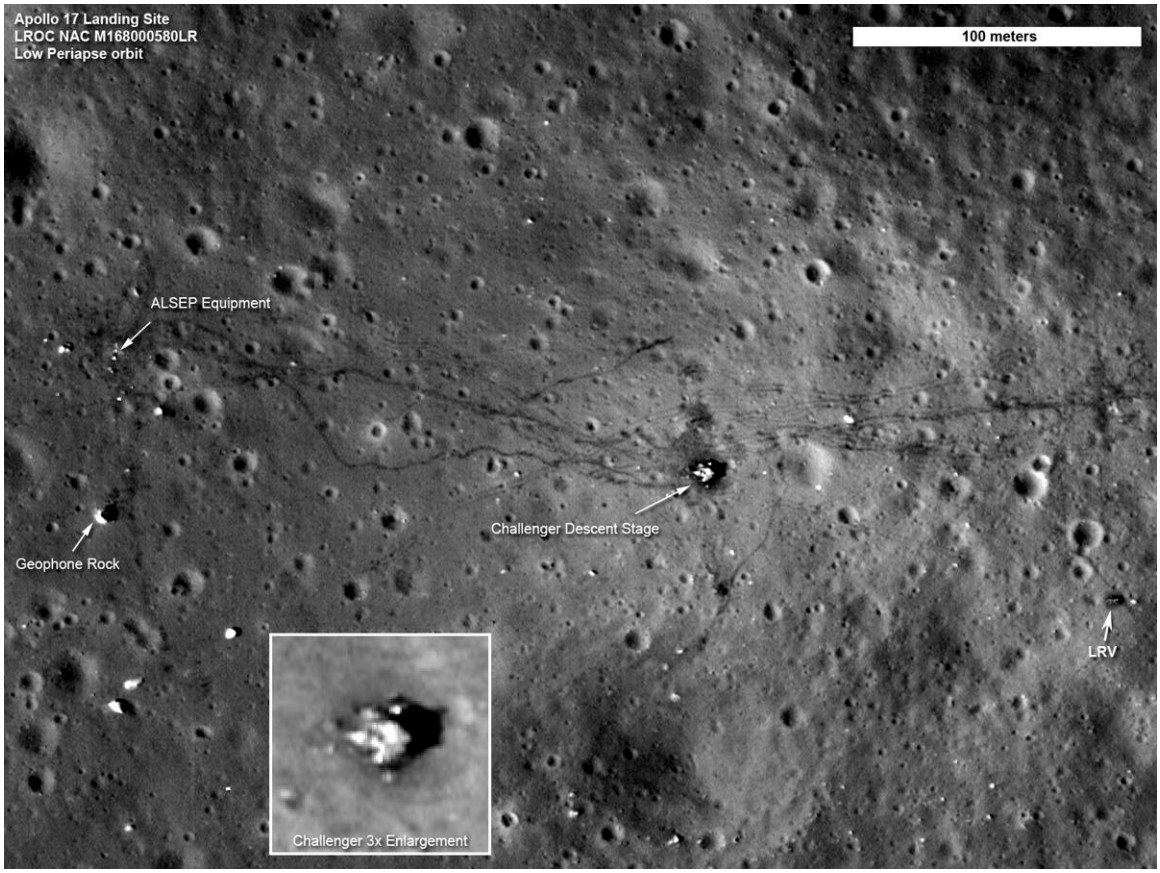
The Apollo 17 Launch

An Eyewitness Account

William F. Mellberg



Frontispiece: The Apollo 17 landing site in the Valley of Taurus-Littrow as photographed on a low periapsis pass by the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter narrow angle camera (photos released on the LROC website on September 6, 2011). The activities of Jack Schmitt and Gene Cernan are quite evident in the foot and rover (LRV) tracks left behind and still visible after 40 years! Of interest is the fact that Neil Armstrong covered a maximum distance of ca. 50 m from the Apollo 11 Lunar Module (LM) on his walk out to Little West Crater during the first mission in 1969. Three years later on this last mission to the Moon, Jack Schmitt carried the heavy ALSEP package ca. 225 m from the LM, 4.5 times further! The total duration outside of the LM was 2 hrs 31 min for the Apollo 11 crew, but it was 22 hrs 04 min for the Apollo 17 crew. The total lunar surface stay times were 21.6 hrs for Apollo 11 and 75 hrs for Apollo 17. (NASA-LROC photo).

