

Eugene Cernan, “last man on moon”, landed 40 years ago

Emil Venere

Eugene A. Cernan, a Purdue University alumnus and the most recent person to walk on the moon, stepped out of the lunar lander 40 years ago Tuesday (Dec. 11).

Cernan was commander of Apollo 17, which blasted off from Kennedy Space Center on Dec. 7, 1972. The lunar module touched down on the moon at 2:55 p.m. Eastern time Dec. 11.

The Purdue alumnus performed three moonwalks, exploring the barren landscape in a lunar rover, collecting about 250 pounds of soil samples and moon rocks, and taking scientific measurements.

Technically, he is the most recent person on the moon since he was the last to re-enter the lunar module Challenger after the mission's third and final moonwalk with crewmate Harrison Schmitt.

"Once you walk on the moon you can never 'unwalk,'" Cernan said in the 2003 book "Wings of Their Dreams: Purdue in Flight," written by journalist and Purdue flight historian John Norberg.

"No one can ever take that step away from you. It's a unique opportunity, but it carries a responsibility as well. You're one of the 12 human beings who have lived and called another planet in this universe home—and I refer to the moon as a planet because that's what it felt like for me after three days. You have a responsibility to make sure that other people know what it was like. What did it look like? What did it feel like? Were we scared? Did we feel closer to God? People want to know. I tell them it's really not so much what we saw as what we felt, the almost spiritual experience of standing on the moon."

Cernan graduated from Purdue in 1956 with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and was commissioned through the university's NROTC program. He entered flight school after graduating and in 1963 received a master's degree in aeronautical engineering from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School.

He was one of 14 astronauts selected by NASA in 1963. He carried out three space flights. As a pilot aboard Gemini 9 in 1966, he became the second person to walk in space. He was a lunar module pilot for the Apollo 10 mission in 1969.

Cernan participated in the design, engineering and development testing of spacecraft hardware and systems for NASA. He was a member of NASA's senior management team and reviewed decisions that directly affected operations in mission planning.

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From 1973-75, he served as a senior U.S. negotiator during discussions with the Soviet Union concerning the joint Apollo/Soyuz project between the two superpowers. After retiring from the Navy in 1976, he joined Coral Petroleum Inc. as executive vice president of the international division. In 1981 he started his own business, the Cernan Corp., to pursue management and consultant interests in energy, aerospace and other industries. He also has been actively involved as co-anchor on ABC-TV's presentations of shuttle flights and on ESPN's documentary coverage of "Earthwinds Hilton." His autobiography, "The Last Man on the Moon," was published in 1999.

Purdue named Cernan a distinguished engineering alumnus in 1967. He holds honorary doctorates from Purdue and three other institutions, along with numerous honors, including the Navy Distinguished Flying Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal with Star and the NASA Distinguished Service Medal. He has been inducted into the U.S. Space Hall of Fame, the National Aviation Hall of Fame, Naval Aviation's Hall of Honor and the International Aerospace Hall of Fame.

Source: [Purdue University](#) [1]

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