy of Apollo 1, there were no Apollo flights designated Apollo 2 or Apollo 3. To preserve the safety of the astronauts, Apollo flights 4, 5 and 6 were all unmanned.

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The Apollo 7 mission had a goal of earth orbit, and made history as the first successful manned Apollo mission. We were fortunate to have the presence of Walter Cunningham, one of the 3 astronauts from Apollo 7. Mr. Cunningham generously shared his stories of the Apollo program from the very early days through the end of his career working at NASA to further the space program by drawing upon his knowledge of space flight and the Apollo systems. Mr. Cunningham commented that if the Apollo 7 mission had the same misfortune as the Apollo 13 flight, the astronauts would have had no ability to survive since there was no lunar module attached to the Apollo 7 spacecraft. Mr. Cunningham's wife, Dot, serves on the Board of the Houston Chapter of the FBINCAAAA, and both of them are revered in the Houston NASA community. Dot's efforts made this event possible.

Also attending our event was none other than Fred Haise of Apollo 13 fame. For anyone who has seen the movie Apollo 13, or who were glued to their television during the several day ordeal in 1970, you recognize the name Fred Haise as being one of the brave astronauts on the ill-fated Apollo 13 mission which avoided tragedy only through the bravery, intensive training and dedication of the astronauts aboard Apollo 13 and those at mission control with their supporting staff of engineers. Fred Haise is a most gracious and accommodating celebrity who readily told of his experiences in space. He talked about how he and his fellow astronauts on the Apollo 13 mission were not all that worried when they lost their first oxygen tank as they still would have had enough oxygen to do their mission to land on the moon, although it may have been shortened. However, when they learned there was a leak in the second oxygen tank, their immediate reaction was extreme disappointment that they were not

going to get to go to the moon. They immediately knew that in order to survive they would have to go into the lunar module to have oxygen.

According to Captain Haise, the series of events did not occur quite as close in time as depicted in the movie, so they were not quite as horrific as depicted. While he might just be modest, his explanation is he and the astronauts had trained for many contingencies. When any event happened, they went straight to work on solving the problem and doing what needed to be done. The same mentality was also present in the NASA personnel on the ground. The Apollo flight controller for Apollo 13, Glynn Lunney, talked about whether or not the NASA personnel on the ground were afraid the astronauts were going to die, and he explained that they were all there for one purpose and that was the safe return of the astronauts. Mr. Lunney said they never considered failure as an option as they immediately went to work to solve the problems to bring the crew home safely. Losing the crew was never a consideration.

As mentioned earlier, Al Worden spent the evening with our group. Colonel Worden has the distinction of having been the most isolated human being in history. As the command module pilot for Apollo 15, Colonel Worden remained in the command module while his fellow astronauts descended to the moon. Colonel Worden orbited the moon 74 times. When the command module was at its greatest distance from the astronauts on the moon, Colonel Worden was more than 2,200 miles away from any other human being. All told, he spent 73 hours alone in space. When asked his favorite question of whether or not he was lonely, he laughed and said no, there is a big difference between being lonely versus being alone. In fact, he said he was rather looking forward to his fellow astronauts departing from the command module. He said to imagine

being one of three grown men living for three days in the approximate space of the inside of a Volkswagen Beetle. That's why he was delighted to have some alone time and to be able to stretch his legs and read his books in peace and relative comfort.

Astronaut Randy Bresnik was also present at the gala. He has flown several missions in space, with the most recent being in October 2017 as commander of the space station. Commander Bresnik has had the privilege of serving his career during the final years of the Space Shuttle program and has had an increasing involvement with the space station. He is also notable as one of the very few people whose spouse (Rebecca) gave birth on Earth while in outer space. Rebecca Bresnik is also a NASA employee as an attorney for NASA. When speaking with Commander Bresnik about living in space, he noted that it would not be possible without electric fans. He explained that the reason there are quite a number of fans on the International Space Station is not for cooling purposes, but because there is no movement of air in zero gravity. When the astronauts breathe, they exhale carbon dioxide. Without air movement, the carbon dioxide could build up around you, and one would literally suffocate in their own respiration.

While at the National Leadership Conference, I marveled that throughout the room there were the actual people, past and present, who turned science fiction into science fact. For my generation, the Apollo astronauts are among the heroes of our youth. It was an honor to personally meet them and share in their experiences which helped shaped history and space exploration.

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