

Space pioneers mark Gemini history

Aldrin and Lovell reunited with their spaceship at Chicago exhibit

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Joshua Lott / Reuters

Astronauts Buzz Aldrin, left, and Jim Lovell speak to the media Thursday about their space experiences in front of the Gemini 12 capsule that carried them into orbit and back. The capsule is part of a new permanent exhibit at Chicago's Adler Planetarium, titled "Shoot for the Moon." Saturday marks the 40th anniversary of the Gemini 12 launch.

CHICAGO - The last time Jim Lovell and Buzz Aldrin saw their Gemini 12 spacecraft together, it was bobbing in the Atlantic Ocean following their 1966 mission.

The two astronauts were reunited with the capsule Thursday as part of a new permanent exhibit called "Shoot for the Moon," at the Adler Planetarium.

"This was a good bird. It did its job," Lovell said of the capsule, which has burn marks on its base from its re-entry into the atmosphere, and a jumble of switches and toggles on its control panel.

Gemini 12 did not land on the moon, although the four-day mission helped prepare for a lunar landing by demonstrating that an astronaut could work successfully outside the spacecraft, with Aldrin spending 5½ hours in space.

But Lovell, 78, and Aldrin, 76, both were part of the Apollo program, which did have lunar landings as its mission. On July 20, 1969, Aldrin became the second man to walk on the surface of the moon, following Neil Armstrong.

Lovell was captain of the 1970 mission that was supposed to be the third lunar landing. But that landing was aborted after an oxygen tank overheated and exploded. The safe return of the men to Earth was a result of the ingenuity of the astronauts and the NASA engineers on the ground.

Jammed into Gemini

Years earlier, inside their Gemini module, Lovell and Aldrin hardly had any room to move.

Accessories occasionally needed during the trip were attached on a long cord, stored behind the seats. Aldrin remembers it taking him 10 minutes to maneuver to reach them. They also had to struggle in the small space to put on their pressurized suits when Aldrin went out for his spacewalk. He's still amazed at how small the interior of the spacecraft was.

"It was cramped. There just wasn't much room," he said.

One of the upsides? They were traveling so fast they would orbit the Earth in about 88 minutes, meaning they saw more than a dozen sunrises and sunsets a day.

"You never got tired of looking out the window," Lovell said.

The Gemini 12 capsule is on a long-term loan to the Adler from the National Air and Space Museum.

Space history on exhibit

The exhibit opens Saturday, the 40th anniversary of the beginning of the mission, and actually encompasses several galleries.

The Gemini 12 spacecraft and a gallery focusing on Lovell's life opened this summer. Lovell grew up in Milwaukee and visited the Adler as a child — he has donated about 30 personal items to the museum, including the manual whose cover the Apollo 13 crew ripped off to create a scrubber to convert carbon dioxide into oxygen.

The gallery opening Saturday is mostly geared toward getting children interested in space exploration, informing them of all the possible associated [careers](#), and inspiring them to take an interest in math and science.

They can use a joystick to try to gently land a lunar model on a computer screen, design their own colony on the moon or put on astronaut helmets and get their photos taken under a newspaper headline, "Future Moon Astronauts Chosen."

"Shoot for the Moon" is part of an effort to expand the mission of the Adler Planetarium. Opened in 1930, it traditionally has focused on astronomy, but it is now broadening its scope, seeking to become a leading space science center.

Lovell said he believes institutions such as Adler are necessary to inspire Americans of the great possibilities of space exploration.

Both Lovell and Aldrin said they are encouraged by President Bush's plan to send astronauts back to the moon and on to Mars, but say it will require years of political will and a dedication to funding.

"I would say that if we ever get behind in this business, it will be extremely difficult to catch up to some other nation," Aldrin said. "We have a lead now and we should protect that."

Lovell said fear of possible dangers to astronauts can't hold back progress.

"We could get 100 percent safety by hauling the shuttle craft back into the barn and locking the door," he said. "You have to accept the rewards that you get from it overbalancing the risks that are involved. People like ourselves gladly accept the risks and hopefully there's a new direction now, a more aggressive approach to making spaceflights more frequent."