

A Personal Account of the Apollo XXI Mission

By Natalie Lewis

Part One

"That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Whenever I read this quote, I feel inspired. It tells me that if Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were able to walk on the moon in 1969, then surely in 2030 we, NASA, should be able to send astronauts to Mars. I'm getting ahead of myself, though; I should introduce myself. My name is Mark Bennett. I was the Johnson Space Center director for 11 years, and this is the account - from the perspective of yours truly - of the final Apollo, the XXI, and it's 16-month mission to Mars.

It all started in March. I still remember stepping up to the podium to speak, after Mr. Wilson, and how nervous I was. It was a big step for NASA, and the world. The entire staff at NASA had been under strict hush orders, and all the top NASA executives (including me) were confident that no word of our continued Apollo project was leaked to the press. Then, finally, we were ready, and reporters were invited to film us live, on camera, to the world. Harry Reynolds, the top administrator of NASA would make the announcement, and Evan Wilson - the deputy administrator - would speak after him. He would also congratulate all of NASA's employees, contributors, and donors for making the project available. I would speak next, and basically say the same things. Besides being nervous, I was excited - and I couldn't wait to reveal the secret that we had kept so carefully.

The whole project was designed in 2021. Mr. Reynolds had presented the idea first to Mr. Wilson, then to me. I was intrigued by the prospect, and more than a little excited. Our plans eventually solidified, and we went right to work. Mr. Wilson took care of the press, and made sure that they had no idea of our plans. Mr. Reynolds sent out a confidential email to all of NASA's employees about the revived Apollo project, and I was in charge of supervising the

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engineering of the Apollo XXI. Nine years passed, and it seemed much longer. I would sometimes stay hours after dark, and the more dedicated employees would as well. During the years we worked, we encountered some major setbacks, but to our relief we overcame them. One of our proudest moments was when we discovered the solution to making a temperature resistant outer shell for the Apollo XXI. There were already multiple scientific reports on the matter, and after a year the engineers found the solution. At the equator, Mars usually reaches about 68 °F at noon, and a low of about -243 °F at the poles, so it was essential to have the temperature resistant shell. Another problem that we dealt with was keeping up appearances, such as continuing to ferry astronauts to and from the space station. We had our work cut out for us, but we managed.

Let me slow down now, and explain why the Apollo project was discontinued in the first place. It started with the Apollo XVII. The Apollo XVII was the last (as of 2030) manned mission to the moon, and it launched on December 7, 1972. I can tell that you're wondering why then, if the last Apollo was the seventeenth, did we name ours the twenty-first? It isn't as well known, but there were going to be three more missions to the moon. That's right; on the Apollo XVIII, XIX, and XX. However, they were canceled due to monetary problems in 1970. After that, there wasn't as much public interest, so NASA canceled the project. (Sort of.) However, ever since the failures of the Apollo XVIII - XX, NASA has accumulated more money, enough to send astronauts to Mars.

And now that I'm through explaining, let me continue my story. This is right after the big announcement.

"Mr. Bennett! Mr. Bennett, why was this project kept a secret?" "Mr. Reynolds, why has NASA waited so long to announce their plans?" "Mr. Wilson? Any comments?" The press were

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swarming like bees on honey. I remember trying to smile politely (without showing my exasperation) - and failed. Harry Reynolds, on the other hand, looked like he grew up with people taking his picture. Hours later it was finally over. I went straight home after, took a shower, and went to bed immediately. I lay there, staring up at the dark ceiling. Thinking about the Apollo XXI, and what consequences it would bring. Then I fell asleep.

Part Two

"September 23, 2030. A day that we'll remember for the rest of our lives. The Apollo XXI is set to launch from Cape Canaveral, Florida, at 5 PM Eastern Standard Time. As I'm sure you already know, this spacecraft will travel on a 16 month round-trip mission to Mars. A special report from NASA has just come in, and it finally reveals the astronauts that will soon make history. And they are... Commander Robert Davis, Flight Engineer Anne McClain, and Command Module Pilot Edward Johnson. Rick, many people are discussing whether or not NASA will actually succeed. What's your opinion?"

"Well, Emily, I think that this time, NASA has bitten off more than they can chew. It-" I turned the TV off. I'd already heard all the theories about what might go wrong. Sometimes I'd even find myself wondering if something would. The Apollo XXI was set to launch tomorrow, and so many things could occur by then. We'd tried to be prepared, but there might be something that we'd overlooked. Maybe if we could push the date - no. I shook my head. Everything's fine... let's just hope it stays that way. I picked up my suitcase. Florida, here I come.

