

Reaching for the Moon

by Buzz Aldrin
art by Wendell Minor

The name my parents gave me was Edwin Eugene Aldrin Jr., but the name my sister gave me was the one that would stay with me all my life. She could not manage to say brother, only “Buzzer.” Later that got shortened to “Buzz,” and no one ever called me anything else.



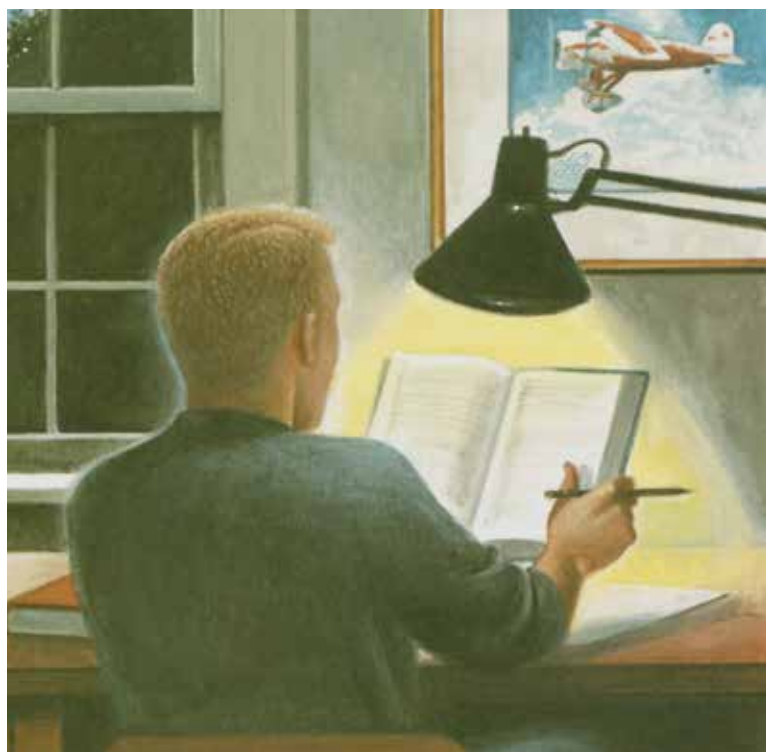
What I wanted to do more than anything was fly. So, after going to college at West Point, the United States Military Academy, I joined the Air Force. I learned to fly fighter jets, fast and quick in the sky.

I loved going as fast as a human being could go, and I learned to pilot planes that flew faster than the speed of sound.

But there were men flying faster than that—America's first seven astronauts. The astronauts seemed like supermen to me. I couldn't imagine myself exploring outer space. But when my college friend Ed White told me his plan to apply to the space program, I realized that the astronauts were pilots just like Ed—and me.



I went back to university and studied aeronautics and astronautics. But the first time I applied to the astronaut program, I wasn't accepted. I didn't give up. I applied a second time, and I got in. I was already a pilot and a scientist. Now I was an astronaut as well.



My first spaceflight was on board *Gemini 12*. Once the spacecraft was in orbit, I put on my spacesuit, opened the hatch, and drifted out into space. Only a thin cord connected me to *Gemini* as we circled Earth. It took us less than two hours to go all the way around the world. But the speed didn't seem real to me. I felt as if I were gently floating while Earth spun beneath me.

After *Gemini 12*, there was a new mission—Apollo. The goal of Apollo was to put humans on the moon.



Many people thought it couldn't be done. They thought that the powerful rockets needed to go that far could never be built. They thought that, even if we did reach the moon, we would never be able to take off again to come home. But, one by one, all the challenges were met.

Neil Armstrong, Mike Collins, and I were chosen as the team for *Apollo 11*—the flight that would land on the moon.



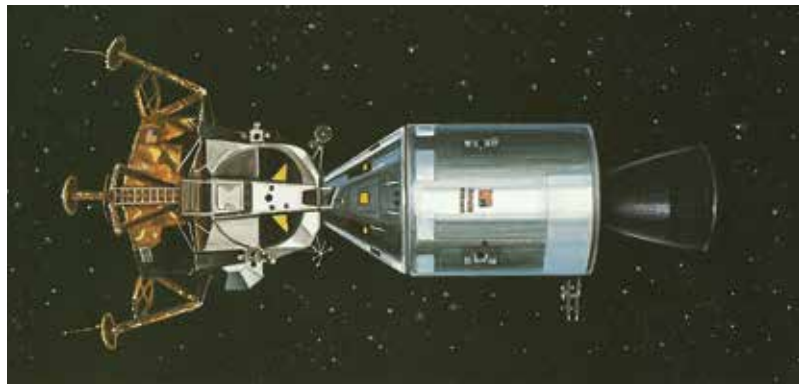
On July 16, 1969, Neil, Mike, and I boarded *Apollo 11*. We lay side by side on three couches, tightly strapped in. Beneath us I heard a rumble, like a faraway train. But as we lifted off, the movement felt so gentle that if I had not been looking at the instruments, I would never have known we were on our way.

Outside the window of *Apollo 11*, Earth grew smaller and smaller. At last we were so far away that I could hold up my thumb and block the bright disk from my sight.



After five hours we could take off our spacesuits and helmets and move around the cabin. We ate chicken salad and applesauce for dinner, with shrimp cocktail, my favorite of our freeze-dried choices. Then it was time to rest.