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Harrison ("Jack") Schmitt and I first crossed paths a few hours before he began his journey to the Moon. Although Dr. Schmitt most likely forgot our 'meeting' within seconds after it occurred (he had more important things on his mind at that moment), I will never forget seeing him and his crewmates as they headed toward Launch Complex 39 where their giant Saturn V Moon Rocket was poised for lift-off. It was a brief rendezvous that made the spectacular nighttime launch of Apollo 17 all the more exciting for a 20-year old space enthusiast and University of Illinois student (that would be me). I will tell you more about our chance encounter later. But first, here is a little background on what brought me to the Kennedy Space Center on the evening of December 6, 1972.

Boyhood Memories

My earliest recollection of the Moon goes back to my boyhood in Chicago. I remember riding along Lake Shore Drive with my family one fine autumn evening as we watched a magnificent Full Moon rising over Lake Michigan. My Grandfather asked me if I could see the "man in the Moon." I can't remember if I did. But I do recall my Father (Frank Mellberg) saying, "Some day there'll be a *real* man on the Moon." That episode took place just a few days after Sputnik-1 was launched in October 1957. I was five years old.

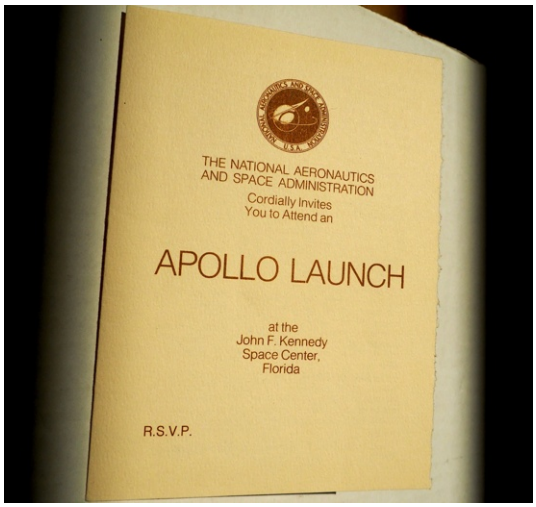
Fast forward five years to 1962. By then I had read Jules Verne's visionary novel "***From the Earth to the Moon***." I had seen George Pal's classic sci-fi film "***Destination Moon***." I had watched Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom, John Glenn and Scott Carpenter

Frank Mellberg with a model of the Surveyor spacecraft he built. At right is an operational breadboard version of the Surveyor camera zoom lens which he designed.

launched into space. And I had heard President Kennedy boldly challenge America to send men to the Moon as the lofty goal of the Apollo Program. All of which turned me into a space aficionado at an early age. My interest in the Moon was further piqued that year by my Father's appointment as the project manager responsible for the design and development of the cameras that would fly aboard the unmanned Surveyor lunar landers. Those cameras were produced at the Bell & Howell Company in Lincolnwood, Illinois (a Chicago suburb). The Surveyor series preceded the Apollo astronauts to the lunar surface— proving that it was possible for men to land on the Moon. My parents gave me a backyard telescope for my 11th birthday the following year (1963). Peering through the eyepiece, I could see the Moon's mountains and craters in great detail, as well as viewing Jupiter's moons, Saturn's rings, the phases of Venus and ice caps on Mars. It was an exciting time for a youngster to be learning about astronomy!

As NASA reached for the Moon throughout the 1960s, my bedroom became a 'mini' space museum with model rockets and spacecraft lining my shelves, and colorful posters and photographs adorning my walls. The posters and photographs were sent to me by Public Affairs Officers (PAOs) at the Kennedy Space Center, the Marshall Space Flight Center, the Manned Spacecraft Center (now the Johnson Space Center) and NASA Headquarters in Washington. William J. O'Donnell was a PAO at NASA Headquarters. Bill was especially helpful— sending not only pictures, but also books and press kits, which described America's space program in great detail. As I was finishing the 7th Grade in June 1965, I was chosen to represent my school at a program for Chicago area students when the Gemini 4 astronauts came to town shortly after their remarkable flight. I was thrilled to meet Jim McDivitt and Ed White. I had no way of knowing that White, who had just become the first American to walk in space, would lose his life less than two years later in the Apollo 1 fire. I was glued to our family television for each of the space missions during that era— including Surveyor I's successful touchdown on the Moon in June 1966, and Apollo 11's historic landing in July 1969.

The author at age 14, holding a Gemini spacecraft model.



(*Left*): The Apollo 17 badge/pass. (*Right*): The formal 'VIP' invitation to attend the launch of Apollo 17.

