

AN APOLLO 7 CELEBRATION

An all-star gathering in Dallas brings long overdue honor to the crew of America's first Apollo spaceflight. BY MARK MAYFIELD



Left: Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the Moon, was among those attending a luncheon honoring astronaut Walter Cunningham, below, and the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 7 mission. Above: Apollo 12 astronaut Alan Bean addresses the crowd of 300. More than 30 scale models of the Saturn 1B served as centerpieces on the luncheon tables. PHOTOS: KATE MACKLEY



For decades now, feature films, documentaries, and books that have taken up the subject of the Apollo spaceflights have usually concentrated on the Moon landings, or on the first lunar voyage, Apollo 8.

Often overlooked in these remembrances has been Apollo 7, the first test flight of the new spacecraft and a nearly flawless mission. But a 40th anniversary event honoring Walter Cunningham and the Apollo 7 crew at the Frontiers of Flight Museum in Dallas was so successful on October 17 that it made up, in a matter of several remarkable hours, for 40 years of neglect.

“Among test pilots that first test flight is the big one—the one when any design flaw and overlooked consequence is likely to reveal itself and cause major problems,” said Apollo 11’s Neil Armstrong. “... All those (later) flights were dependent on the Apollo 7 crew doing their job. And they delivered.”

Armstrong joined fellow Apollo 11 crewmate Buzz Aldrin, Apollo 8’s Bill Anders, Apollo 12’s Alan Bean, NASA Administrator Mike Griffin, former flight director Gene Kranz, U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison and many others in honoring Cunningham and Apollo 7. Their presence, along with video greetings from President Bush, former President George H.W. Bush, former flight director Chris Kraft and others, underscored a growing sentiment for the accomplishments of Cunningham and crewmates Wally Schirra, who died last year, and Donn Eisele, who died in 1987.

The anniversary event included a panel discussion and a luncheon, and was highlighted by the most important moment of all when Griffin honored the Apollo 7 crew with NASA’s Distinguished Service Medal, the space agency’s highest award. The Apollo 7 crew was the only one never to have been honored, due to animosity with mission planners and flight controllers at the time. Schirra, as commander of the flight, had several verbal run-ins with flight controllers during the mission, and he also had a head cold, which contributed to what was described as an irritable attitude. But that was all forgotten on this day in Dallas.

“That was a long time ago,” said Griffin. “It’s a different time now and I think really should not be allowed to obscure the contributions which the Apollo 7 crew made ...”

Griffin called Apollo 7 a “superbly flown” mission and told the crowd of 300 at the luncheon that he had written the text of a certificate accompanying the medals. The text read, in part, “For exemplary performance in meeting

all of the Apollo 7 mission objectives and more on the first manned Apollo mission, paving the way for the first flight to the Moon on Apollo 8 and the first manned lunar landing on Apollo 11.”

While praising Cunningham and his crew, astronauts Bean and Anders also took turns poking fun at Cunningham from the podium. “Now Al Bean and I used to fly together a lot in T-33s and T-38s,” said Anders. “We would challenge ourselves to do a perfect flight. Right, Al? And when we landed we would debrief each other and say, ‘Well, Al, you were six feet off altitude here or a degree off there.’ And so we would strive to do better each time. But Walt, being a Marine, knew he flew the perfect flight every time!”

Cunningham thanked his astronaut buddies and told the group: “The first observation I’ll make is how much better things get after 40 years!”

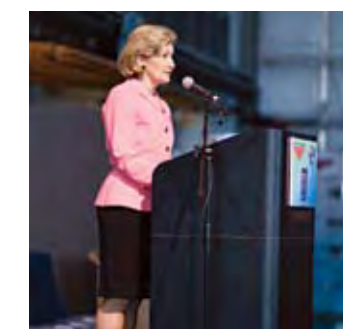
And he added: “When I was an active astronaut, I just lived the experience. I gave very little thought to the historical aspect of what we were doing. I think the other guys were doing the same thing. We did our jobs and we took success for granted. We realized that landing on the Moon was a moment in history, but we also thought of it as just one step in the continuing exploration of space. Only in the last 25 years have I been able to put the entire experience into perspective.”

Cunningham and others who spoke from the podium looked out over 30 tables that had, as their centerpieces, actual flying 1/8th-scale models of the Saturn 1B, the rocket that lifted the Apollo 7 crew into space at the start of their 11-day mission on October 11, 1968. Many of the models were later sold for \$500 each with proceeds going to Be An Angel, a charity that helps kids with disabilities.

