VETERANS FIRST BEFORE

LANDING A MAN ON THE MOON AND RETURNING HIM SAFELY WAS FIRST AND FOREMOST A MILITARY MISSION DURING THE COLD WAR. THAT'S WHY THE ASTRONAUTS WHO ACHIEVED THAT HISTORIC FEAT 50 YEARS AGO THIS JULY WERE ALL DECORATED VETERANS.

BY JIM SERVI

NASA PHOTO

THE FAME

Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin are photographed in May 1969 at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. All three men served in the military before training as astronauts and credit the experiences and attitudes gained in uniform as vital to their success in space.

When the former commander of VFW Post 5880 in Brockton, Mass., stood before thousands assembled at Houston's Rice Stadium on Sept. 12, 1962, he challenged them with a goal that seemed unthinkable.

"We choose to go to the moon," President John F. Kennedy declared.

"We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win."

With this message to the nation and to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) — made less than 60 years after the Wright brothers had first achieved manned flight with a heavier-than-air-craft — President Kennedy reinforced a vow he made during his first year in office to land a person on the moon before 1970.

Project Apollo — named for the Greek god of the sun — was born out of that declaration with a mission to land a person on the moon and safely return. Every citizen knew it would be difficult and dangerous, but the general consensus was that the risk was worth it. To accomplish that objective, NASA turned to the bravest citizens that America had to offer — U.S. veterans.

In 1952, Michael Collins, Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin and Neil Armstrong found themselves serving their nation in the armed forces, although they wouldn't officially be partnered together until more than a decade later. Little did they know that when their paths crossed, they would change the world.

COMBAT TOUGHER THAN SPACE FLIGHT

Collins followed in his family tradition of military service when he entered West Point. His father, an Army major general, two uncles, his brother and a cousin all served. Upon commissioning in 1952, Collins flew F-86 Sabres at Nellis Air Force Base in southern Nevada and later learned how to deliver nuclear weapons as part of the 21st Fighter-Bomber Wing at George Air Force Base northeast of Los Angeles.

Collins excelled at every challenge and was selected to test jet fighters as an experimental flight test officer at Edwards Air Force Base in southern California.

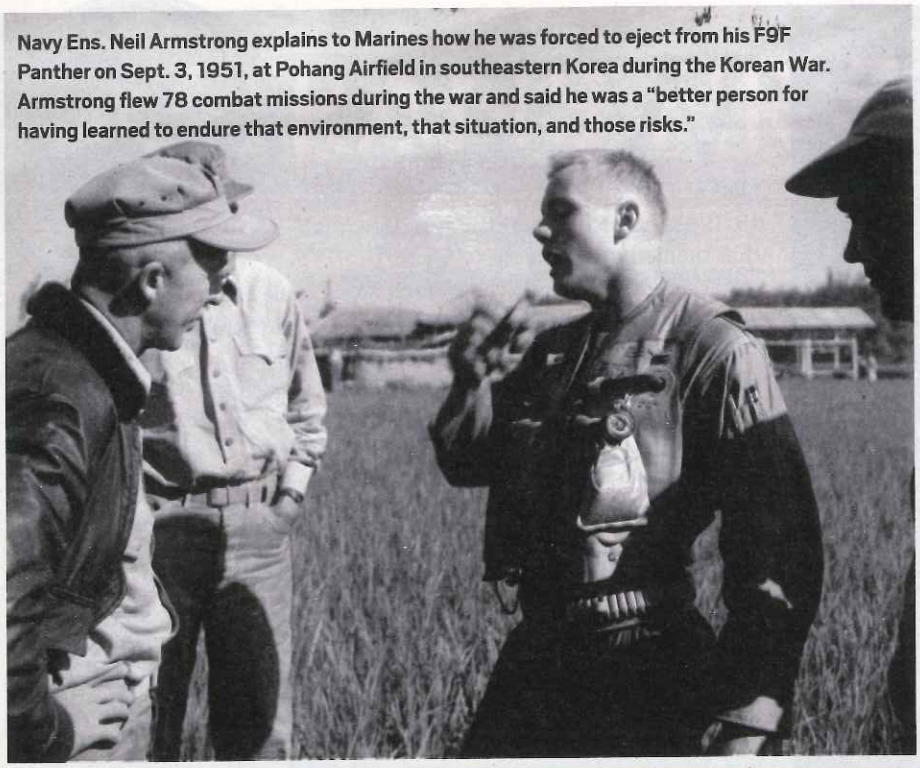
In 1962, he wanted to take his skills to the next level. He entered the Air Force Aerospace Research Pilot School at Edwards AFB and applied to be an astronaut. He was rejected.

