Suspenseful, Surprising Space Race History

By Craig Nelson

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Read An Excerpt

NPR.org, July 17, 2009 · On July 20, 1969, Walter Cronkite pulled off his glasses, mopped the sweat from his forehead and gushed: "Wow, boy! Man on the moon!" Neil Armstrong's giant leap for mankind, the TV news anchor would add, meant that "everything else that has happened in our time is going to be an asterisk."

Although it didn't quite turn out that way, the moonwalk remains an iconic episode in American history. And now, the Apollo 11 mission has found its historian. Drawing on declassified CIA documents and hundreds of interviews with NASA flight crews, engineers and bureaucrats, Craig Nelson's Rocket Men supplies a superb survey of the Cold War origins of the space race — and a scintillating, suspenseful and surprising "you are there" account of the ups and downs of the astronauts assigned to the 30-story-high Saturn V spaceship.

Neil Armstrong, Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin and Michael Collins, Nelson indicates, weren't daredevils with the "right stuff." They were supercool nerds, with advanced science or engineering degrees, who accepted rules and hierarchies. They were willing as well to put their lives on hold for years, as they trained in a Boeing 707 (aka a "Vomit Comet"), flying parabolic arcs to simulate zero gravity.

But even on the moon, Nelson reveals, the astronauts couldn't escape the nausea of American politics. NASA officials had designed a stainless steel plaque, inscribed "We Came in Peace for All Mankind," to be left on the lunar surface. Just before launch, Richard Nixon insisted on adding the words "Under God."

The decision to plant the American flag also generated controversy. About a month before launch, Congress decreed that leaving the Stars and Stripes on the moon did not violate a United Nations prohibition of territorial conquest in outer space. Bought anonymously from Sears, Old Glory was hastily strapped to the lunar module's ladder and prevented, by a Thermoflex casing, from giving new meaning to the phrase "flag burning" during liftoff.

Upon their return to Earth, Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins were hailed as great American patriots. But they had changed. According to a colleague, the three buzz-cut pragmatists had "fallen in love with the mystery up there." And so had many of those who watched them.

"Through you we touched the moon," declared a sign waved at Neil Armstrong's motorcade in Manhattan. Forty years later, when the space program has lost its luster, Rocket Men, at least temporarily, returns us to a time of grand dreams and great American achievement.

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Kathryn Millan

A former publishing executive, Craig Nelson has written studies of Thomas Paine, World War II and travel.
Chapter Seven: A Way to Talk to God

Following the announcement of Apollo 11's launch date, a great swarm headed for Cocoa Beach, the seaside town directly south of Cape Canaveral's eighty-eight-thousand acre Kennedy Space Center on Merritt Island. Even by NASA shot standards, the Apollo 11 draw was a crushing flood — over one million spectators, hoping for a glimpse of history, descended on the narrow barrier islands southeast of Orlando in central Florida. Wernher von Braun and his wife alighted from a helicopter on a nearby golf course; in time, they were joined by Spiro Agnew, Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson, Sargent Shriver, Jack Benny, Cardinal Cooke, Daniel Patrick Monynihan, Barry Goldwater, Johnny Carson, Gianni Agnelli, Prince Napoleon of Paris, 400 foreign ministers, 275 corporate executives, 19 governors, 40 mayors, half of Congress, 1,000 cops and state troopers, 3,000 boats anchored in local waters, 3,497 journalists, and an exaltation of Supreme Court justices.

Neil Armstrong's wife and kids, joined by astronaut Dave Scott and *Life* magazine reporter Dodie Hamblin, were part of a North American Aviation yacht party on the Banana River. This was unusual, for the great majority of astronaut families avoided attending launches, worried about their children, and the media assault, in the event of a disaster. "I remember that we did not go to the Cape to watch the launch. I found out later it was because, #1, they could not afford it (money was always tight with five kids and a military salary) and, #2, my dad did not want us all out in the grand stands in case the rocket exploded during the launch," Gayle Anders said after Apollo 8. Neil Armstrong, in fact, had told Jan they shouldn't come, but she insisted. Before she could fly to the Cape and enjoy the day with her family, her friends, and Dodie Hamblin, however, Mrs. Armstrong — a synchronized swimming coach and "as strong as horseradish," according to college friend Gene Cernan — stood atop a screaming-pink dais erected in front of the family's El Lago, Texas home, and endured another press conference:

"Will you let the children stay up and watch the moon walk?"

"I don't care for what they do."

"Is this the greatest moment of your life?"

"No sir. When I was married, it was the greatest moment of my life."

"Are you pleased with the Sea of Tranquility as a place to land?"

"Yes."

"What are you having for dinner tonight? Space food?"

"No, sir."

The astronaut wives were so flabbergasted by the absurdity of their press questions that they even had developed a skit parodying the entire process:
"We're here in front of the trim, modest suburban home of Squarely Stable, the famous astronaut who has just completed his historic mission, and we have with us his attractive wife, Primly Stable. Primly Stable, you must be happy, proud, and thankful at this moment."

"Yes, Nancy, that's true. I'm happy, proud, and thankful at this moment."

"Tell us, Primly, tell us what you felt during the blast-off, at the very moment when your husband's rocket began to rise from the earth and take him on this historic journey."

"To tell you the truth, Nancy, I missed that part of it. I'd sort of dozed off, because I got up so early this morning and I'd been rushing around a lot taping the shades shut, so the TV people wouldn't come in the windows."

"And finally, Primly, I know that the most important prayer of your life had already been answered: Squarely has returned safely from outer space. But if you could have one other wish at this moment and have it come true, what would that one wish be?" "Well, Nancy, I'd wish for an Electrolux vacuum cleaner, with all the attachments ..."

Armstrong had also told his parents that it would be better not to come to Kennedy, so they had stayed home in Wapakoneta, Ohio. Unlike almost any other American celebrity, however, astronauts were of modest income, with backgrounds in the military, where they had all been trained. There is in fact a great history in aviation of 'ordinary' heroes — the Wright brothers made bicycles and Lindbergh was a mailman, after all. But the astronauts were the first to be in such a position, and then come face-to-face with the worst of American hero-worship.

Think of your son being the first man to go to the Moon; could there be a prouder moment in any parent's life? Instead, Neil Armstrong's mother and father found themselves living in a Spielberg horror movie, their small town and their modest home under attack by a ceaseless horde of reporters and photographers, the broadcast networks even parking an eighty-foot transmission tower in their driveway. At the least, when it was learned they only had a black-and-white TV to watch their son's historic moment, a big color set arrived, courtesy of ABC, CBS, and NBC.

By Tuesday, July 15th, every room for let within fifty miles of Kennedy's pad 39A was taken; a thirty-mile swathe of highway was quadruple-parked end-to-end with untold thousands of cars and trailers and motorcycles and campers stocked with beer, Pepsi, and bikinis. It was the middle of summer in the middle of Florida, meaning a heat that melted asphalt onto the soles of barefoot children and a humidity that made women sweat like Teamsters, especially that remarkable gaggle of lithe and adventurous females that made their way to Cocoa for every shot, pretty young things on the hunt for astronauts, or their best buddies, or somebody who worked at NASA, or somebody, sure to have a swinging time at the Satellite, Vanguard, Polaris, Rocket! or Space Girls taverns, drinking liftoff martinis and moonlanders of vodka, soda, lime juice, crème de menthe and crème de cacao. Legend has it that a woman known as "Wickie" would trump them all by sleeping with six of the Original Seven. Cocoa's innkeepers knew what they were doing for, even under this giddy torrent, the town never ran out of liquor, gasoline, or food. It did, however, run out of alarm clocks.

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