Earlier, during a panel discussion, Armstrong drew a huge laugh from the audience when he looked around at his fellow aging astronauts and at the younger Mike Griffin and joked: “... with Mike’s exception ... the rest of us are septuagenarians and as a class, some don’t hear too well, some don’t see too well, most of them don’t remember very well, so if you ask questions, you have to take anything we said with a bit of a grain of salt. But everyone will tell you the truth, generally speaking.”

For Cunningham’s wife Dot, who had worked months planning the luncheon for her husband, the entire event could not have been better.

“From start to finish, I loved every minute of it,” she said. ✦



This page, clockwise from top left: Walt Cunningham’s son Brian addresses the gathering; Walt Cunningham and Neil Armstrong share a laugh at a panel discussion that preceded the luncheon; NASA Administrator Mike Griffin holds up one of the agency’s Distinguished Service Medals awarded to the Apollo 7 crew; U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison at the podium; Walt and Dot Cunningham in front of the Apollo 7 command module and among the Saturn 1B models made for the event; Neil Armstrong pays tribute to Apollo 7; LAUNCH editor Mark Mayfield reads a letter from Tom Hanks, honoring Cunningham; a spacesuit display is nearby as the crowd gathers for the luncheon. Opposite page, top to bottom: the panel discussion; Neil Armstrong listens from his luncheon table before speaking to the group; Alan Bean and Gene Kranz having a good time at the panel discussion; Buzz Aldrin at the luncheon. PHOTOS: KATE MACKLEY



PROJECT SATURN

Friday, October 17, 2008 is a day that I will remember as long as I live. I will fondly recall the events leading up to this day as well. My involvement began with an e-mail from a friend—Mark Mayfield.

In the e-mail, he made a simple request: "... I'm writing to tell you about a wild project we're going to attempt to put together for an October 17 luncheon at the Frontiers of Flight Museum in Dallas, marking the 40th anniversary of Apollo 7 and honoring Walt Cunningham ..." I didn't realize at the time that this request would give birth to a project that would involve more than 30 people (including Mark, Semroc Astronautics founder Carl McLawhorn and family, Walt Cunningham's wife Dot, and 26 master modelers) and would end with me meeting some of my childhood heroes.

Mark originally wanted my Dallas group to build all 30 models, but I didn't feel I could coordinate the manpower and resources locally to complete that many Saturn 1Bs in the allotted time frame. Over the next week or so I spoke with Carl and Mark several times over the phone, and I organized the initial Dallas team: Jack Sprague, James Gartrell, Stuart Powley, and myself. Our team would commit to building 10 models—one-third of the needed number. After reviewing several options, Carl, Mark, and I came to the conclusion that we needed to include talented modelers from across the country. This would increase costs, but would provide the best guarantee that there would be enough models completed so that there would be one on every table at the luncheon. I stressed the need to get started because it would truly be a race to the finish.

During the following week I made more calls and e-mails to Carl and Mark to discuss logistics and to develop a game plan. Since we were in Dallas (where the luncheon was to be held), the Dallas team would be able to build

and deliver our models to the museum either on or before the day of the luncheon. Later on, we added two other members to the team: Bill Gee and Chas Russell. I did not know that Chas was one of the other talented modelers Carl and Mark had asked to help out until two weeks into construction. Since Chas lives in Fort Worth, we invited him to join us in the build and the number of models built locally increased to 11.

Ten days after Mark's first e-mail on August 28, the kits arrived. Carl worked a miracle pulling together the kit parts and producing the SA-205 (Apollo 7) specific decals and parts and getting them in the mail so we could receive them before Labor Day weekend. Construction began the Saturday of Labor Day weekend (August 30) and continued for the next seven weeks.

I had high hopes that we would complete the initial structure build of all 10 models by the end of the day on Labor Day. I came upon the idea to build all 10 models "assembly-style" in order to draw upon the strengths of each member of the Dallas team and to reduce wait time. For example, while James and Stuart assembled the basic rocket structure, I cut out all the paper parts—scalped shrouds, Lunar module shrouds, and fin covers. Jack was tasked with constructing the eight fins for each of the Saturn 1Bs—88 total fins. With his previous experience building up structures (model airplanes, space shuttles, etc.) he was uniquely qualified to produce the museum quality fins we needed. Suzy Sprague, Jack's wife, helped out wherever a steady set of hands was needed. She helped me cut out some of the small paper pieces, and came up with a great way to produce a clean crease in the fin skins.

