

The Explorers: Neil Armstrong

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Astronaut Neil Armstrong, commander of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon, in 1969. Wikimedia Commons

Synopsis: Neil Armstrong was born in Wapakoneta, Ohio, on August 5, 1930. After serving in the Korean War and then finishing college, he joined the group that would become NASA. He entered the astronaut program in 1962 and was command pilot for his first mission, Gemini VIII, in 1966. As spacecraft commander for Apollo 11, he became the first man to walk on the moon. He died in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 2012.

Early Years

Neil Armstrong developed a fascination with flight at an early age and earned his pilot's license when he was 16. In 1947, he began his studies in space engineering at Purdue University. The U.S. Navy paid his college tuition. The Navy scholarship required him to serve active duty before graduation.

His studies were interrupted in 1949 when he was called to serve in the Korean War. A U.S. Navy pilot, Armstrong flew 78 combat missions during this military conflict. He left the service in 1952 and returned to college. A few years later, Armstrong joined the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), which later became the National Aeronautics and Space Administration

(NASA). For this government agency he worked in a number of different capacities, including serving as an engineer and in the dangerous job of test pilot. He tested many high-speed aircraft, including the rocket-powered X-15, which could reach speeds up to 4,000 miles per hour. The typical typical passenger jet flies at 500 miles per hour.

Astronaut Program

In his personal life, Armstrong started to settle down. He married Janet Shearon on January 28, 1956. Their son Eric arrived in 1957, followed by daughter Karen in 1959. Sadly, Karen died of complications from a brain tumor in 1962. The following year, the Armstrongs welcomed their third child, son Mark.

That same year, Armstrong joined the astronaut program. He and his family moved to Houston, Texas, and Armstrong served as the command pilot for his first mission, Gemini VIII. He and fellow astronaut David Scott were launched into the earth's orbit on March 16, 1966. However, they experienced some problems and had to cut their mission short. They landed in the Pacific Ocean nearly 11 hours after the mission's start, and were later rescued by the U.S.S. Mason, a U.S. Navy vessel.

Moon Landing

Armstrong faced an even bigger challenge in 1969. Along with Michael Collins and Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin, he was part of NASA's first manned mission to the moon. The three were launched into space on July 16, 1969. Serving as the mission's commander, Armstrong piloted the Lunar Module to the moon's surface on July 20, 1969, with Buzz Aldrin aboard. Collins remained on the Command Module. At 10:56 PM, Armstrong exited the Lunar Module. "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," he said as he made his famous first step on the moon.

The Apollo 11 craft returned to Earth on July 24, 1969, landing in the Pacific Ocean. The crew and craft were picked up by a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier, the USS Hornet. The three astronauts were confined in quarantine so that they were certain not to have brought any dangerous matter from space.

Before long, the three astronauts were given a warm welcome home. Crowds lined the streets in New York City for a parade in their honor. Armstrong received numerous awards for his efforts, including the Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Space Medal of Honor.

Later Contributions

Armstrong remained with NASA until 1971, when he left to join the University of Cincinnati as a professor of space engineering. He stayed at the university for eight years. Later, he served as a leader of the Presidential Commission on the space shuttle Challenger accident. The commission investigated the 1986 explosion of the Challenger space shuttle, which killed its crew, including school teacher Christa McAuliffe.

Even in his final years, Armstrong remained committed to space exploration. In 2010 he expressed his concerns over changes made to the U.S. space program. He testified in Congress against President Barack Obama's decision to cancel the Constellation program, which included another mission to the moon.

Cancelling the program would cost the United States its leadership position in space exploration, Armstrong said. "America is respected for its contributions it has made in learning to sail on this new ocean. If the leadership we have acquired through our investment is simply allowed to fade away, other nations will surely step in where we have faltered. I do not believe that would be in our best interests," he told Congress.

Death And Legacy

Even though he was one of the most famous astronauts in history, Armstrong largely shied away from the public eye. In a rare 2005 interview, he described the moon, saying, "It's a brilliant surface in that sunlight. The horizon seems quite close to you. ... It's an interesting place to be. I recommend it."

Armstrong underwent heart surgery in 2012. He died a few weeks later, at the age of 82, on August 25, 2012. Shortly after his death, his family released a statement: "For those who may ask what they can do to honor Neil, we have a simple request. Honor his example of service, accomplishment and modesty, and the next time you walk outside on a clear night and see the moon smiling down at you, think of Neil Armstrong and give him a wink."

News of Armstrong's death quickly spread around the world. President Obama was among those who shared their memories of the space pioneer. "Neil was among the greatest of all American heroes—not just of his time, but of all time," Obama said.

Quiz

- 1 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-2]. Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from the information in this section?
- (A) Neil Armstrong became interested in flying after he fought in the Korean War.
 - (B) Neil Armstrong knew he wanted to be an astronaut since he was a young child.
 - (C) Neil Armstrong began working for NASA only to pursue his dream of landing on the moon.
 - (D) Neil Armstrong's lifelong interest in flying led him to work in many different roles at NASA.
- 2 Which sentence from the section "Moon Landing" suggests that landing on the moon was an important achievement in space exploration?
- (A) Along with Michael Collins and Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin, he was part of NASA's first manned mission to the moon.
 - (B) Serving as the mission's commander, Armstrong piloted the Lunar Module to the moon's surface on July 20, 1969, with Buzz Aldrin aboard.
 - (C) "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," he said as he made his famous first step on the moon.
 - (D) The three astronauts were confined in quarantine so that they were certain not to have brought any dangerous matter from space.
- 3 Which detail BEST supports a central idea of the article?
- (A) As spacecraft commander for Apollo 11, he became the first man to walk on the moon.
 - (B) Neil Armstrong developed a fascination with flight at an early age and earned his pilot's license when he was 16.
 - (C) He and his family moved to Houston, Texas, and Armstrong served as the command pilot for his first mission, Gemini VIII.
 - (D) Armstrong remained with NASA until 1971, when he left to join the University of Cincinnati as a professor of space engineering.
- 4 Which of the following choices reflects a main idea of the section "Death And Legacy"?
- (A) Armstrong died of complications shortly after undergoing heart surgery in 2012.
 - (B) Armstrong is remembered for his contributions to space exploration.
 - (C) Armstrong's death was mourned by many around the world, including President Obama.
 - (D) Armstrong regretted not being able to return to the moon in his lifetime.