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Reflections on a return to the Moon



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By Martin Hickes

Fred Haise still dreams of the Moon.

Immortalised in space and Hollywood legend as the lunar module pilot who almost perished aboard the ill-fated Apollo 13, when he finally returned to Earth his near-death experience should have grounded any further ambition. It didn't.

Haise would have gladly blasted off again, but by the time he was slated to return aboard Apollo 19, the public had become apathetic about the merits of space exploration and with many critical of the amount of money being spent, the mission was cancelled.

No one then is more pleased that, 40 years on from Neil Armstrong's giant leap for mankind which captured the world's attention, President Obama is making positive noises about future exploration.

While America is facing a trillion dollar budget deficit this year, NASA is already working on a replacement

for the current space programme which comes to an end in 2010. It may take another five years to kick in, but as the 40th anniversary of the first Moon landing approaches, the mood in the White House seems generally supportive.

"I'm delighted plans are being made by NASA for a return to the Moon under the Orion project – the new equivalent of Apollo," says Haise, who was played by Bill Paxton in the 1995 box office hit Apollo 13.

"I got to see the Moon from the 'dark side' which few people ever achieve, but I do feel a pang of jealousy every time a major anniversary of Moon landings comes around.

"I was very disappointed at the time. We'd lost out on the chance to land on the Moon and we failed to accomplish the mission objectives which so much training had been invested in.

"I actually went back in to training as the backup commander for the Apollo 16 mission and thought that I would get a second opportunity as the commander of Apollo 19. Unfortunately, five months into training the programme was cancelled."

It took less than a year for the public to fall out of love with space. The oxygen tank explosion on Apollo 13 brought the human and financial cost into sharp relief and while the story would later be turned into a box office hit, starring Bill Paxton as Haise and Tom Hanks as Captain Jim Lovell, on board the crew felt only disappointment.

"I had tremendous respect for everyone involved in the Apollo programmes," says Haise. "There was no moment of terror on Apollo 13. There was confusion at first due to the large number of caution and warning lights that were illuminated covering several different unrelated systems.

"Very quickly it became apparent that we had lost oxygen tank two. There was a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach because I knew that we would have to abort. We had lost the landing and we had lost the Moon.

"The second oxygen tank appeared to be intact so the situation was not life-threatening.

"But by the time it became apparent that the second tank was slowly depleting, we were very busy in troubleshooting with mission control to isolate the leak.

"Then we realised the Command and Service Module or 'mother ship' was dying and we had to hurriedly power up the Lunar Module.

"I made a rough calculation of consumables and figured that we could get back to attempt an entry.

"As I observed the Moon pass by, I was impressed, as others before me, how stark and lifeless it appeared in contrast to our beautiful Earth. The Earth is like a precious jewel surrounded by a thin shiny halo in the black of space.

"I had studied astronomy from library books while in high school so had an appreciation of the size and scope of our universe – going to the Moon was not going very far! The lunar flight was a 'great adventure' for me and not a religious experience."

While the Apollo 11 crew's legendary achievements were hailed as a humanitarian triumph, the space race struggled to reclaim its early glamour. However, with next month marking the 40th anniversary of the first Moon landing, it may well be the time to get the public back on board.

Various anniversary events are already being planned in Yorkshire with Capt Lovell due to be a guest at the West Yorkshire Astronomical society later in the year. Inevitably the celebrations have given Haise, now 75,

cause for reflection. When he was growing up, space rockets only existed in comic books and no one dreamed of being an astronaut.

"There were no real astronauts, only Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon in the Saturday matinee movie serials," he says. "Even when I joined the military service to learn to fly during the Korean War, there was no astronaut programme, the occupation as we know it today did not exist.

"I still feel special to be part of the Apollo few and I certainly hope that we continue to explore our Solar System and the Universe.

"Whether we have a lunar base or actually colonise another planetary body will be dependent on national or even international policy which dictates how and when resources will be expended.

"The Apollo 13 incident briefly united our nation and the world towards a common cause and hope for our survival.

"On the 40th anniversary of the first Moon landing, it serves as an example that space exploration is a unifying endeavour for the human race as a whole.

"It's also about self-preservation. We don't know what will happen to this planet in the future, but it would seem that we, the human race, should apply some resources to continually improve technology to enable some day placing humans on other habitable planetary bodies in our universe."

While Haise remains a vocal advocate for space exploration, he has in retirement found time to enjoy his other passions.

"I spend a lot of time with grandchildren and try to limit the amount of public speaking I do so it doesn't take over my entire life," he says.

"There are several science and aviation museums that I support with fund-raising activities and when I get a quiet moment, I enjoy fishing. It reminds me of growing up with my father in Biloxi, Mississippi. I have found that in retirement, if one is not careful, you can find yourself as busy as when you were working full time. But I still dream of the Moon."

Lunar legacy

Apollo 11-17 landed men on the Moon, the last just before Christmas in 1972.

The goal of the programme, to land a man on the Moon by the end of the '60s, as articulated by President Kennedy, was accomplished with only two major failures. The first failure resulted in the deaths of three astronauts in a launch pad fire in Apollo 1. The second was the oxygen fire on Apollo 13.

An Orion manned mission back to the Moon is planned for no later than 2014 under ambitious plans by the US – if the money doesn't run out.

Fred Haise's Apollo 13 colleague Capt Jim Lovell will be in Yorkshire on Friday, October 2 at 7.30pm at St Wilfrid's Catholic High School, Featherstone. Tickets from [ken.willoughby @btinternet.com](http://ken.willoughby@btinternet.com).

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