

ORBIT

“That’s one small



step for man,



one giant



leap for



mankind.”



Neil Armstrong: reluctant, modest Hero who inspired two generations with “one small step”

Editor of **AdAstra**, **Umberto Cavallaro** pays tribute

Neil Armstrong has passed away on August 25. Another piece of history has been filed for ever.

“Reluctant hero” was one of the most recurring titles we saw on newspapers and journals referring to the sad news. And this properly describes Neil Armstrong. Probably the 20th Century will be remembered in the future centuries as the one when the Man for the first time left his native Earth and started to travel around in the Universe, and the history books will mention Neil Armstrong as the Man who – at the end of a fierce competition – for the first time has set footprint on another celestial body and they will report the perhaps most famous statement ever, in the entire space programme: “That’s one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind”: the step which fulfilled the challenge President John F. Kennedy issued at the beginning of the 1960s – to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

The memorable statement engendered heated debate on whether Armstrong did or did not utter the “a” which he at first claimed he did, but later acknowledged might not have, upon scrutinizing his recorded voice from the moon. His biographer James R. Hansey called Armstrong “one of the most known and less understood people on the planet” Undoubtedly “known”. The grainy black and white TV broadcast of him stepping on the moon was watched live by an estimated 600 million people worldwide, a fifth of the global world population: the largest population ever for any single event in history.

Undoubtedly “little understood”. Described as usually taciturn, self-controlled and self-effacing, he was never comfortable with celebrity and consistently avoided cameras. Michael Collins, who shared with Armstrong the Apollo 11 adventure, wrote that Armstrong “never transmits anything but the surface layer, and that only sparingly ... I like him, but I don't know what to make of him, or how to get to know him better”. Walt Cunningham (Apollo 7), who was his colleague and friend for many years during the NASA golden age, in his book “The All- American Boys” annotates “He flew the X- 15 rocket plane early in its development, yet I never heard him mention it. He never seemed to get involved emotionally in an issue and, when he spoke, his tone and delivery gave the impression that his words had been rehearsed. His face has a softness, a pinkness, that will keep him looking younger than he is. To those who knew him, Neil wasn't the type to become involved in the super spectacular. Whatever he did, he seldom made mistakes. He was the right man for mission commander”.

Modesty and appreciation of the team are recurring in Armstrong's statements: “I was certainly aware that this was the culmination of the work of 300,000 to 400,000 people over a decade” In a rare television interview in 2005, Armstrong stated he did not deserve the attention he received for being the first man on the moon, just steps ahead of fellow Apollo 11 astronaut Edwin ‘Buzz’ Aldrin. “I wasn't chosen to be first. I was just chosen to command that flight. Circumstance put me in that particular role”.

Moonwalking marked the culmination of a series of accomplishments that included



A commemorative cover was immediately issued by Fleetwood to celebrate the moonlanding: the cover on the left refers to the historical statement of Armstrong “...One Small step for a Man...”.

After scrutinising the recording of Armstrong's words, it was definitively decided that the correct version was “...One Small step for Man...” and a new version of the cover was produced, as shown on the right.



piloting many pioneering high-speed aircraft and making the first space docking during the Gemini 8 mission His career demonstrates he had what Tom Wolfe later called "The Right Stuff".

Armstrong had an early fascination with aircraft and received his pilot's licence on his 16th birthday. A U.S. Navy aviator, he flew 78 missions in the Korean War. As a research pilot at NASA, he flew on over 200 different models of helicopters, gliders, jets and rockets, including the X-15 rocket plane.

He reached astronaut status in 1962, and was assigned as command pilot for the Gemini 8 mission, during which he performed the first successful docking of two vehicles in space followed by a successful emergency splashdown. After retiring from NASA in 1971, Armstrong taught aerospace engineering at the University of Cincinnati for a decade and served on the boards of several companies, including United Airlines.

After a life of aeronautical achievement Armstrong had one desire: "Pilots like to be remembered for their flying and landing, not for their walking". And this was in line with his disappointment for the poor ambitions of the space programme in the last years. Deliberately away from the limelight for years and with scrupulous attention to avoiding any controversy that might reflect upon the space programme, Armstrong went public in 2010 with his concerns and "substantial reservations" about President Barack Obama's space policy that shifted attention away from a return to the moon and emphasized private companies developing spaceships and called this a "devastating" plan that destined the United States – the leading space faring nation for nearly half a century – to become one of second or even third rate stature. Along with more than two dozen Apollo-era veterans, he signed then a letter referring to the plan as a "misguided proposal that forces NASA out of human space operations for the foreseeable future". And after that, once again, he withdrew from public life.

"No one could ever have handled the fame and attention as well as Neil did. That is truly Neil's best contribution to the history of NASA and America" commented Walt Cunningham, after returning from the sad occasion of Neil Armstrong's Memorial Service in Cincinnati on August 31., adding "I feel fortunate to have lived when I did and to have played a small role in Neil's historic accomplishment".

Probably some inflated declaration, though sounding official, does not do him justice. It seems more appropriate the simple request of his family for anyone who wanted to remember him: "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".



Top: Gemini 8 cover signed by CAPCOM and friend Walter Cunningham

Above: cover designed by the American artists and stamp designers Paul and Chris Calle

Below: Commemorative cover serviced for the first X-15 flight of Neil Armstrong, with a bad imitation of his signature. Forgeries of Armstrong autographs are common and are becoming more and more sophisticated: see real thing below

