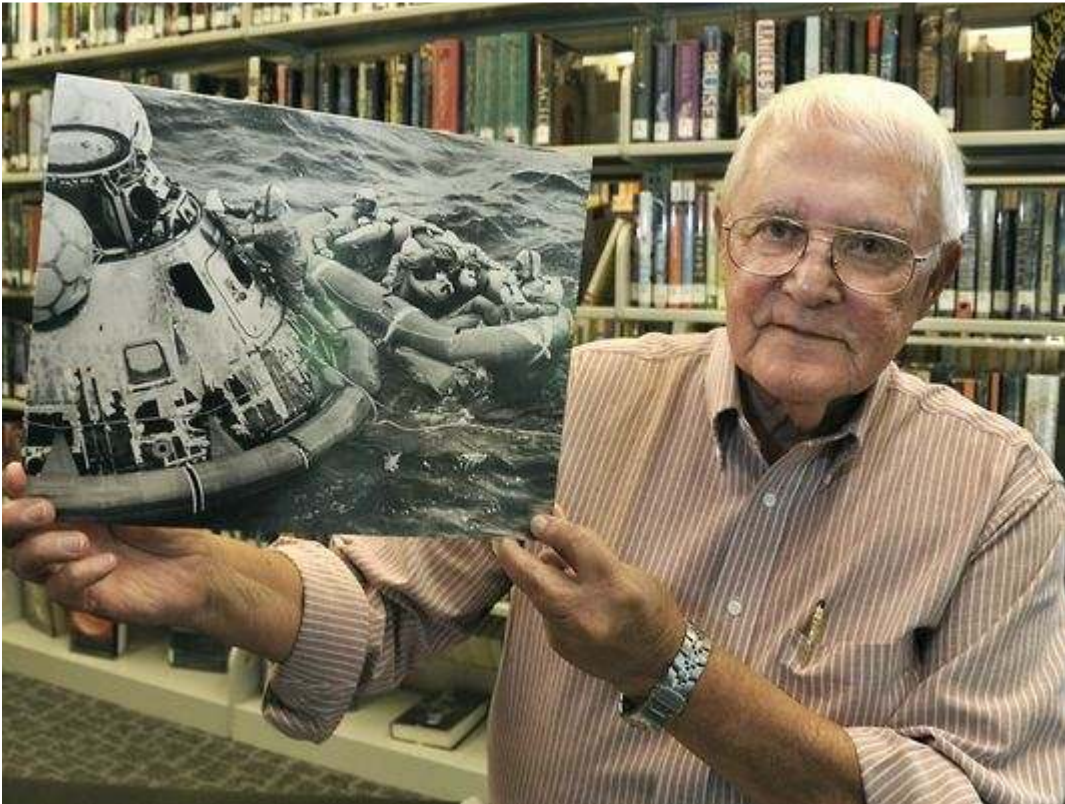


Local photographer recounts chronicling Apollo landing

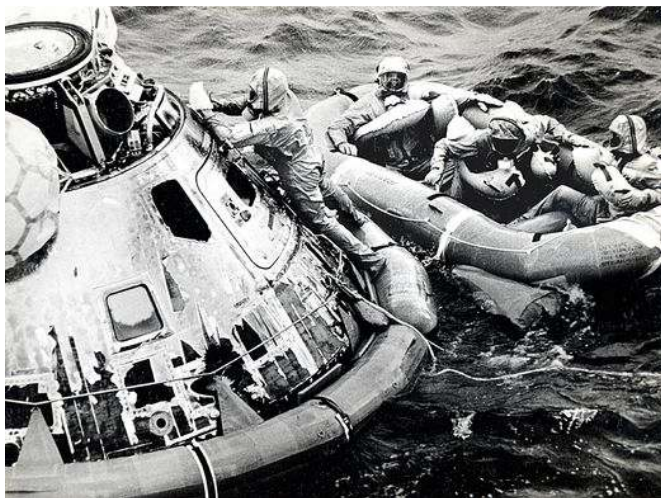
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(Photo: Bill Sanders , wsanders@citizen-times.com)
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Editor's note: Milt Putnam, former U.S. Navy chief photographer now living in Fletcher, chronicled with his cameras the recovery of the astronauts of the Apollo 11 moon landing on July 24, 1969, in the Pacific Ocean off Hawaii. This is his recollection of the events surrounding that historic event 45 years ago this week.

Apollo 11 splashdown covered by local photographer



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On June 27, 1969, a banging on my door at Naval Air Station, Imperial Beach, California, shook me out of a deep sleep. It was 4 a.m. Bill Case, a senior chief journalist from Pacific Fleet Headquarters Hawaii, was there with a big smile on his face. He asked, "Is your bag packed? You ready to leave for the Apollo 11 recovery this morning?"