Moon Rockets

In February 1970, I joined my parents for a short trip to Florida, the highlight of which (for me, at least) was a visit to Cape Canaveral where we toured the towering Vehicle Assembly Building (VAB) (see back cover) and Launch Complex 39 at the Kennedy Space Center. Our tour bus took us past Pad A where Apollo 13 was being prepared for its mission. How I wished I could have been there to see that lift-off two months later. But I was finishing my last semester in high school when Jim Lovell, Jack Swigert and Fred Haise began their lunar odyssey.

Two years later, I read about the upcoming Apollo 17 mission, which was destined to become the last Apollo voyage to the Moon. It was going to be a night launch— a 'first' for the Apollo Program. My Father told me that if I could get a pair of passes from NASA, he would pay for a trip to Florida. I was determined to see the "last flight out." So I wrote a letter to Bill O'Donnell, describing my Dad's generous offer. A short time later, Bill sent us two 'VIP' invitations. (For the record, there were more than 40,000 'VIPs' at the Kennedy Space Center that night.) Dad arranged for our transportation and lodging, and I arranged to take a day off from my classes at Urbana-Champaign. My Astronomy 101 professor was more than happy to give me the time off. "I wish I could join you!" he exclaimed.

Following my last class on Tuesday, December 5th, I took a late afternoon flight (an Ozark Air Lines FH-227B) from Champaign to Chicago. That evening, I saw my friend Bob James who let me borrow his 250mm telephoto lens for my camera, along with his unipod (a one-legged version of a tripod which is easier to carry, but not as steady as its three-legged cousin). NASA had already sent me a fact sheet with recommended camera settings and exposure times for photographing the night launch— describing it as "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for camera buffs." The space agency had also mailed instructions telling us where to go when we got to the Kennedy Space Center.

Chicago was bracing for record cold temperatures — single digits — when my Dad and I departed from O'Hare International Airport the next morning (Wednesday, Decem-

ber 6th) aboard a Delta Airlines DC-9. It was in the low 80s when we stepped off the plane at Orlando. We arrived early that afternoon and decided to drive straight to the Cape as we heard the roads were already becoming filled with "bird watchers" heading toward the coast to see the night launch. If the weather cooperated, the flames from the Saturn V's engines were supposed to be visible for hundreds of miles along the eastern seaboard as Apollo 17 soared into space. Hundreds of thousands of people — perhaps as many as one million — were descending on the Cape to get a closer look.

Kennedy Space Center (December 6, 1972)

Dad and I arrived at the Kennedy Space Center around 3:00 p.m. and crossed the NASA Causeway to Merritt Island where we were directed to the Visitor Information Center. Propellants were being pumped into the Saturn V by that time, and the Apollo 17 crew (Gene Cernan, Ron Evans and Jack Schmitt) were going through their final preparations for the mission. They would also be enjoying the traditional crew meal that afternoon – something my Dad and I would miss because of our decision to avoid the traffic by arriving early. We had bought some sandwiches along the way, and they would have to fill our stomachs until breakfast in Orlando the following morning. But food wasn't foremost in our minds as the excitement surrounding the upcoming events began to grow. We parked our rental car and checked-in at the Visitor Information Center (several miles south of the Vehicle Assembly Building) where we picked up our credentials— yellow badges printed with the Apollo 17 mission patch which identified us as official guests.

Bill and Frank Mellberg at the Kennedy Space Center on the father-son odyssey of a lifetime.

Hundreds of buses were waiting in an adjoining parking lot to transport tens of thousands of 'VIPs' to the reviewing stands (open air bleachers) on the north side of the VAB. They would start leaving around 5:30 p.m., and we decided to catch one of the early buses in order to stake out a good spot for taking photographs. Meanwhile, we could look at the indoor exhibits and outdoor displays at the Visitor Information Center, as well as browsing through the gift shop. (The Visitor Information Center in 1972 was nothing like the current facility. It was relatively small and rather basic.) The temperatures were expected to be in the low 70s all evening, so we left our winter coats in the car and enjoyed the warm Florida weather. But as the late afternoon Sun was sinking in the west, we became somewhat concerned about the arrival of a few dark clouds overhead and the sight of lightning in the distance to the northeast. The official forecast called for relatively clear skies by launch time— which was scheduled for 9:53 p.m.

