

1ST ASTRONAUTS REMINISCE, CONTEMPLATE FUTURE

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By Dan McCue
of the News staff

CAPE CANAVERAL - On the eve of the 30th anniversary of setting his feet on the moon, Buzz Aldrin stood by the banks of the Banana River here and gazed across the water toward a launch pad swarming with technicians, the space shuttle Columbia poised for liftoff.

"Looking back on Apollo 11, as we have been this past weekend, it seems the real significance of the voyage wasn't the moon rocks we brought back or some of the other experiments we conducted, it was the excitement the voyage generated among millions of people," Aldrin said.

"I don't know how that's ever going to be replicated again," he said.

The Columbia, its \$2.8 billion astronomy mission delayed almost a year by a succession of technical problems, was scheduled to be launched today, three decades to the day after two American astronauts first landed on the moon.

Led by mission commander Eileen Collins - the first woman to command a shuttle mission, another NASA first forever linked with the date of July 20 - the crew of Columbia are to release NASA's Chandra X-ray Observatory, a 45-foot-long space telescope designed to probe black holes, distant quasars and other high-energy objects in the cosmos.

If successfully launched by the crew, the Chandra will permit a new breed of scientist - the X-ray astronomers - to study the boundaries of black holes and chart the location of mysterious dark matter thought to make up much of the universe's mass. The scientists will also trace the cosmic production of carbon, oxygen, iron and other heavy elements that coalesce to form stars, planets and the molecular ingredients of life.

Edward Weiler, NASA's associate administrator for space science, described the delivery mission as tricky at best.

"Let me remind everybody, this is not a trip to Grandma's on a summer afternoon," he said recently. "It's high-tech stuff, and there are always risks."

When ground facilities and data-handling costs are added to the telescope price, almost \$3 billion is at stake. Columbia's payload is the shuttle's longest and heaviest payload ever. Chandra is 57 feet long and weighs more than 50,000 pounds.

But as America's first generation of space explorers gathered at the Kennedy Space Center this past weekend for a nostalgic look back at the country's race to the moon, several said



they confronted an undeniable irony: While a shuttle launch is still a big deal, the future of the space program is not.

"The only thing that will jump-start the space program, I think, is some kind of plague affecting the entire population of the planet," said Walter Schirra, one of the country's first seven astronauts.

"I know that's not an original thought, that a number of science fiction books have been written that way, but how else could you rationalize the costs to people? Having flown in from California for this event, I was looking down at Texas at one point and thought, 'This about sums it up.'

"Here you have a state that goes on forever, you can see the water, you can breathe the air, and you can easily find 20 acres to live on - to most people, with that as a given, it's kind of silly to go and spend all that money to go to someplace like Mars and have to bring your own air and your own water."

That's exactly the kind of mission Aldrin would like to see NASA undertake in the next 15 to 20 years.



"The problem you have, of course, is that it's a very long trip, it's very hard to keep the attention up ... there's going to be a time delay aspect to it," said America's second man on the moon.

"In the meantime, I think we've got to continue to venture into space. I've seen the commitment we can get from politicians, the funding and the people support, and the only way we are going to continue to move forward is having people involved, rather than just relying on machines to do our exploring for us."

Schirra agreed with much of Aldrin's assessment, but was less optimistic that a voyage to Mars will ever come to pass.

"Buzz keeps talking about this, but, to me, it just doesn't seem practical," he said. "We can't keep the space station on the front page now. How are we going to sustain interest in a mission that's a three-year round trip.

"It'll be, 'Call me when you get back?'" Schirra said with a laugh.

Like his counterparts, retired astronaut Gene Cernan said he never dreamed the country's space program would be where it is today. The last man to leave his footprints on the moon, as commander of Apollo 17, Cernan said he's been disappointed the space agency hasn't undertaken more ambitious manned missions since he splashed down 27 years ago.

"I can remember standing almost in this very spot after we returned, predicting we'd not only be going back to the moon in the short term, but that we'd be on our way to Mars by the end of the century," he said.

"Well, it's the end of the century and the history of space exploration since Apollo is as much about what we haven't done as it is about what we've accomplished."

Although he's pessimistic, Cernan thinks the country's space program can make a comeback.

"Somewhere in our grammar schools today is a young boy or girl who will take us back to the moon, or on to Mars. I'm absolutely convinced of this," he said.

"Now, you can ask me all the practical questions - Where's the stimulus going to come from? Who's going to pay for it? I don't have the answers to those questions, but then, no one would have predicted I'd walk on the moon when I was a young naval aviator in San Diego.



"It's going to happen though," Cernan said, "if for no other reason than we have to satisfy our insatiable curiosity about the unknown, about the human experience."

Caption: (color) Cernan (color) Aldrin (color) Schirra

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