Determined, he tried again in 1963. This time he was selected into NASA's third group of astronauts. Continuing to serve in the Air Force Reserve, Collins rose to the rank of major general and earned the Air Force Distinguished Service Medal, Distinguished Flying Cross and Legion of Merit.

Armstrong joined NASA the same year as President Kennedy's speech at Rice Stadium, but his passion for flight and space exploration took root as a young child.

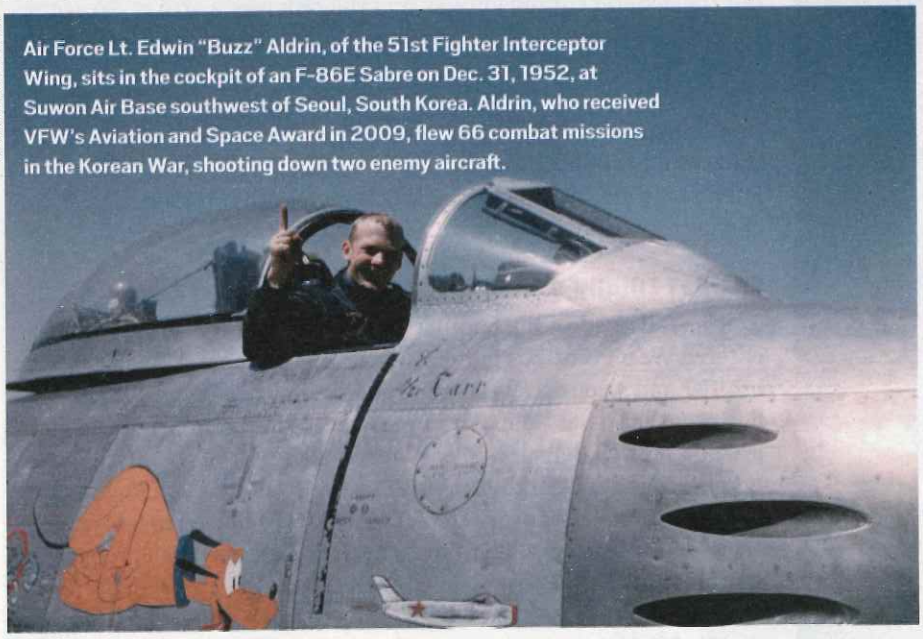
"I had become fascinated with the world of flight as an elementary student," Armstrong explained in a 2011 interview with Australia's Alex Malley, "and determined that somehow I wanted to be involved in that."

By 16, he had his student pilot's license. After graduating high school, Armstrong accepted a Navy scholarship at Purdue University



RBM VINTAGE IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Navy Ens. Neil Armstrong explains to Marines how he was forced to eject from his F9F Panther on Sept. 3, 1951, at Pohang Airfield in southeastern Korea during the Korean War. Armstrong flew 78 combat missions during the war and said he was a "better person for having learned to endure that environment, that situation, and those risks."



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

Air Force Lt. Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin, of the 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing, sits in the cockpit of an F-86E Sabre on Dec. 31, 1952, at Suwon Air Base southwest of Seoul, South Korea. Aldrin, who received VFW's Aviation and Space Award in 2009, flew 66 combat missions in the Korean War, shooting down two enemy aircraft.

in West Lafayette, Ind., and studied aeronautical engineering. Through his scholarship, he trained as a Navy pilot.

In 1951, he found himself aboard the *USS Essex (CV-9)*, headed for the Korean War. Shortly after arriving, Armstrong had a brush with death. While making a bombing run, his Grumman F9F Panther was hit by anti-aircraft fire. After maneuvering to friendly territory, his only option was ejection. He was quickly rescued and back in the pilot seat a short time later.