Inside the gift shop, I saw dozens of books, models and souvenirs that I wanted to buy. Apart from a shortage of money (I was a poor college student), there was the problem of having to carry anything that I might have purchased for the rest of the evening, as we could not return to our car until after the launch. Since I was already carrying my camera, extra film, a heavy telephoto lens and a unipod, I did not buy much more than a few postcards. But while I was browsing through some books, I accidentally stepped backward into a familiar figure. "Dr. von Braun!" I exclaimed as I turned around and came face-to-face with Wernher von Braun, the world-famous rocket engineer and 'father' of the Saturn V Moon Rocket. "I'm sorry," I said— basically speechless. Von Braun smiled broadly, made some joke to ease my embarrassment and wished me a good evening. "It should be quite a sight when that Saturn V lights up the sky." My brush with greatness passed quickly. But moments later, I was rubbing elbows with legendary CBS News anchorman Walter Cronkite as I walked down another aisle. He smiled at me, and I nodded at him. The Visitor Information Center was filled with famous people, all of whom were just as excited as we were about the upcoming launch!

Wernher von Braun and his Saturn V Moon rocket. (NASA MSFC photo)

Close Encounter with the Apollo 17 Crew

As my Dad and I were walking around the gift shop, the Apollo 17 crew was suiting up (donning their spacesuits) just a few miles away. We boarded our bus around 5:45 p.m.— twenty minutes after sunset. A thin, crescent Moon was hanging low in the western sky. It was a very thought-provoking sight that particular evening. Twilight was fading fast, and the sky in the east was already dark. Although we did not know it as we were taking our seats in the bus, Cernan, Evans and Schmitt were boarding their Crew Transfer Van outside of the Manned Spacecraft Operations Building at the same time. Both vehicles were soon heading north along the Kennedy Parkway toward the sprawling Moonport.

As we reached the intersection with the Saturn Causeway near the VAB, our bus came to an abrupt stop. To our right, I caught my first glimpse of the Saturn V Moon Rocket in the distance— bathed in searchlights and pointed toward the heavens. Directly behind us was a rather unusual sight. I saw a single, overhead light coming toward the bus. I soon realized that it was a helicopter pointing a searchlight on the roadway ahead of the Crew Transfer Van— a safety and security precaution. A few moments later, the van stopped alongside our bus, and we could see Cernan, Evans and Schmitt sitting inside— dressed in white spacesuits topped off by clear 'fishbowl' helmets. They were no more than ten feet away from us. We waved at them, and they waved at us. My Dad and I

A space-suited Gene Cernan (far right) in his 'fishbowl' helmet awaits his crewmates, Ron Evans saying goodbye to his wife, followed by Jack Schmitt behind him shortly before the Crew Transfer Van at right encountered the author on the Kennedy Parkway. (NASA photo 72 HC-881)

had never expected to see the Apollo 17 crew that night. But there they were … right next to us. We could almost reach out and shake hands. Moments later, their van turned in front of our bus and drove away toward Pad A. As we watched them heading down the Saturn Causeway, I turned to my Dad and said, "Just think. Those guys are going to the Moon!" Our brief encounter with the astronauts was an experience I will never forget—even if none of them ever remembered it.

We resumed our own ride and arrived at the massive Vehicle Assembly Building around 6:30 p.m.— about the same time the crew arrived at Pad 39-A. They would soon be riding an elevator up to the 320-foot level of the 400-foot Launch Umbilical Tower. From there, they would walk across Swing Arm (Service Arm) Number 9 to the White Room – the small, enclosed space at the end of the arm from which they climbed into their seats aboard the Apollo spacecraft. Dad and I weren't so sure where we would be sitting for the launch. But if the lift-off was on time, we had a three-hour wait ahead of us.

The Viewing Site

The 52-story Vehicle Assembly Building dominates the Kennedy Space Center. There are four high bays in the main structure, each of which could accommodate a Saturn V Moon Rocket on a Mobile Launcher (although only three Mobile Launchers were built). Our bus driver told us that you could fit four United Nations buildings into the VAB—

one in each of the high bays. He parked on the north side of the VAB and instructed us to remember the number of the bus (which I've long since forgotten) and its location. "You'll be taking the same bus back to the Visitor Information Center about an hour after the launch. I'll look for you then." Why we had to take the same bus, I don't know. But NASA seemed to have everything very well organized … so I didn't ask!

