

ALASKA

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Buzz

MY FRIEND CHUCK LEANED OVER TO ME and whispered, "It's like having lunch with Christopher Columbus." I looked across the table at the smiling face of Buzz Aldrin, who was deep in conversation with a fan who had stopped by the table to meet his hero, and I nodded. Exactly.

There are only a few times in life when an event has such impact that everybody can remember exactly where they were and what was happening around them with absolute clarity. Those of us who are old enough remember that one of those times was when President Kennedy was assassinated.

A more pleasant memory, but just as vivid, was July 20, 1969. That was the day that men first landed on the moon. As the world watched on television, Neil Armstrong stepped down from the lunar lander and made his famous proclamation: "That is one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." He was joined 19 minutes later by Buzz Aldrin.

President Nixon congratulated them from the White House in what he stated "certainly has to be the most historic telephone call ever made." The success of that Apollo 11 mission filled our hearts with pride for what we as Americans—we as humans—could achieve.

Now, having had the good fortune to be invited to participate in a celebrity charity event, I was sitting across from this legendary space explorer having lunch. Chuck was right, it *was*

like having lunch with Christopher Columbus.

And what a great opportunity to get a firsthand perspective. Buzz was simply captivating, whether he was discussing the Apollo mission or giving us a heart-felt insight into his upcoming book, *Encounter With Tiber*, a science fiction thriller in

which a meteor shower is on a 40-year collision course with Earth. The only chance for survival is to find and then migrate to a planet that can support human life. The underlying message,

and a good one: We need to invest in space exploration *now*. He's a bright guy—one you listen to with interest.

But my wife's question was the one that really stopped us in our tracks. She asked Buzz what he was thinking about when he was sitting on top of that rocket ready for lift off. He paused, as if trying to understand the question, then finally responded to the effect that he had confidence that if a problem occurred on the platform they could get off safely. That wasn't her point, though; she was thinking in her terms, and what would have been going through her mind: The risk of going to, landing on, and then taking off again from the moon. Fear, in other words.

I knew exactly what she meant; I think all of us at the table did. But not Buzz. He wasn't at all worried about what he was setting out to do, so that wasn't his point of reference. He and the rest of the Apollo 11 crew knew they had a team behind them that was beyond compare. And they were confident in themselves and their team. That came through clearly when Buzz answered the question.

Later, we asked for his views on the movie *Apollo 13*—specifically whether or not it was close to what he saw from his experiences. He had nothing but good things to say about the movie, and in particular about director Ron Howard's skill and talent.

As I listened to him talk, I again came back to the idea of teamwork. It was difficult enough to get Apollo 11 to the moon and back, but those of you familiar with the Apollo 13 mission know the challenges they faced when their command ship was crippled, and what it took to get those astronauts back to Earth.

Like people around the world, I followed that story closely, right up to its final, happy conclusion. So I certainly knew the story and the outcome. Yet when I saw the movie, it was so gripping that I actually got tears in my eyes—along with everyone else in the theater, I might add. Why? Teamwork. That was what was compelling to me—what [continued on page 80]

people working together can do under even the most difficult of circumstances.

And you know, most of us in business rely on our teams in the very same manner. The consequences may be less dramatic, but no less critical to the success of our operation. At Alaska Airlines teamwork is a tradition, and I think it's reflected in all we do. I'm obviously biased, but I truly believe that we have a wonderful group of talented people who accomplish much more than the sum of their independent contributions through teamwork. We've won numerous awards over the past years that I think are testimony to that fact.

We each bring something unique to our workplace, but it's our collective effort that is the payoff. Sometimes some of us, like Buzz, get a lot of the attention, but every single member of the team is critical to success. That's the bottom line.

Having said all that, it was still a thrill to have lunch with someone in the same category as Christopher Columbus. Buzz is quite a guy. And by the way, he may have walked on the moon, but he's the most down-to-earth person you could ever meet. Thanks for the lesson on teamwork, Buzz.

John F. Kelly
Chairman,
President and
CEO.

Apollo 11
astronaut
Buzz Aldrin.

