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Q&A: BUZZ ALDRIN

By James Cameron

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- Walked on the moon (second only to Neil Armstrong) during Apollo 11 mission
- Nicknamed "Dr. Rendezvous" for the docking techniques he developed while at MIT earning his PhD in astronautics
- Shot down two MiG-15s during 66 combat missions in the Korean War
- Created the nonprofit ShareSpace Foundation to promote affordable space tourism

Thirty-five years ago, *Apollo 11* landed on the moon - and Buzz Aldrin stepped into history as the second man to walk the lunar surface. **James Cameron** talked to him about that moment and the next step in manned space exploration.

CAMERON: Every year that goes by makes the *Apollo 11* landing even more stunning. Did you think about that trip as exploration or more like a military mission?

ALDRIN: At the time, it felt like the beginning of something; it seemed pioneering. We were carrying out something; it was part of a bigger thing that you could call exploration, but the participation was really an operation. I was not that impressed with discovering something new. It was executing something and carrying it out.

How much did you think or worry about the risk involved?

You do what's in front of you, whether it was Apollo or flying airplanes into combat. You're not panicky about anything. You get into it. You do it. You have a certain amount of faith, and you charge ahead. It's not like you're calculating a risk or having concern about the consequences. You do the best you can and be as alert as possible - and calm and clear-headed in the midst of chaos.

You do your job ...

Some people are more fortunate than others. And if you don't get shot down or blown up, you get selected for significant opportunities and all of a sudden you're a great hero for taking risks. And all you did was do what was in front of you.

So you must have thought that the Apollo program would lead to

more trips to the moon and eventually to Mars. Was there a sense that, being the first heroes, NASA wouldn't risk you on other missions?

I felt it was greedy of anybody to take opportunities away from other people who were putting in a lot of time, who weren't as fortunate to be on the missions that got all the attention. And also, if there was risk involved, why go through that again? You don't have to face that. You just have to ease out.

You've done a lot of work on Mars exploration - you've designed systems for getting there, published papers on how to pull off sustainable missions. Does it make sense to return to the moon in preparation for going to Mars?

It really does. Going to Mars will take an enormous commitment, and going to the moon first can help that succeed. But that wouldn't justify supporting a permanent habitat with a large number of people on the moon; that doesn't make sense to me. The moon environment is in some ways more disadvantageous than Mars - there are temperature extremes, a total vacuum, you don't have wind storms, but you've got radiation.

So does a habitat on Mars make sense?

Absolutely. I think the financial commitment to send humans to Mars is so great that you shouldn't entertain it if you're only going to do it once or twice and then give up. It's hard to set up something that works there, then leave it and expect it to keep working between occasional visits. If something goes wrong, you have to get there to fix it. It will be dead for a long time. If we are going to make the investment, we ought to continue getting the return on the investment. That means establishing a growing permanence. It would be a tour of duty of about five years. You've got to face that going in.

There won't be any problem getting people to sign up to go to Mars for five years. Hell, I'd go. In the meantime, NASA is talking about getting back on the moon within 15 years. How do you think you'll feel if humans return to the moon?

I'd be very satisfied to be around. There's something about reaching that distance that's unique, a true distinction.

Should lunar astronauts be in a special category?

Twenty-four people have reached the moon. And half of them have walked on the moon - but you really don't want to differentiate between the two; you'd be short-changing people. But if you start including all the preparatory missions and on up the chain, you've got to include everybody - it becomes somewhat meaningless.

Well I think there's an elite place for the 24 men.

Only in literature, not in anything else. It doesn't receive recognition, and I've been frustrated by that.

I have one fanboy question: When I look at the moon, I see it a certain way. Can you describe to me what you see? Aside from "been there, done that."

I have a peculiar, particular attachment to it. The moon is pretty much as we see it from Earth until you get quite close. The one you see here is the one that we saw halfway there except it was maybe a little bit bigger. But then it rather quickly takes on another role. In orbit, descent, and touchdown - the closer you get - it's a different moon.

What do you make of that experience now? Does it have a dreamlike quality? Or is it still a clear memory?

Was it all a dream? No, it's reality. But it's brought back by certain scenes that are kind of stamped as impressions, isolated memories. Some of them are refreshed by photographs. When I look up there now, it's still the same moon. It's the moon we went to. But not the moon we walked on.