There were already hundreds of people — perhaps thousands — milling around the viewing site adjacent to the VAB. Some had found seats in the bleachers, although those seats seemed to be reserved for genuine VIPs. We overheard one woman talking about the celebrities she had seen and met. John Wayne, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Johnny Carson, Dinah Shore, Eva Gabor and Alabama Governor George Wallace were just some of the people she mentioned; and she had their autographs to prove it. But my Dad and I weren't interested in meeting movie stars or politicians. We were there to see and hear a Saturn V!

We were also determined to get as close as possible to Pad A in order to get the best view of the launch. So we started walking east toward Apollo 17 and the ocean. Many other people had parked themselves in a grassy area near the front (east side) of the VAB. We just kept walking past them until the crowd thinned out and a rope line stopped us from going any farther. We sat down at a spot adjacent to the northeast curve of the Crawlerway which carried the Moon Rockets and their Mobile Launchers from the rear bays of the VAB to Pad A and Pad B – the same spot where the Apollo 17 crew and the news media had watched the roll-out of their Saturn V (SA-512) three months earlier. Someone standing nearby said we were exactly three miles from the launch vehicle. We took his word for it. As we made ourselves comfortable on the grass (too bad we didn't bring a couple of blankets from our plane), we took our first real look at the 36-story Saturn V looming in the distance.

(*Top of page*): My first photo of the Saturn V. (*Above*): A telephoto view.

An Amazing Sight

It was a scene right out of a science fiction film … a giant, gleaming, white rocket perched beside an even taller, bright red launch umbilical tower— both flooded in spotlights. The Moon Rocket looked like an island of light in a sea of darkness. Super cold gaseous propellants were being vented from inside

During our visit before the launch, Apollo 10 Commander Tom Stafford revealed that he had been chosen to command the Apollo-Soyuz mission in 1975. (NASA photo)

the pressurized tanks— mixing with warm, humid air outside to produce billowing wisps of white 'smoke' streaming from the vehicle. The Saturn V had the appearance of a living, breathing machine. We could clearly see the White Room still connected to the Command Module, and the thin, pointer-like Launch Escape System perched atop the spacecraft. Walt Disney could not have produced a more impressive picture. The one thought that kept going through my mind was that we were about to witness three men going to the Moon. It seemed incredible. It was all the more incredible because we were seeing their rocket with our own eyes— a 36-story skyscraper that would soon be soaring into the heavens above us.

Adding to the visual impact was the sound of the NASA public address system and the voice of Charles ("Chuck") Hollinshead, one of the PAOs at the Kennedy Space Center. Speakers were set up around the viewing area, and we could hear Hollinshead's running account of the countdown procedures. Moreover, we were seated next to a couple from Houston who happened to be Astronaut Tom Stafford's neighbors. The woman told us that General Stafford would be stopping by for a visit some time during the evening. We did not have to wait very long as Stafford and John Young (back-up commander for Apollo 17) found their friends and said "hello" to my Dad and me.

Stafford had flown around the Moon as commander of Apollo 10 (with Young and Cernan), and Young had walked on the Moon as commander of Apollo 16. I wanted to ask them about their experiences, but Dad and I just listened politely as Stafford talked with his friends. He had just been named as the U.S. commander of the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project (the first joint Soviet-American space mission). The news had not been announced publicly, and we were asked to keep it to ourselves. Captain Young upheld his reputation as a man of few words. I don't recall him saying anything other than "hello." They spent about ten minutes with us before excusing themselves and heading back toward the VAB. But their visit was another very memorable — and very pleasant — part of the evening.

We passed the time for the next two hours listening to the updates on the public address system, and talking with our newfound friends from Houston. They had witnessed several previous launches, including Apollo 10, and gave us some idea of what to expect. "The sound won't reach us for close to ten seconds. The rocket will just about be clearing the tower when it hits. So those first few seconds are a little strange because you see lots of action, but you don't hear anything. When the sound does reach us, you'll feel it, as well as hear it. The ground shakes and the VAB rattles." Needless to say, I was anxious for the minutes to pass and the launch to begin.

Chuck Hollinshead continued his updates …

This is Apollo Saturn Launch Control. We're at T-minus 40 minutes, 51 seconds and counting. Swing arm number 9 just retracted a few minutes ago, and, as it retracted, the astronaut crew aboard the vehicle could feel it moving away from the spacecraft.

And we could see it! The time started to pass more quickly now. You could feel the excitement in the air as the countdown proceeded. I checked my camera settings and looked through the telephoto lens to make sure it was focused. The telephoto lens also enabled us to take a closer look at Pad A and the Moon Rocket throughout the evening. I could make out the bold red letters 'USA' on the first stage, and 'United States' on the second stage. What a view!

