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„I COULD HAVE FADED INTO OBSCURITY“

Apollo 11 pilot Buzz Aldrin on the return to the Moon and the feeling of having been there first

Interview: Hans-Arthur Marsiske

Q.: Mr. Aldrin, you have listened to a lot of presentations at the conference „To Moon and beyond“. What is your impression of this meeting?

ALDRIN: Well, it's a small group of people that talk to each other, hoping that anybody is listening. It's a pity that there hasn't developed a fan club that keeps things going, like in sports or entertainment. Space doesn't seem to attract so much attention any more.

Q.: Don't you think something has changed since the disaster of Space Shuttle Columbia on February 1, 2003? President George W. Bush announced the Space Exploration Initiative one year later.

ALDRIN: We now have a new plan that is focusing our resources and gets some political support. The challenge is to save this plan into the next administrations of the future presidents. The critical phase of transition will coincide with the 40th anniversary of the moon landing. I consider it as my task to reconcile the achievements of the Apollo program with the new plans. In recent years a whole generation has experienced manned spaceflight only with the Space Shuttle. But these missions couldn't excite people as much as the pictures of the Hubble Space Telescope, the Cassini orbiter at Saturn, or the Mars Exploration Rovers.

Q.: Do you fear the Space Exploration Initiative still could fail?

ALDRIN: Yes, I'm concerned about that. It's a big effort to sustain crewed stations on the Moon. Therefore it could make sense after human exploration to leave further work to robots. The heads of NASA expect growing numbers of inhabitants on Moon and Mars. But I'm not so sure, whether human settlements in such a hostile environment like the Moon can be justified in the long run. There must be some payoff, otherwise it would be a continuous drag of resources that prevents us from doing other things.

Q.: Several speakers at the Bremen conference speculated that settlement of Mars could be easier because of the available resources on that planet.

ALDRIN: In any case we should avoid going there a few times and then stop it again. It must be a continuous evolution. Therefore I don't see a reason to hurry. We could first go to near-Earth asteroids. With these experiences we could then go to Phobos and Deimos, the moons of Mars, and from there we could explore the surface of Mars.

Q.: You mean, we could use the moons of Mars as natural space stations?

ALDRIN: Exactly. We don't know much yet about what they are made of. We also don't know how astronauts could deal with several years in microgravity. I think, with a good program of exercises you can counter the effects of microgravity. But we should consider artificial gravity, too. An interesting machine that I have seen in Southern California combines both: It is a kind of merry-go-round that is propelled by a person on a bicycle trainer. The additional advantage is that no energy is consumed.

Q.: You have proposed the concept of the „Mars Cyclers“, that are spacecrafts in orbits around the sun which bring them close to Earth and Mars in regular intervals. Would these Mars Cyclers have artificial gravity?

ALDRIN: They could develop in this direction. You have to approach such big projects in small steps. Therefore artificial gravity could perhaps first be tested on the moons of Mars or in Mars orbit and then transferred to the Mars Cyclers and other space ships.

Q.: After the Columbia disaster NASA has decided to separate the transport of crew and cargo in the future. You are not quite happy with this idea?

ALDRIN: The separation of crew and cargo makes sense. But NASA not only wants separate spacecraft, but separate launch vehicles, too, the Ares I and Ares V. Now there may be reduced levels of reliability and complexity with launchers for unmanned missions. But I doubt that these savings can really balance out the huge effort of developing a new launcher system. Both rockets require their own ground infrastructure, too.

Q.: Do you expect to see people walking on the Moon again?

ALDRIN: My wife is doing a lot to keep me alive for a while to go. But in 2020 not many of the original 24 people that have gone to the Moon will be left. The 50th anniversary of the Moon landing in 2019 will be a sad gathering with a lot of walkers and wheel-chairs. There already have been proposals to move the landing to 2025 to relax the financial burden. That would also stretch the time between termination of the Shuttle and the availability of the new Orion transportation system, though. Perhaps we succeed in developing an private alternative in the framework of the COTS (Commercial Orbital Transportation System) program. Last year NASA has given money to the US enterprises SpaceX and Rocketplane-Kistler for a first development phase. But I doubt that these companies have enough resources to develop a complete transportation system. There may be some interesting opportunities for European companies to cooperate.

Q.: Together with John Barnes you have written the science fiction novel „Encounter with Tiber“ where you deal with interstellar space travel. Will humans leave the solar system one day?

ALDRIN: The barrier on the way to the next habitable planetary system is very big. For securing the survival of humanity it is sufficient to settle the closer neighborhood in the solar system. Mars is certainly the most attractive place for that. Then we can think about how to escape the end of the Sun in several billion years.

Q.: I can't spare you one question, although I know that reporters have driven you crazy asking it again and again: How does it feel to stand on the Moon?

ALDRIN: It is still frustrating. I don't know what ideal answers there are, what clumsy ones, and what is in between. What ever you feel in such a moment, it can be altered by the descriptions that in the end nobody knows any more where the truth is.

Q.: I wonder if „Encounter with Tiber“ could be read as an answer?

ALDRIN: No, the astronaut Chris who crashes on the Moon doesn't resemble much of me. Our focus in the story was on Mars, anyway. In the long term Moon will be an area for robots. It's interesting that a significant part of the work of astronauts has to do with trying to replacing themselves.

Q.: Did you ever regret being on the first Moon landing mission which has also been the shortest?

ALDRIN: Of course I've thought a lot about it before and afterwards. What I experienced personally with depressions and alcoholism wouldn't have been different, if I had been on a later, more complicated mission. But the interruption of my life and then the re-adjustment to an unstructured life had been much more intense by being on the first mission. We got tremendous attention. You can move away from it like Neil did it very consciously and kept being productive at the same time. If I would draw back I'd miss the stimulation by other people. I could have faded much more into obscurity. But step by step I got used to going out and make myself available. I probably wouldn't have done it without the help of my wife.=