During his time in the heart of the Korean War, Armstrong flew 78 combat missions, for which he was awarded the Air Medal in addition to the Korean Service Medal, National Defense Service Medal and United Nations Korea Medal.

"The risks in combat are substantial, and I think, in general, they are higher risks than I faced in my test pilot work or in my astronaut work and the consequences are severe," Armstrong told Malley in 2011.

"There's a good side and a bad side. The bad side is that you lose colleagues and that's painful. The good side is that you create very strong bonds with your colleagues that survive, and those bonds exist throughout your lifetime. I value those experiences very highly because they build a lot of character, they build a lot of backbone, and you are a better person for having learned to endure that environment, that situation, and those risks."

After Korea, Armstrong still had a strong desire to serve and fly. He joined the organization that would eventually become NASA in 1962.

FIGHTER PILOT TO ASTRONAUT

Aldrin developed an early interest in flight from his father, an Air Force colonel, and took that passion to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In 1951, he graduated near the top of his class and followed his father into the Air Force.

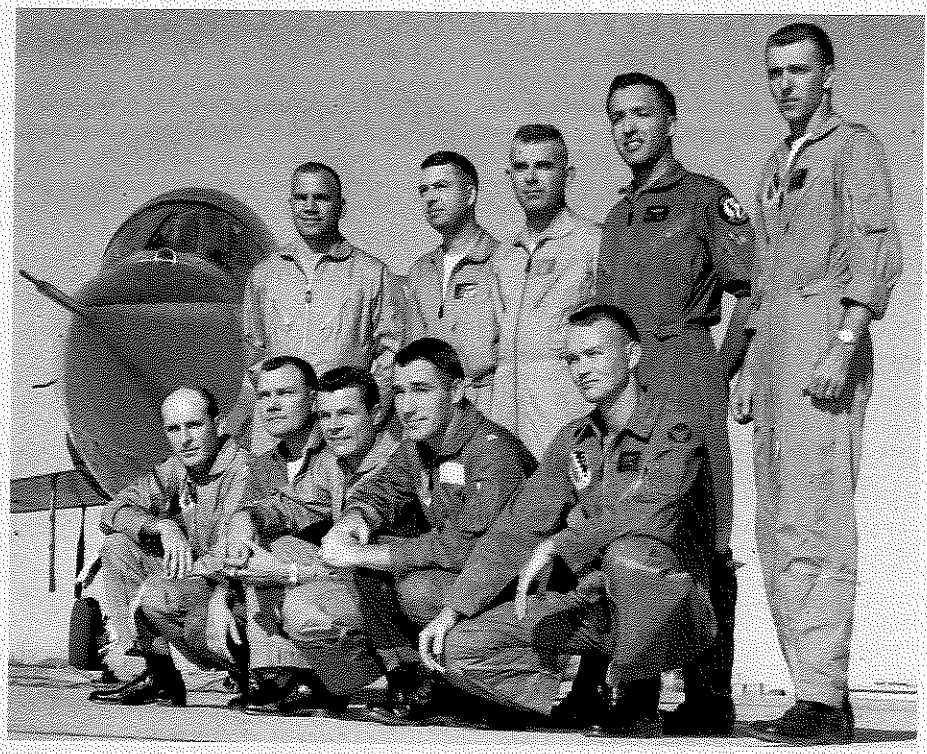
He wanted to be a fighter pilot. After training, Aldrin got that wish and was assigned to the 51st Fighter Wing, flying F-86 Sabres in the Korean War. His mission was to defend South Korea against invading communist forces.

Aldrin flew 66 combat missions during 1953 and shot down two MiGs (Soviet fighter aircraft used by North Korea) to earn the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal, Korean Service Medal, National Defense Service Medal and United Nations Korea Medal.

Following his service in the Korean War, Aldrin held a variety of roles in the military, including instructor, aide-de-camp and F-100 Super Sabres pilot in West Germany. However, after some encouragement from a West Point classmate, he enrolled in graduate school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge.

