

Thousands see astronaut Buzz Aldrin on Hornet

Corey Paul, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Buzz Aldrin, the second man to walk on the moon, was the guest of honor at a 40th anniversary celebration of the Apollo 11 moon landing mission aboard the aircraft carrier Hornet museum.

Photo: Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Thousands packed onto the aircraft carrier Hornet on Saturday to hear Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin describe his experience as the second man on the moon - a desolate place, he said, where the air was so thin he felt like a kangaroo as he bounced on the surface.

The Hornet, now a hulking museum anchored on Alameda Point, is the carrier that fished the Apollo 11 astronauts from the Pacific after they splashed down on July 23, 1969. For Aldrin, returning to commemorate the 40th anniversary of that historic mission was a time to promote the restoration of American space leadership.

It was also a chance to crack a bunch of jokes.

"I'm gonna reveal a secret to you," he told reporters. "There's a monolith on (Mars' moon) Phobos. It's about 15 meters high. And aliens put it there before they came to Egypt to build the pyramids." Like a good comic, Aldrin, 79, kept a straight face - until they laughed.

Speaking with a massive American flag as a backdrop, Aldrin argued that America should forgo another trip to the moon, and instead help other countries get there while we focus on exploring Mars.

Then he told everyone to watch the rap video he made with Will Ferrell and Snoop Dogg: "Rocket Experience."

In a mix of frivolity, admiration and awe, families toured the restored Hornet, viewed relics from the Apollo missions, ate burgers and listened to stories from crew members who recovered the Apollo 11 team. Hundreds lined up for Aldrin to autograph his new book, "Magnificent Desolation: The Long Journey Home from the Moon."

In honor of the event, 5-year-old Paul Arce wore an orange NASA jumpsuit given to him by his great-uncle, who's an engineer for the agency. Paul said he likes his science projects - but most of all, he wants to take the first trip to Mars "to find out if there are aliens there."

Some were closer to potential liftoff.

Twenty-year-old Kristi Bradford, who's majoring in astrophysics at Harvard so she can become an astronaut, agreed with Aldrin that the government should place a greater priority on space exploration.

"I've got to give him props," said Bradford, an intern at the NASA Ames Research Center. "Being the second man on the moon is so much cooler than the first. You don't have to deal with all the media."

Actually, Aldrin fell into depression and alcoholism that lasted years after his voyage as he struggled to find his calling on Earth. He also once punched a man in the face for accusing him of lying about going to the moon - and that was after Aldrin had been sober for decades.

"Well," Ames intern Kamil Stelmach said as he reflected on Aldrin's well-documented post-mission difficulties, "that just makes him cooler."

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