

Years After Apollo 16 Moon Walk, Astronaut Finds Jesus

Where were you?

If you were alive when man first walked on the moon 43 years ago, chances are this moment is forever etched in your memory.

An event arguably as big as any in the history of the United States, Neil Armstrong's first steps came on television at 10:56 p.m. (EDT) on July 20, 1969.

Charlie Duke remembers. How could he not?

The Capcom astronaut for that Apollo 11 mission entrusted with communicating with Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin during their landing on the lunar surface, Duke could hardly breathe in those final minutes. The mission was in real danger of aborting and Duke was the sole communication link from mission control to the astronauts hovering over the moon.

"Very intense, very hectic," Duke remembers that night in Houston. "We experienced a lot of communication problems, data dropouts, computer overload warnings. But we kept going."

Hanging in the balance was nearly a decade worth of grueling work to fulfill President Kennedy's 1961 dream and promise to put a man on the moon—and return him to Earth safely—by the end of the decade.

They were so close. The moon's surface was in view. But the area was too rocky and more fuel was needed to blast past the lunar module to a smoother spot.

"The gas was very critical," Duke said. "I called 60 seconds left, then I called 30 seconds. And we still weren't landing. We were 17 seconds from a call to abort."

Less than 30 seconds left of gas on a three-day journey? Think the folks at NASA were biting their lower lips?

“Tension was mounting at mission control, as you can imagine,” he said. “I heard ‘Contact engine stop.’ And we knew they were on the ground.

“A few seconds later, Neil transmitted, ‘Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed.’”

“Literally,” Duke said this week from his home in New Braunfels, Texas, “we were holding our breath.”

Which may explain Duke’s response at mission control, one of the most memorable voice bytes from anyone associated with the space program.

“Roger, Tranquility, we copy you on the ground. You’ve got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We’re breathing again. Thanks a lot.”

At that point in his life, Duke thought nothing would top it.

He was wrong. Three years later, he became the 10th—and youngest person ever—to walk on the moon.

Still, he was wrong. The best was yet to come.

Six years later, he met **Jesus**.

“Walking on the moon was three days,” he says. “But walking with Jesus is forever.”

April 16, 1972

He spent a record 71 hours and 14 minutes on the moon—about a third of that actually walking, exploring and collecting rocks—and 43 years later, Duke can tell you everything you’d want to know.

Just as if he’s running through a slideshow on your living room wall.

"It had a stark beauty about it," he recalls. "The moon to me was incredibly beautiful."

There were no colors on the moon. Everything was just different shades of gray. And rolling terrain.

The lighting? Bright sun. "Brilliant sunlight," he notes. "Tremendous. Bright and reflective."

But the biggest difference to Earth? "There's no atmosphere on the moon," says Duke, who walked the mission with fellow astronaut John Young. "You look up into the sky and it's jet black. Velvety. What a contrast. Those memories are indelibly in my mind."

Because of the Earth's position straight overhead and the oversized space helmets, only on a rare occasion could Duke catch a glimpse of his home planet while strolling on the moon. But there were a few precious times. And he had plenty of time to ponder Earth, looking out the spacecraft window.

But he didn't spend much time contemplating the Creator.

"Jewel of beauty," he labels his view of the Earth from outer space. "The blackness of space and the thought that we were a long ways from home."

More than 238,857 miles to be exact, if you're tracking frequent flyer miles. But in some ways, Duke was even farther than that from God.

"Now that I'm a believer, in my mind, I can see that sight and proclaim as the Psalmist did," Duke says. "The heavens declare the glory of God. The sky proclaims the work of His hands."

It took Duke six full years—to the day, actually, as he best remembers—from his walk on the moon to when he started walking with the Lord.

April 16, 1978

Born in Charlotte, N.C., Duke grew up in Lancaster, S.C., and graduated from the Navy in 1957; he then received a master's in Aeronautics & Astronautics from MIT in 1964. A year later, he graduated from the U.S. Air Force Test Pilot School, setting the stage for his astronaut career.

But as he relives those years, Duke is anything but proud of the person he turned into and the marriage that he let crumble.

He married Dorothy (Dottie) Meade Claiborne in 1963 and had two sons, Charles II (1965) and Thomas (1967), and his career was taking off—pun intended. Besides his Capcom spot on Apollo 11, he was selected as backup on the Apollo 13 mission before getting his shot on Apollo 16.

But by the time he came home from his once-in-a-lifetime experience, the extreme exhilaration quickly turned to deep despair.

“Now what?” Duke would think to himself. “What are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

But his next career would be the least of his concerns. Dottie was depressed, contemplating suicide, hoping that once her husband's NASA days were behind him, she would finally get first priority.

But things weren't getting better.

“I was 36 years old. My marriage was falling apart,” Duke said. “We were steaming toward the rocks of divorce. Had two kids. So things were pretty desperate in our house.”

Looking for any answer at all, Charlie and Dottie attended a weekend event in the fall of 1975 called Faith Alive at their church in La Porte, Texas.

“It was a very moving weekend for my wife especially,” Duke recalls. “After that weekend was over, she said I've tried

everything but Jesus, she gave her heart to Jesus.”

Almost immediately, Duke noticed a change in his wife. “I watched her change from sadness to joy,” he says. “She had a spirit of forgiveness, a spirit of love, a spirit of peace.”

But it took Duke 2 1/2 years before he was ready to give control over to **Christ**. He was invited to a weekend Bible study and was challenged to either accept or reject the **Scriptures**.

Duke had grown up going to church and knew plenty about God. But he had never made his relationship personal.

“It was either true or the biggest lie,” he says. “After that weekend I made the decision, ‘Yes, Lord, you are my Lord. Come into my life. All that knowledge that was into my head came into my heart.’”

That’s One Giant Step

Fittingly, Duke wasn’t content for his walk with the Lord to begin with small steps.

“I began to devour Scripture, several hours a day,” he remembers. “The more I read, the more conviction the Lord brought upon me. Hebrews says ‘The word is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.’ God began to reveal to me the sin in my life.”

And suddenly, Duke could see the same change he was seeing in his wife’s life.

“God delivered me from anger, unforgiveness, just everything that was wrong,” he says. “It was dramatic. He saved our marriage. Not one promise of God has failed us.”

In 34 years, Duke has seen the Lord open up many doors to use his moon-walking experience to give glory to Him, with speaking opportunities “all over the world.”

He even helped the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association with the 1992 Moscow Crusade—he went over for an advance trip to meet with some of the Cosmonauts he knew along with members of the Russian military.

And now at age 76, Duke sometimes sits back and laughs at the irony of it all. “People all over the world want to meet someone who has walked on the moon.”

But all Duke wants to do is introduce them to the only perfect person to walk on the Earth.

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