My classmates and I speculated that Neil grew up with two dreams. The first was to be a farmer. The other – to fly – took him on the journey of Apollo 11 atop the shoulders of a Team of 400,000 people and the aspirations of countless others. The historic proportions of this voyage were entered over forty years ago in the timeline of the world.

There is great comfort to return to one’s roots after a long and risky journey and no one deserved this more than Neil. Neil’s purchase of a farm in Southwestern Ohio took him home and opened two new doors for him – farming and teaching future aerospace engineers how to push the envelope of man and machine.

Neil has been described as a reluctant hero, an iconic figure, and a test pilot’s test pilot. My classmates and I had the great fortune to see another side of Neil – a great aviator who was comfortable making paper airplanes in UC’s Armory Fieldhouse and a professor who enjoyed having beers with students after final exams. He showed frustration when his assistant was forced to interrupt class because a NASA administrator refused to wait for a call back but he tolerated the antics of our class when we got restless or when a famous Italian actress turned photojournalist converted our Baldwin Hall classroom into a photo-shoot backdrop. About that photo shoot – the photojournalist was Gina Lollobrigida, one of the most popular European actresses of the 1950s and 1960s, who had photographed Henry Kissinger and Fidel Castro and was now in Cincinnati to capture images of Neil and his students.

Many have written that Neil had nerves of steel. I think what we saw was a man with an extraordinary ability to adapt and learn both on the fly (no pun intended) and with incredible speed. Couple that with a sixth sense when it came to timing in the face of escalating risks and you have the right stuff to be Apollo 11’s Commander.

I remember my Control Theory professor set up a stability simulation problem using an analog computer. The goal of the simulation was for the operator pilot to use a joy-stick and keep a pen centered on a small plotter that was wired to the computer. Most of us could keep the pen centered – indicating we had the system under control - for a few seconds but then each of us lost control and the pen quickly skewed to an edge of the plotter indicating we crashed. Neil took his turn at the simulator. The professor then said that Neil just set the record for maintaining control the longest with this simulation.

Neil ejected from a flight of the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle as the Flying Bedstead (the LLTV’s nickname) became unstable and spun out of control at about 100 feet above the ground. A half second further delay in ejecting would have resulted in the parachute not opening in time. Neil landed safely and walked away suffering only from a bloody tongue. Weber Aircraft manufactured the ejection system and awarded Neil with the ejection handle handsomely mounted on a simple plaque. The plaque honored his entry into the Turtle Club where he joined other aviators who paid the price of admission by safely ejecting from their aircraft.

Alongside the Weber Turtle Club plaque in Neil’s Rhodes Hall office was a prescription bottle with pills for motion sickness. The pills were not prescribed by a physician but rather presented to Neil by a Soviet Cosmonaut with best wishes for a safe journey to the moon and then back home. This was a
most interesting gesture considering the state of the Space Race between the Soviet Union and the United States.

If I had the opportunity to ask Neil to reflect on his accomplishments he likely would have turned our discussion to the future and said something like - our Teams achieved the dreams of generations but what’s really important is what we do next.

The man who walked on the moon also liked keeping his feet on the earth and his eyes to the sky and that’s the Neil Armstrong my classmates and I knew.

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