After a night of zero sleep, I found myself at Cape Canaveral, Florida. So far everything was fine. The astronauts and ground control were ready, and the Apollo XXI was passing all the tests so far. I was extremely anxious, but tried not to show it, as cameramen were hovering around,

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filming. Mr. Reynolds was there as well, talking to the cameramen. I probably should have been doing the same, but I was too anxious.

The two hour wait turned to one. I stayed near the front of the room, and stared at the Apollo XXI. When my radio suddenly beeped, I jumped. I quickly recovered myself and turned it on. I listened intently to what it said, then grinned and shouted across the room to Mr. Reynolds, "All systems clear! The Apollo XXI is ready to be boarded!" Everyone in the room clapped and watched as the three astronauts entered the Apollo XXI.

Perhaps we had celebrated too soon, but it felt like a victory when the voice crackled across the loudspeakers: "10. 9. We have ignition sequence. The engines are on. 4. 3. 2. 1. 0..." We watched in awe as the Apollo XXI rose. "...We have liftoff."

I had, at the time, considered that night to have been the best of my life. Everything after liftoff went so smoothly, it felt like a dream. We all celebrated, especially when Commander Davis radioed in to give the all clear. When I finally got to my hotel room (Florida's a long way from Texas) at around 6 AM, I went straight to bed. And I finally got a good night's sleep.

Part 3

It was five months after the launch when things started to go wrong. I had just returned to my office after lunch, when my secretary, Mrs. McDonald, opened the door. "Excuse me, Mr. Bennett, but you're wanted down at Mission Control Center." She looked slightly worried, and I sprang to my feet. "What's wrong?" I asked anxiously. "I don't know, sir, but they sounded a little upset." I blurted out a quick, "Thanks, I'll head over there now," then hurried down the hall toward the elevator.

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Once I reached the door leading to Mission Control Center, I slowed my pace and walked through the door. Employees were scurrying around, and given that they were all talking to each other, it was quite loud. Mr. Wilson had been standing by the screen, but when he saw me, he rushed over. "What's wrong, sir?" I asked him. He sighed. "Mark, we've got a problem."

It turned out that communications aboard the Apollo XXI were down. Which meant that we had no way of talking to the crew, and they had no way of talking to us.

"Luckily, the cameras are still working, or we'd really be in a tight spot," Mr. Wilson said. "Will you be able to fix it?" I asked. He looked grim. "We probably will, but it might take a while. The crew is working on it from their end, which helps, but..." I got the message. Just then, a harried looking employee came up, and said, interrupting, "Excuse me, Mr. Wilson, but we need you over here for a few minutes."

"Right," Mr. Wilson said. He added, "I'll keep you updated, Mark." Then he turned to go. I walked back to my office, my mind buzzing. There were many reasons why NASA had never attempted to send a manned spacecraft as far as Mars. We thought that we had everything covered, but if something as important as the communication system was down, then what else might go wrong? I brushed away those thoughts, but I couldn't quite shake the nagging doubt.

The communication system was fixed. I was updated yesterday, and I felt relieved that at least that problem was over with. Of course, now I had a more pressing concern: The Apollo XXI was set to enter Mars's atmosphere soon, and the stabilization was acting up. Of course, that might not be a problem, but if it happens to shut down before the astronauts land... it wouldn't be pretty.

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"Mr. Bennett!" I was jolted from my thoughts. A man came rushing into my office. "Mr. Bennett, they need you at Mission Control Center! Immediately!" I didn't speak, just dashed past him to the elevator.

When I threw open the door, I could see at once that there was something extremely wrong. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Reynolds were there, and so were all the staff members. It was eerily quiet. Every eye was fixed on the screen. I stopped. Mr. Reynolds glanced back, and said urgently, "Come in, Mark." I cautiously approached the screen, and squeezed between two silently crying employees. I looked. The screen showed the outside camera from the Apollo XXI. It was entering Mars's atmosphere. But something was wrong. I looked at Mr. Reynolds. I tried to say something, but couldn't. He nodded. "They're going too fast. Something went wrong. They aren't going to make it." I nodded numbly. We could all only watch as our beloved Apollo XXI sped faster and faster, carrying with it three human lives. Just as flames started spreading over it, there was a beep from a console behind us. We all turned, but I reached it first. I pressed the button. A pause. Then, a voice: "*- That's one - crackle - step - crackle - a man, one - crackle - leap for mankind.*"

A month after the tragedy, I quit my job at NASA. I now currently make a living as an astronomy professor at a small community college in Delaware. It's a good job, and much less stressful than my previous one. Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Wilson have both retired, but still send me Christmas cards every year.

I have come to the end of my account. I urge future generations to take caution - the Apollo XXI is a devastating example of the risks involved with manned missions. However, space exploration needs to continue, as there is still much that we have not yet discovered in our

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universe. And, provided that we are careful, I believe that someday, somehow, we will get to Mars.