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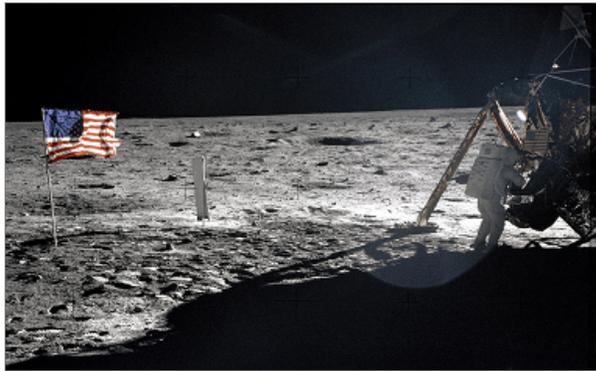
Neil Armstrong: His Small Step, Our Big Moment

Remembering the man, his historic mission and an unforgettable memory from my youth

posted by John Stark, August 30, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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Neil Armstrong's historic first step on the moon on July 20, 1969.
Edwin E. Aldrin Jr. | NASA

I was on the Stairmaster at my health club Saturday afternoon when I looked up at the bank of TV monitors in front of me. On the scrolling CNN news banner at the bottom of the screen were the words, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." I immediately thought, yeah, Neil Armstrong, you try climbing 200 steps on this thing.

When the astronaut's name appeared on the screen, I realized then that he was dead. Lately, it seems every time I see the name of some well-known person from my youth in the

news, I know what's coming: an obit. R.I.P. Phyllis Diller, Gore Vidal and Andy Griffith. More and more of these people are — or *were* — my age or thereabouts, like Sally Ride, Marvin Hamlisch and dare I include Sister Boom Boom (hey, I lived in San Francisco in the early 1980s) .

When horrific news happens, like JFK's death, the Shuttle explosion, Princess Diana's car crash, declarations of war and 9/11, our brains have an uncanny knack for being able to forever remember exactly where we were and what we were doing at the time. This goes for all generations. Upon hearing the news on the radio that Pearl Harbor had just been bombed, a late friend of mine said she still remembered the color of the serving tray that she dropped on the floor.

But when good things happen in the world, do our brains preserve those moments too? In my life, I can think of only one example, and that was the first moon landing. I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing on July 20, 1969, when Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon.

I was 20 years old and still living at home. My parents and I were gathered in front of our brand new RCA color TV set. In those days, you could adjust the color by turning knobs. Color accuracy didn't matter, though, as the event was broadcast on CBS in shadowy black and white, and narrated by Walter Cronkhite. I was sitting on our living room floor, which had blue, wall-to-wall shag carpeting that reminded me of the ocean. Obviously, this was not our usual Sunday night TV fare. We weren't watching *Bonanza*. We were tuned in to TV's greatest reality show ever: just me, my parents, our dog and 600 million other people around the globe.

The moon landing couldn't have come at a better time: the previous year, 1968, saw the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, race riots in cities across the country, violent student protests, the police clashing with demonstrators at the Democratic convention in Chicago and the escalation of the Vietnam War. Two high school friends of mine, one who lived up the block and another whose hall locker was next to mine, had already been

killed in that conflict.

But the moment Armstrong stepped off the ladder of the Apollo 11 space capsule, the future seemed to be defined once again by hope and possibility.

As Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked atop the Sea of Tranquility, their bodies defied gravity. The images of them bouncing up and down — like two kids jumping on a bed — brought back some of our lost innocence.

The moon landing was proof that America still had the best scientists in the world and the biggest dreamers. Combine the two and anything could happen. President Kennedy knew that. We had actually fulfilled his vision of putting a man on the moon before the decade was out.

One other fantastic notion was ignited by possibility: At some future date *I* could be going to the moon! I mean, *couldn't everybody?*

The living room of our suburban rancher was in the back part of our house, so we rarely shut the drapes on the picture window. We didn't have backyard neighbors. Even at night nobody could see in. Or so I thought. Yet as I watched the moon landing unfold, I felt a presence looking over my shoulder. I turned around and there in the darkening sky was the full moon watching me watching it on television.

When I saw that Neil Armstrong had died, I didn't have to wonder where I was or what I was doing the night he stepped off that ladder and said "That's one small step for man. . ."

Without hesitation, my mind retrieved that luminous memory with its sense of hope and opportunity. It had remained intact, meant to be brought out and relived, 43 years later.