

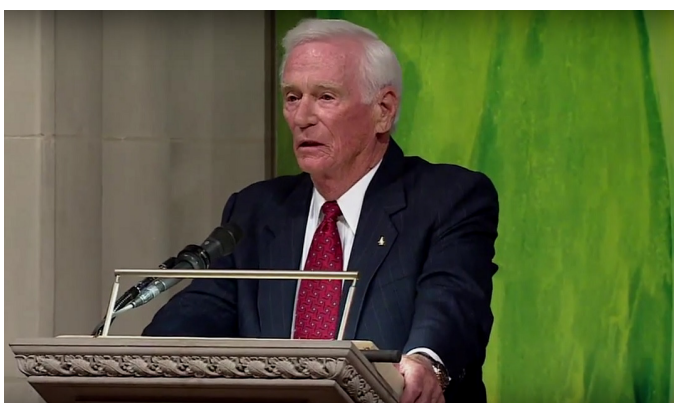


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Eugene Cernan

Eulogy for Neil Armstrong

delivered 13 September 2012, Washington National Cathedral, Washington, D.C.



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

How does one adequately express his feelings about a special friend, when that friend is also a world icon, a national hero of unimaginable proportion, and a legend whose name will live in history long after all here today have been forgotten? A friend whose commitment and dedication to that in which he believed was absolute? A man who, when he became your friend, was a friend for a lifetime? I am not sure this is possible, but I will try.

Neil Armstrong grew up on a farm in Middle America and as a young boy, like most kids, he had a paper route, he cut lawns, he shoveled snow, and his fascination for model airplanes gave birth to a dream, a dream of becoming an aeronautical engineer. Neil had his first taste of flight when he was but six years old, and from that day forward he never looked back.

Although he always wanted to design and redesign airplanes to make them do what they weren't supposed to do, once he had tasted flight, Neil's eyes turned skyward, and it was there that he always longed to be. Little did Neil ever realize that his dream, his longing to soar with the eagles, would someday give him the opportunity to be the first human being to go where no human had gone before.



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Neil Armstrong was a sincerely humble man, of impeccable integrity, who reluctantly accepted his role as the first human being to walk on another world. And when he did he became a testament, a testament to all Americans of what can be achieved through vision and dedication.

But in Neil's mind it was never about Neil. It was about you -- your mothers and fathers, your grandparents; about those of a generation ago who gave Neil the opportunity to call the Moon his home. But never, ever was it about Neil. Neil considered that he was just the tip of the arrow, always giving way to some 400,000 equally committed and dedicated Americans -- Americans who were the strength behind the bow -- and always giving credit to those who just didn't know it couldn't be done.

And therein lies the strength and the character of Neil Armstrong. He knew who he was and he understood the immensity of what he had done, yet Neil was always willing to give of himself. When Neil, Jim Lovell and I had the opportunity to visit the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, on three separate occasions, meeting them in chow halls, control centers -- yes, even armored carriers and helicopters -- those enthusiastic young men and women, yet to be born when Neil walked on the Moon, were mesmerized by his presence.

In a typical Neil fashion, he would always walk in, introduce himself -- as if they didn't know who he was -- shake each and every hand, and he'd always give them, "Hey, how are you guys doing?" Asked one overwhelmed, inquisitive Marine, "Mr. Armstrong, why are you here?" Neil's thoughtful and sincerely honest reply was, "Because you are here." Neil was special to these young kids -- and to a few old ones as well.

Although deeply proud to be a naval aviator, as a civilian at the time he flew, Neil never received his astronaut wings -- it was a tradition of those in the military. It was on the USS Eisenhower, back in 2010, on our way to Afghanistan, that Neil finally received -- did receive the tribute that he deserved. His visibly -- visibly -- moved response said it all (and I quote):



I've never been more proud than when I earned my Navy wings of gold.¹ And I've got to believe that there's a few Golden Eagles in the audience who will second those words.



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Trying to get into Neil's inner self was always a challenge for almost anyone -- maybe everyone. Asked one day by a stranger, "Mr. Armstrong, how did you feel when looking for a place to land on the Moon with only 15 seconds of fuel remaining?" In only the way Neil could -- and I know some of you have seen him this way -- he'd put a thumb on an index finger, he'd tilt his head and sort of put his hand down there and he'd say, "Well, when the gauge says empty, we all know there's a gallon or two left in the tank."² Now there is a man who has always been in control of his own destiny. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is vintage Neil Armstrong.

Fate looked down kindly on us when she chose Neil to be the first to venture to another world and to have the opportunity to look back from space at the beauty of our own. It could have been another, but it wasn't. And it wasn't for a reason: No one, no one, but no one could have accepted the responsibility of his remarkable accomplishment with more dignity and more grace than Neil Armstrong. He embodied all that is good and all that is great about America.

Neil, wherever you are up there, almost a half century later you have now shown once again the pathway to the stars. It's now for you a new beginning, but for us, I will promise you it is not the end. And as you soar through the heavens beyond where even eagles dare to go, you can now finally put out your hand and "touch the face of God."³

Farewell, my friend. You have left us far too soon. But we want you to know we do cherish the time we have had and shared together.

God bless you, Neil.

¹ Quotation faithful in spirit; as to the letter Mr. Armstrong reportedly stated: "I take these wings with great pleasure and great pride...I have made certain achievements in my life and been recognized many times, but, there is no achievement I value more highly than when I received the wings of gold [for naval aviation]; to be given a second pair of gold wings is just as special." [Source: http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=51836]

² Quotation veracity unconfirmed but widely circulated

³ Phrases in quotation marks found in the poem *High Flight* by John Gillespie Magee, Jr.