

The rare gem that is Armstrong

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Comment

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THERE was something conspicuously missing in the 40th anniversary celebration of the lunar landing last month: Neil Armstrong.



The first man on the moon was not much seen during the commemorative celebrations, at least relative to his colleague, Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin.

The lunar landing was, perhaps, one of the greatest human feats of the last century, and Armstrong was the man at the centre of it all.

Armstrong's absence in many popular and specialised media communication channels prompted many to ask the inevitable: "Where is Neil?"

It is not unimaginable that those who were lucky enough to witness Armstrong step on the moon's surface in 1969 would have looked forward to hearing him speak about the historic event 40 years later.

And especially so since the original footage of the Apollo 11 moonwalk was reportedly destroyed during a period when Nasa was erasing old magnetic tapes and reusing them to record satellite data.

For the younger generation born in the 1970s, man walking on the moon seemed more of a dream, especially when the space programme slowed down after the early 1970s.

And to hear about it directly from the man himself would have made a world of difference. Though only a dozen astronauts have stepped on the moon and a dozen others have attempted it, Armstrong's position remains unique.

Amid all these, the question of Armstrong's whereabouts for the 40th anniversary raised many questions.

It is almost unbelievable that Armstrong was not as visible as his partner, Aldrin. Nowhere was this more glaring than in the July 27 issue of Time magazine commemorating the 40th anniversary of Apollo 11 -- the picture of the lunar footprint was not even that of Armstrong's!

We are grateful to Aldrin for sharing many of his experiences with the world in practically all the media. He reportedly argued that "being second" was just as significant.

Still, there must be many who were longing to hear from the very first moonwalker himself.

Going by various sources, Armstrong apparently chose instead to visit his fellow astronauts who have died, to pay tribute for their sacrifices in making the 1969 mission possible.

He cherished the first American to walk in the vacuum of space in 1965. Edward White was killed at a launch pad two years after that during tests for the pioneering but never-flown Apollo 1 spacecraft. Other astronauts killed with him were Virgil Grissom and Roger Chaffee.

Armstrong spoke of how they paved the foundation for his spectacular lunar debut.

Armstrong made very few public outings as part of the Apollo 11 celebrations, not even to his birthplace of Wapakoneta -- though this did not stop the town from making the most of the historic event.

His rare appearances led some to cite "shyness" as one of the reasons. Armstrong was last spotted in Wapakoneta at the 60th reunion of his school graduating class.

Apparently, he preferred to keep a low profile, post-Apollo 11. For example, he was happy with a teaching position at the Department of Aerospace Engineering at the University of Cincinnati until 1979, after he left Nasa in 1971.

The choice of Cincinnati is seemingly because of the relative small size of the department, making it less controversial for him, acknowledging that he came straight into a professorship with only a Master's degree. Armstrong was not at all presumptuous.

What is clear is that Armstrong is much more a humble person rather than a shy one. As to why he was chosen to be the first person on the moon, it was in part due to Nasa's conviction that Armstrong did not have a large ego.

This was proven true when he turned down many offers -- from lucrative offers to act as a spokesperson for businesses to approaches by political groups -- to remain out of the limelight.

More recently, Armstrong refused all requests for autographs due to the commercial abuse attached to it, including the generation of fakes. All these affected him.

Still, Armstrong was deservedly bestowed with numerous accolades, honours and awards, including some of the most prestigious ones.

His name adorns many august places, such as a site near the lunar landing, called Crater Armstrong, and also asteroid 6469, named in his honour.

Most likely, Armstrong is not desirous of such honours. This shows that those who are truly famous, learned or have tasted and seen glory are less preoccupied with it; they are more honest with themselves.

Unfortunately, these are rare specimens, the most valuable of gems. Armstrong is undoubtedly one of the rare ones.

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