Heart Stopper

This is Apollo Launch Control. All indications are we are GO for launch as we approach the 2 minute 30 second mark.

Wow! I could feel my heart racing as we neared the launch. This was really exciting! As we reached the T-minus 30 seconds mark, I saw a brief flash of light at the base of the rocket, followed by this heartbreaking announcement from Chuck Hollinshead:

T-minus 30 seconds. We have a cutoff. We have a cutoff at T-minus 30 seconds. We are standing by at T-minus 30 second mark. We'll bring word to you just as soon as we get it. We have a cutoff at T-minus 30 seconds. T-minus 30 seconds and holding. This is Kennedy Launch Control.

Oh, no! Would the launch be scrubbed? Was our trip in vain? Dad and I had to be back in Illinois the next day, and there was no way we could return to Florida if the launch was rescheduled. Drat! We waited in stunned silence as the minutes ticked by.

This is Apollo Saturn Launch Control. We're at T-minus 30 seconds and continuing our hold. The problem was with the terminal countdown sequencer, which failed to give the command to pressurize the third stage LOX tank … The plan now is to recycle to the T-minus 22 minute mark in the countdown. This recycling procedure will take an additional 35 to 40 minutes. This still puts us well within our launch window. While we're recycling, we'll continue to review the data to determine just what the problem is and whether or not we can proceed from the T-minus 22 minute mark for a launch later in the window.

Hope was alive. A short time later, Hollinshead made this announcement:

This is Apollo Saturn Launch Control. We're continuing to stand by at the T-minus 22 minute mark. We've been given the word here in the firing room now that the count will be resumed at 11:00 p.m. at T-minus 22 minutes.

Finally, just before 11:00 p.m. came this announcement:

This is Apollo Saturn Launch Control. We're at T-minus 21 minutes 10 seconds and counting.

Hooray! There would be a built-in hold at the T-minus 8 minute mark, and the launch wouldn't actually take place until 12:33AM (December 7). But six hours after we had 'parked' ourselves alongside the Crawlerway, we would finally see Apollo 17 lift off.

Final Countdown

This is Apollo Saturn Launch Control, we are now resuming the count ... T minus 7 minutes 54 seconds and counting.

I checked my camera gear again. As I peered through the telephoto lens at the spacecraft, I was wondering what the crew was thinking. Were they as excited as I was? Or were they too busy checking their own equipment in the final minutes before launch? My guess was that while I was focusing on their Moon Rocket, they were focusing on their mission. Meanwhile, Dad and I were both smiling as we anticipated the launch. Our excitement increased as the countdown reached the final three minutes. This YouTube video provides the NASA TV feed from that time, and it provides a view nearly identical to the one we had …

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmwc8E9fCLI

Now approaching the half-minute mark. T-minus 30 seconds and continuing on now. Continuing on at the T-minus 26 second mark. T-minus 25. We'll get a final guidance release at the T-minus 17 second mark. T-minus 17, final guidance release. We'll expect engine ignition at 8.9 seconds.

I had my finger on the shutter as I prepared to shoot pictures of the launch. In my excitement, I'm afraid I wasn't holding the camera as steady as a rock— even with the help of a unipod. Thus, my pictures were a little blurred. But they still offer cherished memories of one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

10 … 9 … 8 … 7 … Ignition sequence started. All engines are started.

There was a collective and audible gasp from the crowd as the powerful F-1 engines of the rocket's first stage suddenly came to life with a blinding light that took one's breath away. It was an incredible sight.

(a) Apollo 17 Ignition

(b) Apollo 17 Lift-off

(c) Apollo 17 Sunrise

(d) Apollo 17 S-IC Engine Cut-off

Lift-off

We have ignition. 2 … 1 … Zero. We have a liftoff. We have a liftoff, and it's lighting up the area. It's just like daylight here at Kennedy Space Center as the Saturn V is moving off the pad. It has now cleared the tower.

The sound finally hit us as the vehicle cleared the tower. First, there was a "boom." That was the noise from ignition. Then there was a rumble, not a roar, as the Saturn V slowly rose from the pad amidst clouds of steam and smoke produced by the water used to cool the pad as it was blasted by the heat of the engines. I thought I could feel that heat. I certainly felt the ground shaking. And as Tom Stafford's neighbor had told us, we could hear the VAB rattling behind us as the sound bounced off its walls.

