

# The last men on the Moon

by Alyson Kerr, Education Support Officer

On 14th December 1972, the Apollo 17 crew finished 22 hours of rock and dust sampling and started the journey home. As they left the surface, the mission commander uttered these words,

'As I take man's last step from the surface, back home for some time to come - but we believe not too long into the future - I'd just like to say what I believe history will record- that America's challenge of today has forged man's destiny of tomorrow. And, as we leave the Moon at Taurus-Littrow, we leave as we came and, God willing, as we shall return, with peace and hope for all mankind.'

The famed Apollo lunar missions had finally ended. The program was created in a tense political environment between the USA and USSR. President John F Kennedy announced in 1961 that it was the country's intention to have a Man on the Moon by the end of the decade. The USA had been plagued by the USSR's continuing success in obtaining the World's Space 'firsts', the Russians had put the first object into space in the form of Sputnik, the first animal, Laika the dog and more importantly, the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin. America was lagging behind so they set their sights even higher by proposing a lunar landing. Public support was overwhelming as the country realised the need to show the Russians that they were technologically equal if not more advanced. By 1969 they achieved their goal when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the Moon. Their success was helped by the fact that the Russian chief designer, Sergei Korolev, had died in 1966 leaving a gap in their development programme. Several more lunar landings were planned to study the surface and there were hopes that one day a permanent base may be established. By 1972 after six successful lunar missions, (Apollo 13 met with near-disaster and never reached the Fra Mauro highlands), the program ground to a halt. The crew of Apollo 17 knew that they would be the last to set foot



Image Credit: NASA

**Apollo 17 crew** Eugene A. Cernan, Ronald E. Evans and Harrison Schmitt pictured before the flight

on the Moon's surface for many years. Further planned missions to the Moon had been cancelled and no more were planned.

But why would NASA cancel a successful program like Apollo? The main reason was financial. The expense of putting a man on the moon was astronomical. By 1965, NASA's budget was 0.8% of the country's Gross Domestic Product and by the time it finished had cost over \$25 billion, this equates to \$135 billion in today's money.

**"The Apollo program has ended but the idea has not died"**

The program was born out of necessity and was rushed. If it had not been for the tense relations with USSR, the program may have taken longer to develop. Research into cost-efficient technology would have been the norm and the program would have developed at a stable pace. This was not to be and it was the main reason that the program ended, it could not be financially sustained. Politicians had difficulty in justifying the expense to the public. Support for the program had wavered in the years since achieving their main aim. The novelty had worn off and the public were left to look at an enormous bill for their pride. Sensing this, politicians began to

take the focus away from Space and onto issues in their own country.

The Apollo program may have ended but the idea has not died with it. There are NASA plans for further lunar landings starting about 2020, but the missions which follow these may be internationally funded. Many countries, including America, Russia and European countries, are working together on project such as the International Space Station and this amicable relationship will be developed to incorporate missions the Moon. The benefits of international cooperation are obvious. Not only will the cost be shared but the technology will be advanced from the many sources available. In the meantime, scientists are still analysing and compiling data on the samples brought back from the Apollo missions and hope to supplement their research in the years to come. When we mark the anniversary of Apollo 17 this month we can appreciate its legacy for the future and it will always be remembered for its contribution to the exploration of Space.



Image Credit: NASA

**Geologist and astronaut** Harrison 'Jack' Schmitt poses with the US flag. He was the first scientist to carry out research on another world.