

# Eugene Cernan

## 1934–2017 astronaut

**Eugene Cernan was the last man to walk on the moon. “The landing,” said the astronaut, “is like being immersed in a sheet of fire, a comet, a shooting star.” Cernan, with crewmates Thomas Stafford and John Young, also travelled faster than any human being in history: Apollo 10 reached 24,791 mph.**

### His journey to the moon

Born in Chicago in 1934 to a Czech mother and Slovak father, Cernan became a naval aviator before being selected by NASA for astronaut training. He went on to pilot Apollo 10 in May 1969, before finally being selected as commander of Apollo 17, which carried out the most recent moon landing, in December 1972. It was on this voyage that Cernan became the twelfth – and last – man to walk on the moon.

He survived that great adventure, without becoming capsized by it, as Buzz Aldrin was, using alcohol; or retreating from it, as the reclusive Neil Armstrong did. Like many astronauts, he retained a military matter-of-factness: ‘We were there to do a job.’

Occasionally, though, his reticence gave way to a sense of wonder. ‘You can hear yourself breathe inside the suit,’ he said of the long moments of stillness just before the launch. Five hundred thousand people watched the night launch of Apollo 17 from Kennedy Space Center, in Florida, including his then wife, Barbara.



He spent three days on the moon's surface. 'People say, "What was it really like up there?" We saw some dazzling, extraordinary things. I mean, not too many people get to see an Earth-rise.' He pauses for a long time. 'When I was boarding the lunar module for the last time and I looked at my footprints, I knew I wouldn't be coming back. That was the one moment when I wanted to stop time.'

## After the moon

Unlike the first man to walk on the moon, the late Neil Armstrong, with whom he became friends, Cernan relished the celebrity the moon landing gave him. He made many public appearances. He said, 'I enjoy meeting people.'

There was a personal cost to that celebrity, and Cernan's first wife, Barbara, did not enjoy it. 'If you think going to the moon is hard, try staying at home.' Their marriage did not survive. The Apollo astronauts were an elite group of alpha males, to which family often took second place. Cernan said, 'We were so "tunnel vision" about going to the moon, but sooner or later, you've got to come to grips with who you are and what's important in life. All I ever wanted to do was fly. For a long time, there was nothing else.' Cernan died on 16th January, 2017, surrounded by his family.