

Target America 1972: When Terrorists Threatened Apollo

An Untold Story of Apollo 17

By David Schlom

Just as the seventh of December marks a day of infamy in American history, 11 September 2001 has now made its mark as a black day in our nation's saga. On another 7 December, in 1972, a terrorist organization targeted one of America's proudest achievements — Project Apollo. Fortunately, that tale is an obscure one in the annals of our space program, because the intended targets survived unscathed. But most Americans are unaware that the final flight to the Moon was being viewed through the sinister eyes of a notorious terrorist group ironically named Black September.

It is 6 December 1972. At Launch Complex 39A, where four years earlier Apollo 8 left on its historic first voyage to the Moon, a gleaming Saturn V stands majestically illuminated by crossed floodlights. Atop the stack sits the command module *America*, awaiting the nation's final flight to the Moon. Tucked inside for their two-week odyssey are Commander Eugene Cernan, command module pilot Ron Evans and lunar module pilot Harrison Schmitt.

It is the first night launch in the history of the space program. Dictated by the inexorable laws of celestial mechanics, Apollo 17 must lift off by the early morning hours of 7 December or slip its launch window. The window is dictated by the angle of sunlight on the Moon. When Cernan and Schmitt descend to the lunar surface aboard

the lunar module Challenger, the shadows cast by the sun must be low enough to show the relief of the rugged mountains ringing the Taurus-Littrow valley so that Cernan can pilot his craft to a safe landing.

But it is another, more sinister kind of shadow that concerns Cernan while he sits atop his Saturn V. A few weeks before the mission, United States intelligence agencies advised NASA security management that the Black September terrorist organization might be targeting the final lunar mission for some kind of attack. Cernan recounted his experiences in his excellent autobiography, *The Last Man on the Moon*. At first, NASA officials decided not to tell the crew of the threat since they already had an ambitious lunar mission to carry out — the longest and most challenging of all the Apollo flights. But then one day Cernan saw a noticeable change in security measures at the Cape.

When the astronauts were informed of the terrorism threat, they noticed that the entrance to their crew quarters had been changed from a standard door to one made of stainless steel — it was bullet proof. Security measures around the Cape became much tighter. Helicopters patrolled the sand spits and sawgrass wetlands around Merritt Island and the launch facility under the direction of the Cape's legendary security chief Charles "Supercop" Buckley.

From 1960, before Alan B. Shepard's historic flight, to the space shuttle era in 1981, Buckley served as the Chief of Security and Fire Operations at the nation's spaceport. Prior to that, Buckley had worked for the Atomic Energy



The final Apollo lunar space vehicle awaits lift-off, December 1972.

Commission overseeing security for atomic tests in the Pacific and at the test site in Nevada. While working at Kennedy Space Center, Buckley acknowledged that threats were routine. “We had many threats,” said Buckley. “Most were in the form of bomb threats and such but the one for Apollo 17 was different. I got a call from a Pentagon Duty Officer informing me that Black September might be trying to go after the crew or their families.”

Buckley tightened the already stringent security measures at KSC. “We had the steel door put on the astronaut’s quarters and I put a guard with a Thompson submachine gun in a quick open locker right outside their door,” recalled the security chief.

On the night of 6-7 December, the Cape had been turned into an impregnable fortress. But by then, intelligence gathering indicated that the huge Saturn V, which contained the explosive equivalent of an atomic bomb, was probably not the target for the terrorists. It was the wives and children of Cernan and Evans (Schmitt was a bachelor) that were the intended victims. Who were the fanatics that would consider taking hostage the innocent family members of the crew? They were the same group responsible for some of the bloodiest terrorist attacks of the twentieth century.

In September of 1970, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) carried out a series of notorious acts including the hijacking and destruction of several airliners. The acts were part of an escalating fury of violence between backers of the Palestine resistance and

Israel and its moderate Arab neighbors. On 6 September, the PFLP acting under the direction of Dr. Waddi Haddad carried out one of the most notorious hijackings in history. The crime began with the simultaneous hijacking and diversion of a Swissair DC-8 and a TWA Boeing 707. The planes were diverted to Jordan and landed at Dawson Field, 30 miles from Amman. In return for the airliners, the terrorists were demanding the release of Palestinian fighters in Israeli jails. Days later, a BOAC VC-10 was also hijacked and diverted and a Pan Am Boeing 747 was hijacked to Cairo. While the world watched in horror, the terrorists proceeded to blow up the planes on the ground when their demands for the release of fellow terrorist Leila Khaled and six other guerrillas went unmet. Fighting between Jordanian troops loyal to King Hussein and Palestinians intensified.

