

Eyewitness to Apollo-8 – A Personal Memoir, by James Oberg
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I still can't decide which leg of the Apollo-8 circumlunar mission of December 1968, when men first flew to the Moon, was most impressive to me personally. It is a still-living memory that no doubt has 'improved' with the passage of time, but it's one that still inspires and propels my imaginations.

As a young college student who had spent a cold and nearly sleepless night on the sand near Cocoa Beach, Florida, I awoke expecting to watch the launch but instead experienced so many more sensations than the merely visual. When the engines ignited, those of us to the south could only see the towering column of exhaust smoke which masked the ascending rocket for more than 20 seconds. Its sun-bright flame, finally dazzling, was soundless for many seconds more, as the roar raced towards us while the rocket itself raced to outpace first its own sound, and then the fingers of gravity itself.

When that roar – more of a ripping rumble as if the sky were being torn apart – reached us, the rocket was already high in the sky and arching to the east. It left no room in my consciousness for any trivial fact-based knowledge of what actually was happening – the impression displaced all rational thought and I even forgot there were three men on board, and where they were headed. The rocket in flight was all my mind could grasp. Finally the cheering crowds around me broke my concentration and brought me back to Earth.

Practical matters pushed the moon flight out of my thoughts. Grabbing the folded sign I had stashed in my backpack, I walked to the road where westbound traffic was already jammed, to the advantage of my plan. I unfolded the sign and stuck out my thumb: "New York" was all it needed to say.

By Christmas I had reached my home in western New York, and there spent much of the following days in front of the television listening to replays of the crew reports and to the successful rocket firing that flung them back towards Earth. I knew that was a dangerous maneuver but I have no recollection of any anxious moments at my end.

A few days later, with the astronauts home safe, my mother glanced out the kitchen window to see the moon in the sky. "Men have flown to the moon," she mused, "but it still looks just the same." She sounded almost disappointed.

Rising to her own almost involuntary amazement that our day-to-day universe was going on just as before, I protested that it wouldn't be like before. "No, not the same," I remember contending, "it'll never again look the same, in the mind of Man." Naïve and bold words, perhaps, but I'd now argue they and my launch experience were prescient. The historical facts fade, but the stunning reality that these missions occurred has indelibly impressed our culture to the extent that we no longer can conceive of a time when moon flights had not happened. Our imaginations are never going to be 'brought back down to Earth' – and I find that most impressive of all.