Forty Years Ago...

On 16 July 1969, at 9:32 AM EDT a Saturn V rocket lifted off launch pad 39 A. Three astronauts were aboard: Neil Armstrong, Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin, and Michael Collins. The previous mission, Apollo 10, was a dress rehearsal. Apollo 10 went through the same critical points that this mission, would, except for one. Whereas Apollo 10 flew just 50,000 ft above the lunar surface, this mission, Apollo 11, would actually land two astronauts on the Moon.

On 25 May 1961, President John F. Kennedy challenged Congress when he said, “…I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.” Eight years later, and prior to the end of the decade, NASA met the late President’s challenge when, on 20 July 1969, the world heard those immortal words “Houston, Tranquility Base here, the Eagle has landed”.

“The Eagle Has Landed”

On 20 July 1969 at 3:17 pm EDT, the lunar module, “Eagle”, landed on the surface of the Moon in Mare Tranquillitatis (the Sea of Tranquility). The landing was the culmination of the work of tens of thousands of people across the nation, of the work of the Mercury program and the Gemini program, and four previous Apollo missions. The world was captivated as Neil Armstrong bounded down the ladder of the lunar module until he reached the landing pads.

Forty years later, there are some who claim that the landing was a hoax: that the whole endeavor was filmed in a studio. However, in a scene that would only happen in real life, and as he stepped onto the surface of the Moon, Neil Armstrong uttered, yet another line that has become historic: “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind”.

Of course, the first clause should read as “That’s one small step for a man...”. One would think that if this had been staged, that mistake would not have been made. Buzz Aldrin followed Armstrong 19 minutes later when he too stepped onto the lunar surface. What followed was one and three-quarter hours of two Americans collecting Moon samples, setting up experiments and giving the world the sight of two human beings working on the Moon. In the end, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin spent a total of 21 hours on the Moon. They collected a total of 20.87 kg of lunar samples.

What goes up...

The crew of Apollo 11 came home on 24 July 1969 as the command module Columbia splashed down in the Pacific. With the safe return of her crew to the Earth, Apollo 11 completely fulfilled Kennedy’s challenge. The astronauts were quarantined for three weeks after recovery to safe guard against any possible extraterrestrial pathogens.

When do we go back?

Monday, 20 July 2009, is the fortieth anniversary of humanity’s first tentative steps on another celestial body. Humanities last steps were taken by Gene Cernan as he left the Moon in December of 1972. No one then, I’m sure, would have dreamed it would take more than 37 years for us to return to the Moon, and continue the exploration of our nearest celestial neighbor.