In a foreshadowing of the trauma of 2001, the terrorist group was a loosely based network with cells all over the Middle East and Europe — particularly Germany. By the spring of 1972, while the Apollo 17 astronauts’ training went into high gear, Black September hatched a plan to carry out a bold kidnapping on German soil. The targets were the enthusiastic Olympic athletes representing Israel. They came to Munich in the late summer of 1972 with hopes high to compete and represent their young nation. Those hopes were dashed when Black September terrorists broke into the Israeli apartments in the Olympic Village, killing two and taking nine hostages on 5 September. The following day, the commandos and German police engaged in a bloody battle

that foiled an attempt to save the hostages. All of the Israeli athletes went home in coffins.

With the backdrop of the tragedy of the XXth Olympiad fresh in everyone's minds, the threat to Apollo 17 was taken seriously indeed. As the countdown clock ticked down, Cernan's thoughts were mostly on the rocket that he was about to ride to the Moon. "The Saturn V was alive," said Cernan. "You almost had to fall in love with that magnificent beast to be comfortable riding it." But Cernan also knew that outside the cabin of *America*, Buckley's security teams were combing the sand spits and swamps to be sure that if anything went wrong with this rocket, it would be NASA's responsibility and not that of a group of fanatic commandos.

After a glitch in the computer system was detected just prior to the firing sequence, the astronauts had to endure a hold as the calendar flipped to the historic date — 7 December. Finally, with the extermination of the computer bugs, the Saturn's five mighty engines roared to life, spewing flame — controlled but violent fury turning Florida midnight into blazing dawn. In the previously placid waters surrounding the pad, the concussive shockwave startled fish into a leaping frenzy. Apollo 17 was on its way to the Moon and there was nothing that Black September could do about it now.

Back in Houston, flight controllers took over the mission and the venerable director of the Manned Spacecraft Center watched as his team watched over the nation's final lunar voyage. Kraft recalled to *Ad Astra* that security measures were as tight in Houston as they had been at the Cape. "I do recall that we had armed security people with automatic weapons on top of the buildings watching over us during the flight," said Kraft. "We also had security details attached to every family," Kraft added. "But that was normal for all of the missions because of all the people who needed to be kept away from the families."

Aboard *America*, Cernan, Evans and Schmitt prepared for their S-IV-B to ignite as Houston relayed the final command to go for "Trans lunar injection." The ever-reliable third stage relit and accelerated the astronauts to 25,000 miles per hour — fast enough to slip the surly bonds of Earth and head for the Moon.

Back in Florida, the families of the astronauts were relieved that their husbands and fathers were finally on their way. Gene Cernan's wife Barbara and daughter Tracy were veterans of the spaceflight adventure. Jan Evans had supported her husband and lived through even more harrowing

duty — as the wife of a Vietnam combat pilot. With her husband on his way to the Moon, she and her children Jaime and Jon joined the Cernans the morning after the launch to board a NASA Gulfstream and headed for Houston.

During the eighty-six hour coast to the Moon, the biggest problems for the crew of *America* were actually rather mundane. Ron Evans had lost his scissors, a blunt nosed surgical variety that was used to open the food bags. Months before, he had been flying missions off the deck of the *U.S.S. Ticonderoga* off the coast of North Vietnam. Now he was off to the Moon looking for scissors so that he wouldn't go hungry while Cernan and Schmitt explored the surface.

For most Americans, *Challenger* is a name synonymous with disaster for NASA. But for those from the Apollo era, it is also the name of one of the pluckiest spacecraft in history. The last of its kind to fly, Lunar Module 12 was built

with the care emblematic of the contributions of the Grumman Corporation to Apollo. It would bear the historic name *Challenger* and would be piloted by Cernan into the box canyon known as Taurus-Littrow. For three days, *Challenger* would serve as a manned lunar base from which Cernan and Schmitt would carry out the lengthiest and most scientifically productive exploration of the lunar surface.

