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Astronauts reflect on their experiences

2:00 a.m. September 5, 2009

Comments from some of the former astronauts who are here this weekend for events at the San Diego Air & Space Museum in Balboa Park and at the USS Midway Museum:

Al Worden, who made the first deep-spacewalk as Apollo 15 returned from the moon: Looking at the moon now is "like an old movie I saw 30 years ago. It reminds me that I was there once.

"It's not real. It becomes less real as the years go by."

He says he can see the area that Apollo 15 landed on when he looks at the moon.

He laments the decline of NASA.

"The program is slowing down and sliding and slipping."

He says that NASA needs an advocate, someone who can convince the president of its importance. He has a lot of confidence in the new NASA administrator, Charles Bolden and says he's ready to help the cause.

"We'll march on Washington, if that's what he wants us to do." Glynn Lunney, a leader in Mission Control during Apollo 13; he later oversaw the Space Shuttle program in its early years: "I like what they're doing at the moment with the Space Shuttle. But I gather there's a major review going on. There's a sense of being on hold.

"We were incredibly fortunate to be personally part of the space program. The more I think about what we did in the '60s, it's hard to believe we landed on the moon. It's wonderful to reflect on. It feels good.

"But it wasn't all roses, including the loss of friends of ours."

He was amazed at what he'd hear from astronauts returning home after visiting other nations.

"People in other countries would always say, 'We did it! We did it! The sense was that it was all of us.'" Fred Haise, best known as one of the crew members of Apollo 13, the spacecraft that successfully returned to Earth after six perilous days in space. His knowledge and experience helped save the crew,

Haise was scheduled to walk on the moon before the mission was scrubbed. He said he had some regrets at the time, but in retrospect, he feels lucky and privileged.

"I was very fortunate to have a chance to be a part of the program. There were only 24 of us who had a chance to go to the moon. And nobody has had the chance lately, so I feel fortunate."

He would like the space program to move faster, but he's felt that way for years.

"It's obviously a matter of budget and priorities. (Former astronaut) Gus Grissom is quoted as saying, 'no Buck Rogers with no bucks.'"

He thinks we should go back to the moon and beyond, as a sort of insurance policy for the human race.

"We have the capability. No other creatures that have evolved have that capability."

He doesn't pay much attention to what the administration is or isn't doing with the space program.

"I'm not into politics. What Washington does is beyond me."

"Apollo 13," the movie, handled the technical end of the incident well, he said. But none of the movie's dialogue, except for "Houston, we have a problem," was uttered by the astronauts, Haise said.

He said the astronauts and mission control went through a long period of trying to figure out what had happened, and there was a lot of trouble-shooting to get to a stable point. Alan Bean, the fourth man to walk on the moon as part of Apollo 12:

"Every day, I tell myself I'm very lucky. It's like I've won the lottery two or three times."

He says there's no big urgency to return to the moon.

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"People want to go to the moon and Mars, but nobody wants to pay for it. I don't see our culture doing anything about it."

One possible motivation might be if China gets to the moon or outer space, he said.

William Anders, the pilot of Apollo 8 and one of the first three men to leave Earth's orbit and see the far side of the moon. He snapped the famous photo of the Earth rising above the surface of the moon:

"The Earth reminded me of a Christmas-tree ornament. Very fragile. We needed to handle it with care."

His photo helped launch the environmental movement. Al Gore used the image in his movie "An Inconvenient Truth."

Anders said the Earth at that distance was about the size of his fist at arm's length. The farther out you go in space, the tinier it becomes. He reached some conclusions.

"The Earth is physically insignificant," he said. "It is not the center of the universe. Even though it's our home, in my view it's physically insignificant. The critters that run around on the surface need to learn to get along."

When he sees the moon as a tiny crescent, he's moved, because that's how the moon was when Apollo 8 launched.

He said the surface of the moon looks like dirty beach sand. It reminded him of the sand he and his wife would see at La Jolla Shores. "That's exactly how it looked."

Anders was trained as a geologist, and he was sent around the world by NASA to study various soils to compare with the lunar surface.

"They could have just sent us to La Jolla Shores," he said.

He says NASA has "managed to work itself into a cul-de-sac." The Space Shuttle ended up being 100 times more expensive than billed, and NASA has been deteriorating since Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin planted the American flag on the moon.

"NASA pretended they had the public behind them, and they didn't. Now they're paying a heavy price."

There is very little public support for returning to the moon or visiting Mars, he said.

"Bush gave verbal support but no money," Anders said.

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