

The Apollo 11 Moon Landing

Thousands of people were gathered at Cape Kennedy, Florida, on the morning of July 16, 1969. They were there to witness the launch of *Apollo 11*, the first space mission designed to land astronauts on the moon and return them safely to Earth. Just eight years earlier, President John F. Kennedy had pledged that the United States would achieve this **unprecedented**, risk-filled feat before the end of the **decade**.



The towering, three-stage Saturn V rocket, standing 36 stories high, sat on the launch pad. In position above the rocket were the spacecraft's lunar module, service module, and command module. Inside the cone-shaped command module, the *Apollo 11* astronauts were strapped into their seats, preparing for liftoff. They were Neil Armstrong, mission commander; "Buzz" Aldrin, lunar module pilot; and Michael Collins, command module pilot.

At 9:32 A.M., with the engines of the Saturn V rocket's first stage at full power, *Apollo 11* blasted off with a thunderous roar. After one and a half orbits around the Earth, the rocket's third stage sent the spacecraft off on its journey to the moon.

On July 19, after traveling nearly 250,000 miles, *Apollo 11* began its orbit around the moon. On July 20, the fifth day of the mission, Armstrong and Aldrin entered the lunar module (named *Eagle*) and separated it from the command/service module (named *Columbia*). They fired *Eagle's* descent engine and started down to the moon. Suddenly seeing that they were headed for a field of boulders, Armstrong quickly switched from computer control to manual control. He anxiously searched for a more suitable landing spot. At last, with less than 30 seconds of fuel remaining, *Eagle* touched down safely on a dusty plain called the Sea of Tranquility. Armstrong immediately radioed Mission Control in Houston, Texas. "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The *Eagle* has landed," he proudly announced.

Wearing a bulky spacesuit, a helmet, and a backpack life-support system, Armstrong descended *Eagle's* ladder. A special television camera allowed millions of people on Earth to watch as he made the first human footprint on the moon. Speaking with excitement, Armstrong declared that this was one small step for a man, but "one giant leap for mankind."

For about two hours Armstrong and Aldrin walked on the moon's powdery surface, setting up experiments and collecting samples of rocks and soil. The following day, July 21, they lifted off from the moon, docked *Eagle* with *Columbia*, and rejoined Collins who had been circling the moon in the command module. The astronauts were ready to head home.

On July 24 the command module splashed down in the Pacific Ocean, southwest of Hawaii. With bravery and skillful teamwork, the *Apollo 11* astronauts had accomplished their heroic mission.