As the Moon Rocket picked up speed and altitude, the sky grew even brighter as the light from the engines rose above us like the Sun— a long tongue of flame trailing behind it. What a light and sound show! At the 1-minute mark, the sky was becoming dark again as the Saturn V flew higher and farther away. It now looked more like a comet with its long, bright tail. We could also hear the crew over the loudspeakers. "*One-thirty and we*

are go," Gene Cernan reported from the spacecraft. When the first stage engines shut down after two and one-half minutes, we could see the nozzles glowing bright red and still trailing smoke. Meanwhile, the second stage engines had ignited, and they produced a steady, white light that grew smaller and less intense as the vehicle picked up speed and distance. Soon, all we could see was a 'star' that finally faded out of sight as the Moon Rocket headed out of range.

Wow! I was awestruck. So was my Dad. So was everyone around us. We were all amazed by what we had just witnessed. Directly in front of us, steam was still rising from Pad A. The thunderous sound of the Moon Rocket had been replaced by the noisy chatter of the crowd— recounting what they had just seen. Most people were too busy talking to hear the ongoing coverage from the public address system. Apollo 17 was approaching the coast of Africa as we headed back toward the buses and the ride back to the Visitors Information Center. No one was going away disappointed that night. It was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Dad and I finally reached our rental car about 2:00 a.m. It had been a very long day, and we were looking forward to reaching our hotel in Orlando and getting a little shuteye before our early morning return flight to Chicago. But it soon became apparent that we were facing a massive traffic jam. Hundreds of thousands of people were now leaving the Cape, and we were at the tail end of the long line of cars. Making matters worse, the highway was shrouded in fog. However, the traffic was moving so slowly that it wasn't all that hazardous a situation. We headed toward Orlando, bumper-to-bumper. Through the fog, I spotted what I thought was the Ramada Inn around 5:00 a.m. Dad took the next turn, and sure enough … we had arrived! When we checked in, we asked for a 6:00 a.m. wake up call. "That's an hour from now," the clerk noted. "That's right," my Dad sighed. "But at least we'll have a chance to take a shower and freshen up a bit before catching our flight."

A few hours later, we were on our way to Chicago aboard a Delta Airlines Super DC-8. Seated behind us was the well-known Chicago television news anchorman, John Drury. Like many other people on that flight, he, too, had been at the Cape for the launch. As we flew back to Illinois (and frigid temperatures), the Apollo 17 crew had already left Earth orbit. Cernan, Evans and Schmitt were on their way to the Moon.

Shortly after the Noon hour, I was back on campus in Champaign via another Ozark FH-227B prop-jet. It was hard to believe that I had been watching a giant rocket heading toward the Moon just twelve hours earlier. My life was quickly returning to normal. But for Jack Schmitt and his crewmates, the adventure was just beginning!

One final memory …

During our long drive from the Kennedy Space Center to Orlando, my Dad opined that he would never see humans going to the Moon again in his lifetime.

Bill (*left*) and Frank Mellberg (*center*) with the last American to set foot on the Moon, Harrison H. (Jack) Schmitt (*right*), together again in Chicago in 2009 after 37 years.

"Oh, no," I countered. "We'll go back. It might be another twenty years. But we'll go back. Apollo 17, as the slogan says, was just the end of the beginning."

Retrospective

Forty years later, I regret to say that my Dad was right. After creating the machines and the technology to travel between the Earth and the Moon, the United States has turned its back on exploration. A few years ago, President George W. Bush approved NASA's Constellation Program. Americans would be going back to the Moon starting in 2020. This time, they would stay. NASA was planning to create a permanent outpost on the Moon— in part, to learn how to 'live off the land' by utilizing lunar resources such as water ice at the poles. But shortly after taking office in 2009, President Obama cancelled the Constellation Program— abandoning the Moon yet again. Which made me sad.

It also made me all the more grateful that I was there when the *last* humans flew to the Moon. I'll never forget it.