Enjoying studies, he eventually earned a doctorate of science in astronautics with one goal in mind — to be selected as an astronaut. In 1962, he was rejected because he had never served as a test pilot. The following year, the requirements changed, and his military flight time was counted. This time he was selected as one of the 14 members of NASA's Astronaut Group 3. Each one of the 14 men was a military veteran.

"All of them had both a desire to be at the cutting edge of aerospace flight research and to serve their country," explained William (Bill) Barry, NASA chief historian.



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

Air Force Capt. Michael Collins (front row, far right) poses with other graduates of the third class at the Air Force Aerospace Research Pilot School in 1963 at Edwards Air Force Base in California. Collins served in the Air Force Reserve after his time with NASA, eventually obtaining the rank of major general.

It was another famous veteran, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who directed that the initial groups of astronauts be military test pilots.

"The first three classes of astronauts selected by NASA had all been military pilots," Barry said. "For all three of them, the flight training, leadership experience and military educational opportunities provided them the skills and attitudes needed to be astronauts and help our country reach the moon."

FIRST HUMANS ON THE MOON

Together at NASA, each of the three men gained the experience needed for a successful lunar landing. Armstrong served as the command pilot for Gemini 8 and on March 16, 1966, performed the first successful docking of two vehicles in space.

Part of the Gemini 10 mission, Collins performed a series of important experiments during his time in space in July 1966. Aldrin was part of Gemini 12 and performed a spacewalk of more than two hours on Nov. 13, 1966.

Fate was taking shape as all of them were selected to crew the Apollo 11 mission. Armstrong served as commander, Collins as command module pilot and Aldrin as lunar module pilot. On July 20, 1969, they made history with the first manned mission to the moon.

Armstrong's words will forever echo in the minds of the millions who watched that day and the billions who have learned of the feat since.

"That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," Armstrong famously declared as he became the first human to step foot on the lunar surface.

When asked to describe the feelings of raising the U.S. flag on the moon for the first time during an interview with NASA on May 26, 1989, Aldrin revealed that important connection to his and his fellow astronauts' military service.

"I think all of us ... were aware that this was a national response to perhaps an international challenge," Aldrin said. "Because of the major events that took place as a result of the teamwork that we had between government, academia and industry, I've certainly felt that the American flag is what belonged there."

They were hailed as heroes, but Collins sees it differently. Very private, Collins rarely grants interviews, but issued a statement in 2009 in which his respect for military service was revealed when he answered a question about being a hero.

"Heroes abound, and should be revered as such," Collins shared, "but don't count astronauts among them. We work very hard. We did our jobs to near perfection, but that was what we had hired on to do. In no way did we meet the criterion of the Congressional Medal of Honor: 'above and beyond the call of duty.'"

The world saw it differently and the trio was honored throughout their lives for their roles in the Apollo 11 mission. Collins, Armstrong and Aldrin were all awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom shortly after their return.

Despite the accolades, their military service always remained important. In 2009, VFW recognized Aldrin at its 110th National Convention in Phoenix for his lifetime support of veterans and military personnel. As the assistant secretary of state for public affairs, Collins also spearheaded a youth program that helped improve the attitude towards military personnel and veterans on college campuses during and after the Vietnam War.

Armstrong, who visited troops in Afghanistan and Iraq several times as part of USO tours, requested to be buried at sea. The Navy honored that request following his death in 2012.

WHAT IS NEXT FOR NASA?

"We have a lot on the plate — but the headline item is the current policy to send humans beyond low-Earth orbit, return to the moon to stay in order to prepare for an eventual human mission to Mars," Barry said.

He believes veterans and current military personnel will play a pivotal role in leading that effort.

"NASA has always had a symbiotic relationship with the military and still has a major relationship with the military," Barry said. "Many of our new astronauts are in the military or have a military background."

With the courage, leadership and experience developed during their military service, Collins, Armstrong and Aldrin were able to land on the moon. With the same passion, the next group of young veterans will use that historical feat as motivation to take NASA beyond.

EMAIL *magazine@vfw.org*

Jim Servi is a member of VFW Post 10203 in Hamburg, Wis. A veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Servi is a past contributor to VFW *magazine.*