I vastly underestimated the amount of time it would take to construct 10 Saturn 1Bs at one time, even using the assembly-line method. After the

A group of dedicated modelers turn their attention to the Saturn 1B, and make the Apollo 7 luncheon one for the record books. An inside perspective. BY JOHN DYER WITH JAMES GARTRELL

first weekend, there was no question that completion of the models would take longer than I expected. Little did I realize at the time that it would take a full seven weeks and extra work by Jack, Bill, and I during the final week to complete the models by the deadline. Not only was it a huge imposition on the Sprague household, our site for the joint build sessions, but also the sacrifice of almost two months of everyone's free time was taxing. I didn't underestimate the commitment of the team, though. They stayed steadfast on target, making whatever sacrifices were needed to meet our goal.

We made great progress by the end of Labor Day. All 10 models had all four of the white tank tubes attached to them, and the black tank tubes had been masked for the decal and painted. After encountering several problems trying to work around the black tubes, a few weeks later we decided to repaint them white and then remask and repaint black as the roll patterns were painted. This was a setback, but did not prove to be fatal to the project.

Bill Gee joined the team on the second weekend (September 6–7). He helped by constructing the Apollo capsules while other team members constructed "fiddly bits" (those small but important details) and added them to the model. He also helped Jack with final touch-up, adding filler where needed and sanding smooth. Bill, Jack, James, and I masked the models prior to painting the black roll patterns on them. As I mentioned before, Chas Russell was able to attend several weekend sessions and helped attach fiddly bits to the models. He also constructed the antenna assemblies for all 10 models, and helped to remove the masking tape after the models had been "shot" with black paint. Chas expertly removed the tape from one model that I had, as Jack called it, "armor plated" with masking tape. Jack was also busy putting details on the LEM shroud and service module using

the design template he and Mario Perdue developed.

A few weeks into the project, Carl sent an e-mail to the builders telling us that Buzz Nau had created a private thread for the team on Ye Old Rocket Forum (oldrocketforum.com). This proved to be a godsend. We were able to meet and talk with other members of the team, and discuss details and construction techniques that would not have been possible otherwise.

We estimated that each team member averaged more than 150 hours on this project, primarily on the weekends and weeknights. James was driving almost 160 miles to attend each session and Jack put in many extra hours during the day to ensure the models were completed on time. After the models were spray-painted, the fiddly bits and decals were applied, Jack applied clear coat. The models were considered complete on October 12, just five days before the event.

The incredible journey was far from over, though. I offered to receive and store the Saturn 1Bs from the modelers scattered across the country. During the week of the luncheon I received 23 models in the mail. I have

This page: John Dyer (top left) at work on the models; Chas Russell (top center) and James Gartrell (bottom center) during the build sessions; Jack Sprague (top right), and group members (bottom right)—John Dyer, James Gartrell, Bill Gee, Suzy and Jack Sprague. Opposite page: The Saturn 1B build group at work in Dallas, including James Gartrell and Jack Sprague (top center); Bill Gee (top right) and Stuart Powley, Jack Sprague and James Gartrell (bottom right).

PHOTOS: DALLAS AREA ROCKET SOCIETY



great respect for the U.S. Postal Service—20 of the models were shipped via express mail and all of them arrived in great shape. Only two models shipped by other carriers were damaged, but were easily repaired.

Jeff Graham's model was the first to arrive on October 9. When I unpacked his model, it looked so great that I knew this was going to be an incredible event!

The busiest day was Tuesday, October 14 when 10 models arrived. The postman was great: He knew when I would be home and came back to drop any packages that required a signature. By the time Thursday (the day before the luncheon) rolled around we had only a few models left that were in transit.

Late Thursday afternoon Carl, Cheryl, and Bruce McLawhorn arrived in town. Since their hotel was only three miles from the museum (site of the

This page: Semroc Astronautics founder Carl McLawhorn, top left, with the Saturn 1B models in front of the Apollo 7 command module; Stuart Powley, Bill Gee, John Dyer and Bruce McLawhorn with Apollo 11's Buzz Aldrin, top right; Carl McLawhorn, Walt Cunningham and Mark Mayfield in front of the Apollo 7 command module, at bottom right; and Bruce McLawhorn, Stuart Powley, Bill Gee, John Dyer, James Gartrell, Dot Cunningham, Apollo 8's Bill Anders, and Mark Mayfield pose for a photo after the luncheon.

event) we decided to move all the still-packaged models to their room for easier transport on Friday morning. They were at my house when the last model arrived via UPS. It was really amazing that Carl sent out 35 models to be built and we received 34 prior to the luncheon. One was unable to be completed. Considering the luck they were having, I told both Mark and Carl they needed to go out and buy lottery tickets!