If Cernan was concerned about the safety and welfare of his and Evans' family back on the Earth, one certainly couldn't tell it from his performance on the Moon. During three EVA's, the two lunar explorers covered nearly 19 miles of total distance using their lunar rover. The spent a total of 22 hours outside of *Challenger* and if other lunar voyagers seemed cool and calculating in their ventures, this crew threw themselves into the adventure with sheer joy and enthusiasm. Schmitt in particular seemed to relish his role as the only geologist to ever walk on

another world, regaling Houston and the world back home with renditions of "Oh bury me not on the lone prairie," "What is this crazy thing called love," and even "We're off to see the wizard." Cernan and Schmitt turned the art of Moonwalking into a kind of Olympic event as they bounded and mimicked cross country skiers, rolled boulders down hills and even tossed the geologic hammer.

Despite the carefree attitude that came over the airways in color television from 239,000 miles away, Cernan's thoughts were often focused on the waning gibbous Earth that hung over the magnificent peaks of the Taurus-Littrow Valley. At one point, he urged Schmitt to take a few moments to look at the incredible blue marble hanging over their home on the Moon. Schmitt replied characteristically, "You've seen

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The Apollo 17 prime crew (left to right): Ron Evans, Jack Schmitt, and Gene Cernan.

one Earth, you've seen 'em all." The geologist had his mind on the task at hand — lunar exploration.

Back in Houston, Cernan's daughter Tracy was preparing to star in her own television broadcast as she provided expert commentary for Jim Hartz on *The Today Show*. Fathers and daughters often share a very special bond and the one between nine-year-old Tracy and her astronaut father was special indeed. While Cernan was bounding around the Moon, his daughter told the national audience (in her maxi skirt that featured a large Apollo 17 mission patch) that it looked like her Dad and Schmitt were "having a ball up there!" When asked if her father was going to bring her back anything special, she told Hartz, "I can't tell you." Hartz persisted and the maxiskirted Cernan gave in with an answer. "He's going to bring me back a Moonbeam."

For Gene Cernan, his daughter's "Moonbeams" were a pleasant distraction from the reality of the Black September threat. He had wondered before the mission even began: What would he do if Barbara and Tracy were taken hostage? If his daughter were held at knife point, would he denounce his beloved country, for which his command ship was named, in front of a worldwide television audience? "It's kind of like the question, 'What would you do if the Lunar Module's ascent stage failed to ignite and you were stranded on the Moon?'" Cernan, like others before him had been asked that question. But this was different. All of the astronauts were men who were willing to give what Lincoln had

called, "the last full measure of devotion." But what if his precious daughter was threatened? It is a question that he thankfully did not have to answer.

While Apollo 17's lunar explorations went off without a hitch, there were ominous events occurring back home — one near the MSC in Houston. On Interstate 10 outside Beaumont, Texas, a car was pulled over en route from Houston. It is not clear why this car was singled out, but its trunk contained a dark cargo. Chris Kraft remembers, "The man they pulled over had a trunk full of sophisticated weapons. I don't recall that there were explosives but there were certainly many guns."

In lunar orbit, Ron Evans piloted *America* and carried out the last set of observations by a solo lunar voyager. Like previous command module pilots, Evans had been trained by Egyptian-born geologist Farouk El-Baz. Evans' descriptions of the lunar surface were enthusiastic and effusive. Privately, he seethed over the lip service that politicians were paying to Apollo's accomplishments while axing the federal space budget.

In his final minutes on the surface, Gene Cernan parked the rover about a mile away from *Challenger*. In a privately significant moment, he performed an act of faith and love as he sent back a "Moonbeam." It took the form of a father's finger, carving out the initials TDC in the lunar regolith for Teresa Dawn Cernan — his daughter's initials. He then prepared for a bittersweet moment, leaving the last human footprints on the Moon.

Apollo's explorations ended as they had began, in the spirit of peace for all humanity. Cernan's stirring words that "God willing, as we shall return . . ." remains unfulfilled. As he had on each previous EVA, Cernan asked for the universal traveler's blessing, "Godspeed the crew of Apollo 17." As a worldwide television audience watched, *Challenger's* ascent engine ignited and the final lunar module carried its precious human and rock cargo back toward rendezvous with Evans in *America*.

