

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

What on earth?

There was one American who was not on this earth on September 11th, 2001 and that was Expedition Three Commander Frank Culbertson who was in orbit in the International Space Station. He says it was difficult to comprehend the news he and his Russian cohorts heard about events in New York City, but they happened to be 250 miles over the city that day. They saw the fire and huge billows of smoke and Culbertson took photos.

No one paid much attention, but that Tuesday other American astronauts were on their way to the space station. In fact, no matter what day our space shuttles take off or land, we don't pay much attention anymore. The International Space Station is celebrating its first full year of habitation and the science research laboratory, the Destiny module, was launched and attached this year. The space station is now the most complex and powerful spacecraft ever built. There is a page on the NASA website which illustrates exactly where it is and shows to the second how long it has been in orbit. About 11:00 am. CST, on December 29, the station has been in orbit over 1135 days. Accumulated hours of human cargo, the crews, have reached 424 days.

NASA programs are accomplishing incredible research and experiments. The space station, only one of many NASA programs, is made possible by NASA's solid fleet of space shuttles. The exception, of course, the shuttle Challenger, which in 1986 exploded 73 seconds after take-off and is the worst space accident ever. In spite of this horrific tragedy and set-back the shuttle program celebrated its 20th anniversary this year, having carried more than three million pounds of cargo and 600 passengers into space. Do the names Columbia, Discovery and Atlantis ring a bell?

I've been fascinated with space exploration since it started with Project Mercury in 1958. It's no coincidence that my son, who was born in 1969, is named Neil. We must have known that Neil Armstrong was going to be the first person to step onto the surface of the moon in August of that year.

I'm not much of a collector, but I do have copies of Time, National Geographic and Life magazines from the 1960's and some fantastic pictures.

The goals and programs of NASA are vast: in the areas of aerospace technology, biological and physical research, earth science, human exploration and development of space and space science. For example, we send many unmanned missions to Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, asteroids, Saturn, the Moon. This year astronomers using the Hubble Telescope measured the atmosphere of a planet outside our solar system. Astronomers discovered eight new planets outside our solar system, which have circular orbits similar to those in our own planetary system. They also discovered water-bearing worlds beyond our solar system. These findings are seeking to answer the question, "Is there life on another world?"

NASA helps us predict weather patterns, including those of hurricanes and other storms. This summer NASA satellites tracked the devastating spread of wildfires, helping federal, state and local governments deal with these natural disasters. They are tracking, definitely from a bird's eye view, the phenomena of global warming.

NASA is working on laser technologies, modernizing surgical procedures and cancer detection. NASA funded research presented evidence that Earth's most

severe mass extinction, an event 250 millions years ago that wiped out 90 percent of life, was triggered by a collision with a comet or an asteroid.

This year they launched the Mars Odyssey, which will reach the planet six months after it left Earth. During that time Mars will have moved one-quarter of the way around its orbit. So it's vital that NASA know where the target is at launch and where it will be when the spacecraft arrives. Back to astronomy!

But don't look for humans to be taking off for Mars anytime soon. Time Almanac says the project would cost billions and Mars is 47 million miles away, compared to the Moon, which is only a short hop of 240,000 miles. The Almanac says, "Unlike previous space missions, when these astronauts leave earth, they will not be able to return to Earth for almost three years. The trip to Mars will take between four to six months, depending on the propulsion system used. After the interplanetary voyagers arrive on the Red Planet, they will have to remain there for approximately 18 months until the proper alignment of Earth and Mars allows them to blast off for home."

For those who say, "But shouldn't we be using that money for the poor people here?" I answer, "We can do both." After the moon landing Astronaut Buzz Aldrin said, "This has been far more than three men on a voyage to the Moon — this stands as a symbol of the insatiable curiosity of all mankind to explore the unknown."

Well, let's face it: if it weren't for that curiosity, all of us would still be living on the continent of Africa. Or perhaps, not be here at all.

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