It would be another few weeks before the actual recovery, but the mission required those weeks for nonstop rehearsals in the Pacific. It began with eight HS-4 helicopters with "Black Knight" flight crews landing on USS Hornet 75 miles off the California coast.

On to Pearl Harbor, where the ship was loaded with additional recovery equipment and US Navy Underwater Demolition Team 11 (UDT-11). Also boarding were civilian television crews, and magazine and newspaper photographers and writers.

During simulated recovery exercises UDT-11 swimmers jumped from helicopters into the Pacific and swam to the nearby training capsule (called a boilerplate) where they attached flotation collars to the dummy spacecraft and, playing the part of astronauts, were hoisted into helicopters time after time.

On July 16, Apollo 11 launched from Florida. At that time, Hornet was about 1,600 miles southwest of Hawaii at the Primary Launch Abort Area. If the astronauts had to make an emergency landing in the Pacific before leaving Earth's atmosphere, this was the location.

Within three hours of takeoff from Florida and over the Pacific, the spacecraft blasted out of Earth orbit toward the moon. Hornet then sailed north to the Primary Recovery Site, 1,200 miles southwest of Hawaii.

For the next week, practice recoveries continued, each day starting before dawn and lasting through early evening in all kinds of weather. During this time frame, 16 or 17 training recoveries were completed.

The lunar module piloted by Neil Armstrong touched down on the moon on July 20 – "Houston, Tranquility Base here, The Eagle has landed."

As Armstrong spoke those words, everyone listened closely through crackling static air waves on the ship's radio. Two and a half hours later we heard, "That's one small leap for man, one giant step for mankind."

Recovery day

Deteriorating weather with rain, high winds and rough seas approached the Primary Recovery Area and caused much concern on July 22. The Navy and NASA decided it best to move the splashdown site to another location 250 miles from the storm. USS Hornet steamed at full speed to the new location 950 miles southwest of Hawaii.

A group of photographers was sitting around shooting the bull when "Taps" played over the ship's speakers at 10 p.m., indicating bedtime. No one was sleepy – to tell the truth, we were a little nervous

knowing that within a few hours we would be photographing the first men to land and walk on the moon. It was near 12:30 a.m. when I went to bed, and still I could not sleep.

By 3 a.m. on July 24, Apollo 11 Recovery Day, all hands were up moving around. After breakfast, helicopter crews reported to the flight ready room, where we received last-minute instructions about splashdown times and location.

We lifted off the carrier in the dark. On board the photo helicopter, I had eight Nikon cameras. Only two had motors; the other six would have to be cocked by thumb. Lenses ranged from a 35 mm up to a 300 mm (no zoom lenses). Also in the camera bag were 60 rolls of Kodak Tri-X film and 15 rolls of Kodak color.

My primary duty was to shoot black & white for immediate release through the AP and UPI wire services to magazines and newspapers throughout the world. In 1969, civilian press photographers were not allowed to fly in military helicopters for the Apollo recoveries.

It was my job to photograph the splashdown, the UDT-11 swimmers attaching the flotation collar around spaceship Columbia to secure it in the tossing seas, the astronauts leaving Columbia and crawling into the life raft, and being hoisted into the recovery helicopter. And then back aboard Hornet to photograph the president talking with the astronauts.

Splashdown

It seemed like hours sitting high above Hornet waiting for Apollo 11 to arrive. Finally, word came that Apollo 11 had been picked up on radar and would splash down 12 miles downwind from the ship.

I lowered the port hatch (on the left side) on the photo helicopter. Lee Jones (from NASA) and I would sit side by side on the hatch steps shooting pictures of the recovery. While lowering the hatch my light meter cord became tangled and broke. The meter dropped into the sea and sank.

The primary recovery helicopter #66 and the photo helicopter approached the splashdown site in predawn darkness to find Columbia upside down and bobbing in fairly calm seas. The astronauts pushed a button to inflate three large flotation balloons to upright their craft.

My helicopter moved to the right 100 feet and hovered at 40 feet. We would stay at that spot until all three astronauts were hoisted into the recovery helicopter.

Commander Don Jones, flying helicopter #66, slowly moved in and dropped a marine location marker (green smoke bomb). At the break of dawn, one of the helicopters with the UDT-11 swimmers hovered near Columbia and three swimmers jumped into the ocean.

A second helicopter dropped life rafts and the flotation collar that would be used to help prevent Columbia from sinking. It took only a few minutes for the swimmers to attach the collar and position the rafts.

It was getting lighter by the second and I was already firing the Nikons, shooting whole 36 exposure rolls of film before changing to another camera and lens. Lee Jones had his 16 mm motion picture camera rolling as well.