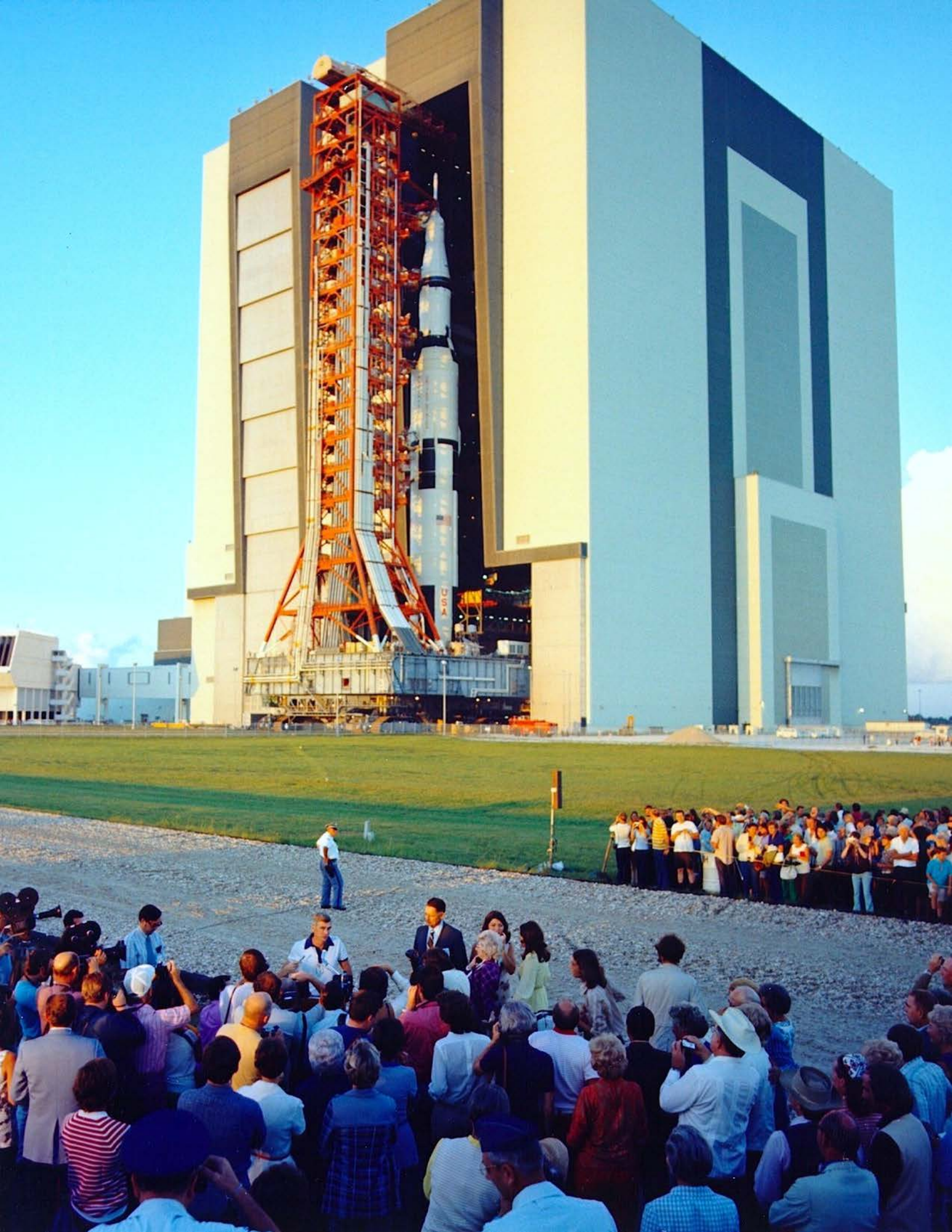
William F. ("Bill") Mellberg is an aerospace author and historian, as well as a former public relations representative for Fokker Aircraft, USA. Mellberg's 1997 book, Moon Missions: Mankind's First Voyages to Another World, *was published in conjunction with the 25th Anniversary of the Apollo 17 mission. He and Dr. Ronald A. Wells are co-editors of Harrison H. Schmitt's website, The Founder's View Today: America's Uncommon Sense …*

http://americasuncommonsense.com/

The author wishes to thank Harrison Schmitt and Ronald Wells for their generous encouragement and support in writing this article. In particular, he would like to thank Dr. Wells for creating the illustrated PDF version.

Endpiece: Gene Cernan (*left*), Ron Evans (*middle*) and Jack Schmitt (*right*) on arrival aboard the U.S.S. Ticonderoga after pick-up from the Apollo 17 Command Module splashdown on December 19, 1972. (NASA photo S72-55937).

Back Cover Caption: Roll-out of Apollo 17 from the Vehicle Assembly Building (VAB) on August 28, 1972, some 3 months prior to launch. Gene Cernan can be seen addressing the crowd at the lower left in the white knit short-sleeve shirt with blue collar. This is the same location where the author and his father viewed the spectacular lift-off on December 7, 1972. (NASA photo KSC-72PC-441).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