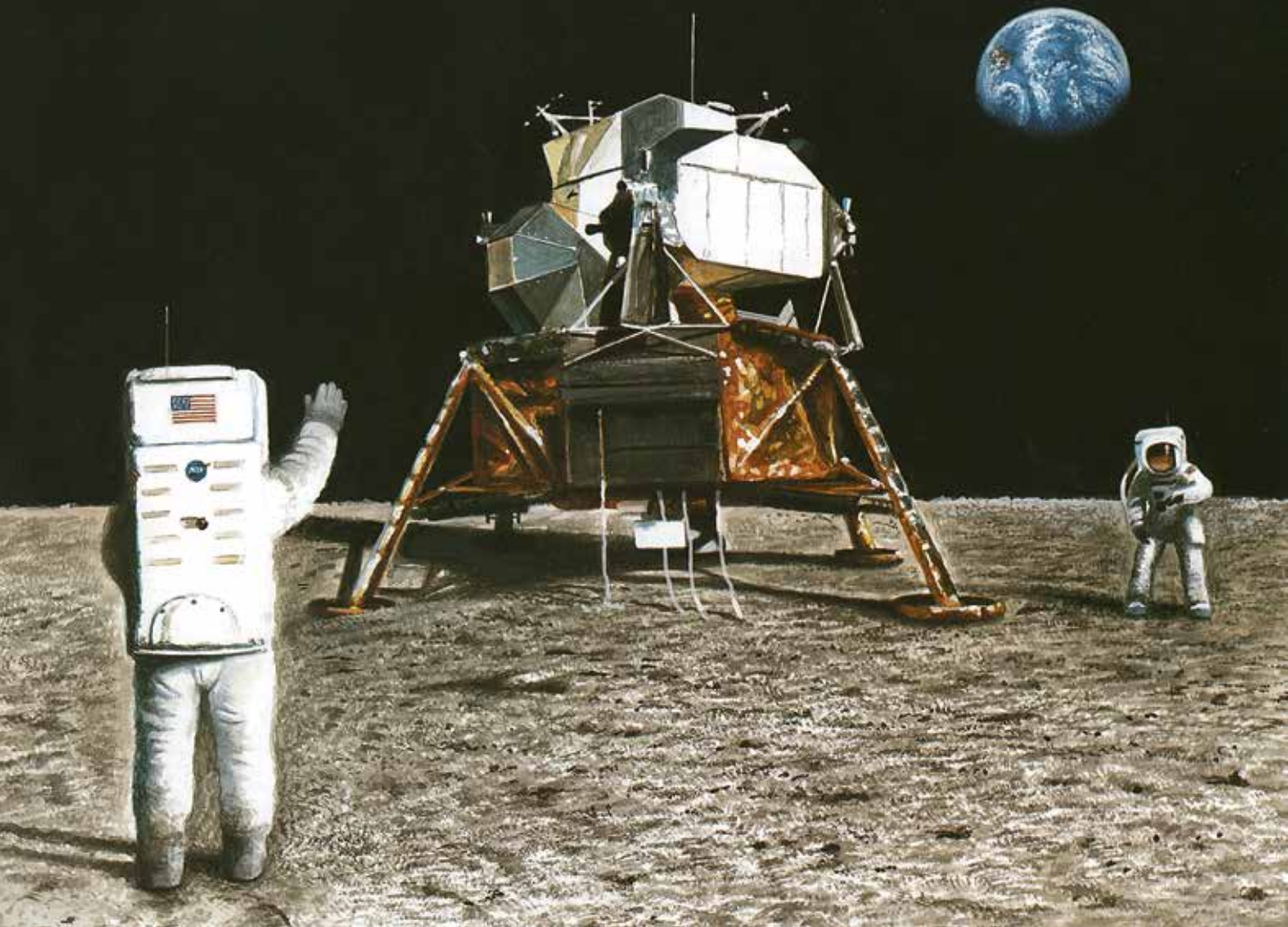
Wrapped in sleeping bags, we floated above the couches, comfortably weightless. *Apollo 11* was our home, a tiny bubble of air and warmth speeding through the icy cold of space.



Four days after launch, we were in orbit around the moon. *Apollo 11* separated into two parts: *Columbia*, where Mike would wait in orbit, and the *Eagle*, the lander. The *Eagle* was powerful enough to take Neil and me down to the moon's surface and back up to *Columbia*. But its walls were so thin, I could have punched a pencil through them if I had tried.

The computer had chosen a spot for the *Eagle* to land. But through the window we could see that it was too rocky. Neil took control. I called out to let him know how far we were from the ground. When we landed, we had used up almost all our fuel with only 20 seconds left to spare.





But we had made it. We were safely on the surface of the moon.

Neil and I put on our spacesuits. Neil climbed out first. Everyone listening back on Earth heard his first words: “That’s one small step for . . . man, one giant leap for mankind.”

I climbed down the ladder and joined Neil. A flat landscape of rocks and craters stretched in all directions. Everything was gray or white.



The shadows and the sky above were as black as the blackest velvet I had ever seen. I could see Earth, our home, in the sky overhead.

I took out the American flag from the compartment where it was stored. Neil and I could force the pole only a few inches into the moon's soil. I worried that the flag would sag or tip. But when we took our hands away, it stood straight.

Neil and I stayed only a few hours on the moon, but we left behind a plaque with the simple words:

**HERE MEN FROM THE PLANET EARTH
FIRST SET FOOT UPON THE MOON
JULY 1969, A.D.
WE CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND**

