

# First Man to Walk on the Moon

## Neil Armstrong

### 1930 – 2012

*I believe that the Good Lord gave us a finite number of heartbeats and I'm damned if I'm going to use up mine running up and down a street.*



Neil Armstrong was born in Wapakoneta, Ohio, on August 5, 1930. After serving in the Korean War and then finishing college, he joined the organization that would become NASA. He joined the astronaut program in 1962 and was command pilot for his first mission, Gemini VIII, in 1966. He was spacecraft commander for Apollo 11, the first manned lunar mission, and the first man to walk on the moon. He died in 2012.

- OCCUPATION: Astronaut, [Explorer](#), [Pilot](#)
- BIRTH DATE: August, [1930](#)
- DEATH DATE: August, [2012](#)
- EDUCATION: Purdue University, University of Cincinnati

## MILITARY SERVICE

Astronaut Neil Armstrong developed a fascination with flight at an early age and earned his student pilot's license when he was 16. In 1947, Armstrong began his studies in aeronautical engineering at Purdue University on a U.S. Navy scholarship.



His studies, however, were interrupted in 1949 when he was called to serve in the Korean War. A U.S. Navy pilot, Armstrong flew 78 combat missions during this military conflict. He left the service in 1952, and returned to college. A few years later, Armstrong joined the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), which later became the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). For this government agency he worked in a number of different capacities, including serving as a test pilot and an engineer. He tested many high-speed aircraft, including the X-15, which could reach a top speed of 4,000 miles per hour.

## ASTRONAUT PROGRAM

In his personal life, Armstrong started to settle down. He married Janet Shearon on January 28, 1956. The couple soon added to their family. Son Eric arrived in 1957, followed daughter Karen in 1959. Sadly, Karen died of complications related to an inoperable brain tumor in January 1962. The following year, the Armstrongs welcomed their third child, son Mark.

That same year, Armstrong joined the astronaut program. He and his family moved to Houston, Texas, and Armstrong served as the command pilot for his first mission, Gemini VIII. He and fellow astronaut David Scott were launched into the earth's orbit on March 16, 1966. While in orbit, they were able to briefly dock their space capsule with the Gemini Agena target vehicle. This was the first time two vehicles had successfully docked in space. During this maneuver, however, they experienced some problems and had to cut their mission short. They landed in the Pacific Ocean nearly 11 hours after the mission's start, and were later rescued by the U.S.S. Mason.

## MOON LANDING

Armstrong faced an even bigger challenge in 1969. Along with Michael Collins and Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin, he was part of NASA's first manned mission to the moon. The trio were launched into space on July 16, 1969. Serving as the mission's commander, Armstrong piloted the Lunar Module to the moon's surface on July 20, 1969, with Buzz Aldrin aboard. Collins remained on the Command Module.



At 10:56 PM, Armstrong exited the Lunar Module. He said, "**That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind,**" as he made his **famous first step on the moon.** For about two and a half hours, Armstrong and Aldrin collected samples and conducted experiments. They also took photographs, including their own footprints.

Returning on July 24, 1969, the Apollo 11 craft came down in the Pacific Ocean west of Hawaii. The crew and the craft were picked up by the U.S.S. Hornet, and the three astronauts were put into quarantine for three weeks.

Before long, the three Apollo 11 astronauts were given a warm welcome home. Crowds lined the streets of New York City to cheer on the famous heroes who were honored in a ticker-tape parade. Armstrong received numerous awards for his efforts, including the Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Space Medal of Honor.

## LATER CONTRIBUTIONS

Armstrong remained with NASA, serving as deputy associate administrator for aeronautics until 1971. After leaving NASA, he joined the faculty of the University of Cincinnati as a professor of aerospace engineering. Armstrong remained at the university for eight years. Staying active in his field, he served as the chairman of Computing Technologies for Aviation, Inc., from 1982 to 1992.

Helping out at a difficult time, Armstrong served as vice chairman of the Presidential Commission on the space shuttle Challenger accident in 1986. The commission investigated the explosion of the Challenger on January 28, 1986, which took the lives of its crew, including school teacher [Christa McAuliffe](#).

## DEATH & LEGACY

Despite being one of the most [famous astronauts](#) in history, Armstrong largely shied away from the public eye. He gave a rare interview to the news program *60 Minutes* in 2006. He described the moon to interviewer [Ed Bradley](#), saying "It's a brilliant surface in that sunlight. The horizon seems quite close to you because the curvature is so much more pronounced than here on earth. It's an interesting place to be. I recommend it." That same year, his authorized biography came out. *First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong* was written by James R. Hansen, who conducted interviews with Armstrong, his family, and his friends and associates.

Even in his final years, Armstrong remained committed to space exploration. The press-shy astronaut returned to the spotlight in 2010 to express his concerns over changes made to the U.S. space program. He testified in Congress against President [Barack Obama](#)'s decision to cancel the Constellation program, which included another mission to the moon. Obama also sought to encourage private companies to get involved in the space travel business and to move forward with more unmanned space missions.

Taking this new decision, Armstrong said, it would cost the United States its leadership position in space exploration. "America is respected for its contributions it has made in learning to sail on this new ocean. If the leadership we have acquired through our investment is simply allowed to fade away, other nations will surely step in where we have faltered. I do not believe that would be in our best interests," he told Congress, according to a report on *NewsHour*.

Armstrong underwent a heart bypass operation in August 2012. A few weeks later, on August 25, 2012, Neil Armstrong died of "complications resulting from cardiovascular procedures" at the age of

82. He is survived by his second wife Carol in Indian Hill, Ohio, and his two sons from his first marriage. He and his first wife divorced in 1994.