About a week before the event, we found out our Dallas team was going to be able to actually attend the event. What a fantastic opportunity! Having to arrive early for setup, we were able to watch the panel session and attend the luncheon. If that wasn't fantastic enough, we were also seated at the LAUNCH Magazine table right behind the Apollo astronauts' table, close enough to reach out and touch Neil Armstrong. All too soon the luncheon was over. I was pleased that the astronauts hung around for a while to talk to admirers and fans. I attempted to meet Neil Armstrong, but the crowd around him was too big. He was gone before I had an opportunity to shake his hand. I was lucky enough to meet and shake hands with Bill Anders, Alan Bean, and Buzz Aldrin. More than a year earlier, at the International Space Development Conference in Dallas, I had been lucky enough to meet Buzz (and Jack Schmitt). So seeing Buzz this year was like "icing on the cake."

As the crowd began to thin, the team reassembled to begin packing the models for shipment. Many of the models were sold before they were even boxed. I was amazed that several of the buyers stayed until their model was

PHOTOS: DALLAS AREA ROCKET SOCIETY AND KATE MACKLEY



packaged for them. One gentleman was planning on transporting his model to Germany. All too soon the boxes were filled, the crowd was gone, and it was time to leave. I remember looking around and thinking to myself (with apologies to a certain credit card company):

"Hours spent building models: 150–200 each; Paint supplies: \$50; Glues, tape, and other supplies: \$50; and The look on Walt Cunningham's face—Priceless."

I want to thank Mark and Carl for the opportunity to be involved with this truly amazing project. I also want to thank all the builders for their dedication and hard work for making this project possible. Special thanks go to Jack, Suzy, James, Stuart, Bill, and Chas for building 11 incredible models and making Project Saturn a great success. I also want to thank Nina, Laurie, and Gail for being "Rocket Widows" for the seven weeks of the Saturn build.

I can't help but think, "What's next?" The answer is obvious: There is another special anniversary next July ... +

THE BUILDERS

All together, 26 modelers from across America donated their talent and time to the Saturn 1B project. They made history: Never before had there been so many flying scale models of the Saturn 1B, or any other NASA rocket, in one room at the same time. The SA-205/Apollo 7 Saturn 1B build group included:

- JOHN DYER—Dallas, TX
- JAMES GARTRELL—Cleburne, TX
- JACK SPRAGUE—Hickory Creek, TX
- SUZY SPRAGUE—Hickory Creek, TX
- J. STUART POWLEY—Rowlett, TX
- BILL GEE—Dallas, TX
- EVAN "BUZZ" NAU—Manchester, MI
- CHAS RUSSELL—Fort Worth, TX
- CHAN STEVENS—Cincinnati, OH
- CRAIG MCGRAW—Mobile, AL
- DONALD FENT—Bartlett, TN
- MARK KULKA—Tupper Lake, NY
- DAVID MONTGOMERY—Katy, TX
- ROY GREEN—Alpharetta, GA
- MARIO PERDUE—McCordsville, IN
- GARY DEGILER—Indianapolis, IN
- AARON HEAD—Indianapolis, IN
- RICK RANDOL—Indianapolis, IN
- JEFF TAYLOR—Coon Rapids, MN
- CAROL MARPLE—Champlin, MN
- MARK THELL—White Bear Lake, MN
- JIM FILLER—Frederick, MD
- JEFF GRAHAM—Battle Creek, MI
- CALEB BOE—Cottage Grove, MN
- TIM LUNDIE—Bumpass, VA
- JOSEPH MOSHER—Kalamazoo, MI

Twenty-six modelers from across the nation built more than 30 Saturn 1Bs for the event. At right: they included the youngest builder, Caleb Boe of Cottage Grove, Minnesota (shown at top left and bottom right), Rick Randol of Indianapolis, Indiana (at center left), and Gary Degler, also of Indianapolis (at top right). Both Randol and Degler built two models each, as did Chan Stevens of Cincinnati, Ohio. Caleb Boe's model was chosen as the centerpiece of the head table at the luncheon that included the Apollo astronauts.

PHOTOS: CALEB BOE, RICK RANDOL, AND JIM FILLER

