July 20, 1969: One Giant Leap For Mankind
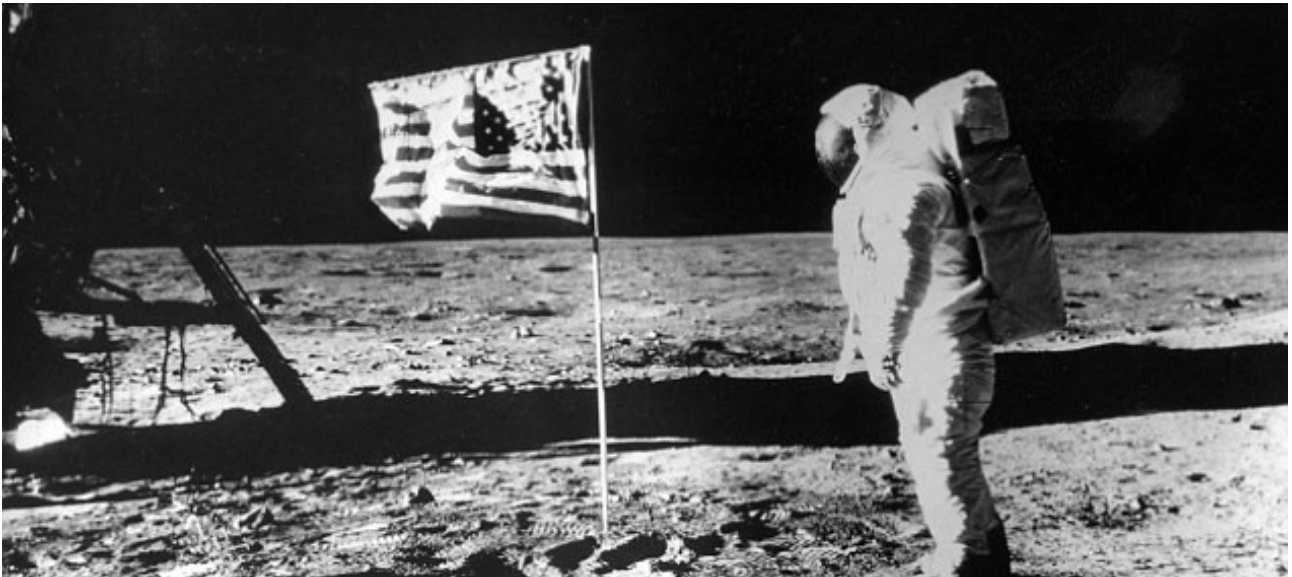

July 1969. It's a little over eight years since the flights of Gagarin and Shepard, followed quickly by President Kennedy's challenge to put a man on the moon before the decade is out.

It is only seven months since NASA's made a bold decision to send Apollo 8 all the way to the moon on the first manned flight of the massive Saturn V rocket.

Now, on the morning of July 16, Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins sit atop another Saturn V at Launch Complex 39A at the Kennedy Space Center. The three-stage 363-foot rocket will use its 7.5 million pounds of thrust to propel them into space and into history.

At 9:32 a.m. EDT, the engines fire and Apollo 11 clears the tower. About 12 minutes later, the crew is in Earth orbit. After one and a half orbits, Apollo 11 gets a "go" for what mission controllers call "Translunar Injection" - in other words, it's time to head for the moon. Three days later the crew is in lunar orbit. A day after that, Armstrong and Aldrin climb into the lunar module Eagle and begin the descent, while Collins orbits in the command module Columbia.

Collins later writes that Eagle is "the weirdest looking contraption I have ever seen in the sky," but it will prove its worth.

When it comes time to set Eagle down in the Sea of Tranquility, Armstrong improvises, manually piloting the ship past an area littered with boulders. During the final seconds of descent, Eagle's computer is sounding alarms. It turns out to be a simple case of the computer trying to do too many things at once, but as Aldrin will later point out, "unfortunately it came up when we did not want to be trying to solve these particular problems."

Over the next three and a half years, 10 astronauts will follow in their footsteps. Gene Cernan, commander of the last Apollo mission leaves the lunar surface with these words: "We leave as we came and, God willing, as we shall return, with peace, and hope for all mankind.