

Apollo 11 Aboard USS Hornet, 40 Years Later

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Ed Jay
Astronaut Buzz Aldrin
fields a question at last
week's Splashdown
2009 that celebrated
the Hornet's successful
recovery of the Apollo
11 astronauts.

None of them had a Top 10 hit; none had ever won an Oscar, yet according to some reports more people than ever before or since were either watching this trio's performance on television or listening on the radio. Many people can still tell you where they were when Neil Armstrong led the threesome as the first human to set foot on the moon. Buzz Aldrin joined his colleague on the lunar surface and Michael Collins flew above them, piloting the Columbia.

One member of the epoch-making Apollo 11 crew set foot on USS Hornet last Saturday. This time Aldrin walked up the gangplank dressed in suit and tie. On July 26, 1969, Aldrin and his fellow astronauts descended from a helicopter dressed like they had just come from outer space.

This time, instead of entering an isolation pod, Aldrin headed to the Hornet's wardroom for a press conference. Members of the team who brought Aldrin and Co. aboard 40 years ago were waiting.

They included Clancy Hatleberg, who decontaminated the astronauts after they emerged from their space capsule; Chuck Smiley, the HS-4 helicopter pilot who helped bring the astronauts aboard the Hornet, and Smiley's co-pilot, Bruce Johnson. Also waiting in the wardroom for Aldrin were Dr. John Stonesifer, director of quarantine operations, and Don Blair, the radio personality who broadcast the splashdown as it happened on the Mutual Radio Network

Aldrin acknowledged his colleagues by pointing out that Apollo 11's trip to the moon and back was a team effort. He said he was thankful for the communication system that allowed him, Collins and Armstrong to return safely to Earth.

The participants quietly deferred to Aldrin who spoke to the media more about America's future in space than its past. Since retiring from the National Aeronautics Space Administration, Aldrin has vigorously promoted America's continued leadership in space.

In the 1960s he pioneered training underwater as a substitute for zero gravity. He also devised the docking and rendezvous techniques still used today.

Forty years later, Aldrin is looking past the moon to Mars. He has devised a master plan for missions to Mars. His Aldrin Mars Cyclor would make perpetual cycling orbits between Earth and Mars.

He questions America's current plans to return to the moon.

"We've done that," he told his audience. He does not suggest abandoning the moon, but looking past it. He is the founder of a rocket-design company and a nonprofit dedicated to promoting space education.

The title of Aldrin's latest book, *Magnificent Desolation*, echoes his first impression of the lunar landscape.

And what about that blast-off-to-recovery television coverage with all those millions of Earthlings looking on? "We missed the whole thing," Aldrin said. "We were the only ones not watching."