The primary recovery helicopter made a slow pass near Columbia. Navy Lt. Clancy Hatleberg, the senior UDT-11 swimmer, jumped into the water and swam to the command module. The next helicopter used its rescue basket to lower a bag containing four uniforms never worn by space travelers before.

The uniforms, biological isolation garments (BIGs), were worn by the astronauts and Hatleberg during recovery because it was unknown if the astronauts would return to earth from the moon carrying some kind of germ or virus that would cause harm.

Hatleberg slipped into one of the BIG garments while the other swimmers in a raft moved 100 feet upwind from Columbia. At 6:20 a.m., Hatleberg quickly opened the command module hatch and tossed in three remaining uniforms, and closed the hatch just as quickly.

After a short wait, Hatleberg opened the hatch again and out came three moon adventurers covered head to toe in BIGs. Collins and Aldrin settled at each end of the life raft. Neil Armstrong sat in the middle and watched Clancy Hatleberg closely as he closed Columbia's hatch and locked it down.

Hatleberg sprayed a decontaminant over the module and around the hatch. He then wiped down each of the astronauts with a sodium hypochlorite solution to kill any moon germs that may have gotten on their BIG suits before they exited the command module.

The primary helicopter #66 moved over the spaceship and astronauts, lowering her rescue net to hoist each astronaut one at a time into the helicopter.

If I had jitters they were gone – the job at hand was foremost on my mind and I was shooting pictures as fast as possible. My mind was on automatic – shoot a few pictures, change the f/stop a little, ensure the next camera was still set on 1/250 of a second shutter speed, check the f/stop, reset the shutter speed as the light changed, etc.

When the last astronaut was lifted from the life raft into the recovery helicopter, the photo helicopter raced back to Hornet. It was also Lee Jones' and my job to photograph the astronauts as they stepped from the recovery helicopter and walked into the Mobile Quarantine Facility where they were to spend the next three days.

On the way back to the carrier, I stuffed 52 rolls of exposed film into the zippered pockets of my flight suit and 8 unexposed film into another pocket. I loaded three cameras to use in the hangar bay for when the astronauts arrived. I left five Nikons and the remaining unexposed film on the helicopter for pickup later.

The aftermath

Walking across the flight deck, I saw President Nixon watching the incoming helicopters. I stopped and shot a few pictures for the naval archives and then proceeded on to the hangar bay.

Lee Jones and I worked our way through hundreds of sailor to our assigned spots right in front of the MQF where everything would take place, joining dozens of news photographers and writers who were also covering the recovery and the president.

Knowing the president would be leaving the ship shortly after talking with the astronauts, I ran to the flight deck to get pictures of him shaking hands and speaking with some of the sailors. As I came alongside the sailors, President Nixon appeared through an open hatch and stepped onto the flight deck.

Immediately a Secret Service man stepped behind me and placed a hand on my left shoulder. Walking backwards taking pictures of the president shaking hands, the secret service guy stayed with me step for step. Suddenly I bumped into him and instantly both his hands were on my shoulders and he said "This is as far as we go, bub."

We were near the Presidential helicopter. President Nixon stopped in front of me. We shook hands and he asked if I would send him pictures of the recovery. He then boarded Marine One and lifted off for Johnston Island 250 miles away.

Walter Green (from AP) developed all my film. Upon seeing how many rolls of black and white film I had, he said, "Bet you didn't miss much," and I said, "Walter, if I did miss something, I couldn't ask Neil to do it again."

I had not eaten since breakfast at 3 a.m., but I was so tired by 8 p.m. that I laid down on my bunk still wearing boots and flight suit to rest for a couple of minutes before hitting the shower. I awoke at 6 the next morning still dressed.

The next day, Walter Green found me in the mess hall. He had a telegram from New York that read newspapers around the world had used more pictures that I had taken from the photo helicopter than any others.

Everyone involved with the recovery had the next day off. A couple of friends and I went to Waikiki Beach, walked around awhile, and then saw the movie, 2001: A Space Odyssey.

In a lifetime of taking pictures, I can safely say I've never had a more exciting photographic assignment than the Apollo 11 recovery, 45 years ago.

It was a tingling thrill to see the astronauts crawling out the command module into a life raft. My adrenaline was pumping, faster than Nikon camera motors could shoot. These men had just returned from the moon.

I'm very proud to have been chosen to photograph history. I always stand a little taller when I see one of my recovery pictures in a library book, a magazine, newspaper or anywhere. I think – wow, those pictures will be seen forever.

Milt Putnam retired from the Navy in 1979 as a Chief Photographer's Mate. He later worked for several newspapers and as director of photography for the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agriculture Sciences. In November 2011, Putnam, along with six others from the Apollo 11 Navy recovery team, was

invited to attend the ceremony awarding Congressional Gold Medals to astronauts John Glenn, Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Buzz Aldrin.