Neil Armstrong was buried at sea Sept 14, 2012.

Shortly after his death, his family released a statement: "For those who may ask what they can do to honor Neil, we have a simple request. Honor his example of service, accomplishment and modesty, and the next time you walk outside on a clear night and see the moon smiling down at you, think of Neil Armstrong."



## **First step toward the moon**

### **Rivers gave flight training to future man on the moon**

Like they say, behind every great American astronaut is a Navy officer teaching him how to do it.

With the passing last week of Neil Armstrong, who died at age 82 with the eternal honor of being the first person to walk on the moon, America lost a hero whose cosmos-sized “giant leap for mankind” on July 20, 1969 was toasted in every corner of the globe.

The military training that led to Armstrong’s taking this “small step for a man” began 20 years earlier, in the two-man cockpit of a single-engine, 550-horsepower, all-metal SNJ Navy training aircraft, under the direction of Lee Rivers, now a retired lieutenant commander living in Apalachicola with his wife, Laurie.

A former Clerk of Courts who was beloved in his second career as a social studies teacher at Apalachicola High School, Rivers is known by locals as “Pal.” But in the Navy, they knew him as “Chipper,” a term for a talkative sort fond of telling you how to do it, down to the smallest details.

“It’s slang for somebody who can’t keep their mouth shut,” said Rivers.

Armstrong already had four years of flying experience, having earned his pilots license on his 16th birthday back in Wapakoneta, Ohio, when he was called to the Pensacola Naval Air Station in Florida in 1949 midway through studying for a degree in aeronautics engineering at Purdue University.

But after acing pre-flight training, finishing in the top 10 percent of his class, Armstrong learned under Rivers’ tutelage in flight school at Whiting Field that knowing how to fly a small planes above the corn fields of northwest Ohio only went so far.

“He was one of the sharpest people I’ve ever been around but I had all kind of trouble with him,” recalled Rivers this week. “I couldn’t get him to make a tight turn.

“He’d been flying these little tiny light planes, and there you fly down with power on and land, and then take your power off and coast, lowering your tail,” he said.

But in the Navy, being trained to land on an aircraft carrier meant undoing old habits. And they died hard.

“In the Navy, you cocked up in the three-point attitude and flew a few knots above stalling speed, and cut power just before you touch down. You got to stall, so your tail hook will catch the wire on the carrier,” said Rivers. “You approached about 300 feet, about 100 feet above the carrier deck, and made a 180 degree turn and came right up to the stern, cut power and came in and landed, and hoped your hook would catch one.

“Neil grew up learning how to fly a plane the traditional way,” he said. “There is a traditional way and there’s a right way in the Navy. And that’s the Navy way.”

The initial Stage A of flight training consisted of 20 “hops” in the SNJ, the first 18 of which were dual instruction flights. Armstrong’s first “hop” was on July 6, 1949, and over the next month, Rivers, who sat in the front seat, recorded Armstrong’s progress. (See sidebar)

“He was a very good instructor,” whose cockpit coaching was “quite authoritarian, but fun loving,” Armstrong told author, James R. Hansen, in the 2005 authorized biography “First Man: the Life of Neil A. Armstrong.”

While another instructor, J.W. McNeil, gave Armstrong “unsatisfactory” for his approaches, and “below average” ratings for taxiing, stalls, landing, emergencies and headwork, the future Korean War pilot was spared being forced into additional instruction or a re-exam.

By Aug. 30, on the 18th hop, Armstrong had addressed his deficiencies, and while Rivers graded him below average in transition, landing pattern and approaches, he judged him “safe for solo.” On Sept. 7, Armstrong made his first Navy solo without an instructor.

“Afterward, a couple of Neil’s mates observed Navy tradition by cutting off the lower half of his tie,” wrote Hansen. “And Neil gave Chipper Rivers a bottle of his favorite whiskey.”

Hansen’s interviews with Armstrong’s classmates showed that they regarded the future astronaut (who at age 20 was the youngest member of the squadron) as a promising aviator.

“He was confident, but not cocky,” David Stephenson told the biographer.

“Neil had a head start on most of us by virtue of his experience as a private pilot,” said Bruce Clingan. “Beyond that, I think he had a tremendous natural talent. If it involved flying, he was very good at it.”

Two years after graduation, Armstrong would go on to fly 78 combat missions in Korea in the cockpit of a F9F Panther, one of the Navy’s first successful carrier-based jet fighters.

Rivers, now 88, continued on to a distinguished career in the Navy, including serving as assistant chief of naval intelligence for a 12-man Navy staff attached to the 8th Army in Korea. before retiring for a second career as a school teacher in Apalachicola.

He was at the couple’s cottage at Indian Pass on that famous day in July 1969, watching the sketchy reception on a black-and-white television.

“He was still coaching him, still chipping all the way through,” recalls Rivers’ wife, Laurie.

Rivers wrote Armstrong a letter of congratulations and on Sept, 25, 1969, he received a hand signed thank you letter, on NASA stationery, from his former student.

“I certainly appreciate your very kind words concerning our recent adventure,” wrote Armstrong. “It certainly was a satisfying experience for us and we are very encouraged by the reception it has been given around the world.”

Rivers said he was not at all surprised by Armstrong’s self-effacing tone in describing his role in one of mankind’s most significant achievements.

“He was perhaps the most reserved person I’ve ever known,” said Rivers.

“I remember the days at Whiting Field very well and the excellent beginning that you provided me,” Armstrong went on to write, before referring to “other instructors of that vintage” who he had occasion to run across in his current duties.