Because of his patriotic and unflappable attitude, Evan's nickname was perfectly aligned to the ship he piloted. "Captain America" may not have walked on the Moon but he did get to perform a spacewalk to retrieve the magazines of film he had shot while in orbit. His old ship, the *Ticonderoga*, awaited the intrepid voyagers back home in the Pacific Ocean. On 19 December 1972 an era came to an end when *America* safely splashed down and was recovered by Evans' former shipmates.

Two days later, Cernan, Evans and Schmitt landed at Ellington AFB outside Houston. Young Tracy Cernan ("Punk" to her Dad) gave her father a big hug and Cernan thought to himself, "Thank God, no Black September." But Charles Buckley's work wasn't over yet — though this time it was more pleasant. "Cernan had me organize a world tour and we visited countries in Africa and Asia — including Pakistan," Buckley reminisced. "The people we met all over the world loved the astronauts."

Black September would not reach Cernan's America until a dark day in 2001. While the names of the criminal group may be different, the face is the same — evil. What lessons can we, as Americans and space enthusiasts learn

from Apollo's final mission nearly thirty years ago? Apollo began with a President's challenge to a nation to accomplish a seemingly impossible task. And yet we did it. Apollo ended in a less innocent, more cynical time a mere decade later as an unpopular war and scandal would shake the nation.

When the World Trade Center Towers fell on 11 September 2001, Apollo lunar geologist Dr. Farouk El-Baz had a daughter just a few blocks away. In horror, she watched as hundreds leapt to their deaths. When the purveyors of evil couch themselves in Islamic rhetoric, it is instructive to think of the real faithful — people like El-Baz who renounce these acts as contrary to their beliefs.

Where else but in America could he take part in a nation's greatest adventure? Or a geologist get to spend time on a field trip on the Moon? Ron Evans, who passed away in his sleep in 1990, found himself flying to the Moon while friends were held in North Vietnamese prisons.

What of NASA now? How do plans to venture to Mars fit in with a nation at war with terrorism around the globe? Perhaps it is time for a new paradigm for our space program. To paraphrase its greatest presidential champion, maybe NASA and its supporters should stop wondering what the country can do for it and ask what it can do for our country.

"Our space program is standing in quicksand right now," said Chris Kraft. "If it were up to me, I'd go to (Secretary of Defense) Donald Rumsfeld and ask 'What can NASA do to help?'" There are bright and capable people in our space program. Mars lies far in the future but "NASA has the potential to be a powerful tool in this new war against an elusive and treacherous enemy."

The Third World War was supposed to be between superpowers locked in an Armageddon-like conflagration. At the time this is being written, America and its allies are beginning to strike back against those responsible for the worst act of terror in world history. Gene Cernan knows that he is fortunate. He took part in the greatest adventure in human history. Despite a real terrorist threat, he and his family are safe and he is able to spend time with his grandchildren on his beloved ranch in the Texas hill country. Like most of us, he cried after the attacks on 11 September, and then became



Photo courtesy Kipp Teague / Retroweb

Apollo 17 lifts off from Kennedy Space Center, Florida, in Apollo's only manned night launch.

angry. He probably wanted to get his old uniform out of the closet, hop into the cockpit of a fighter and take care of Osama bin Laden himself. Our Apollo era fighter jocks are around 70 years old now. It wouldn't be a fair fight — the terrorists wouldn't stand a chance.

As for Charles Buckley, the former security chief says that the current crisis has definitely beefed up the defense of Kennedy Space Center. "I really only know what I read in the papers like everyone else but the other day I drove down the highway by the Air Force bases and they were pulling over cars left and right," said Buckley. "Supercop," who was given a special badge with the number 007 for Apollo 11's historic mission, says that if anyone tried to get into unauthorized areas, "They'd be shot on sight." The Buckley family is still part of our nation's security. His oldest daughter is the Assistant Deputy Director of the Secret Service and has been protecting presidents since Ronald Reagan began his term in 1981.

Given the current world crisis, leadership within and without NASA is needed to keep the United States viable as a space power. America is more than a country, it is

an idea that has lit the world for two and a quarter centuries. The flags flying over our homes and the sacred part of Manhattan known as "Ground Zero" are essentially the same as those left on the Moon. We should remember that stars highlight the field of blue. Showing the world, then and now, who we truly are. ★

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