

From the frivolity of the Cape...

(Editor's note: The articles on this page were written by Ray and Ann Sweeney in a special assignment for *The Tar Heel*. Ray Sweeney is a doctoral candidate in history here at UNC and his wife is an administrative assistant to the director of N.C. Memorial Hospital.

Using press passes obtained by *The Tar Heel*, the Sweeneys magnified a personal vacation into a journalistic triumph for *The Tar Heel*—on-the-spot coverage of the blastoff of Apollo 15.)

CAPE KENNEDY, Fla., July 26, 1971—We arrived on Merritt Island Sunday afternoon, July 25, after a hot, interminable drive across the Florida peninsula in a cantankerous Volkswagen.

With a group of other reporters and supposed reporters, we are staying at the home of a technical writer at the Cape. Joe Green generously opens his house to a

group of ten or twelve friends and friends of friends for every launch. This time, the first visit for us, we get our word in late and must camp out in a tent on the Green's green.

Food, drink, air conditioning and bathroom facilities are open and free to the visiting horde. The crowd at this house is composed mostly of professional, amateur, and would-be science fiction writers, so the ego concentration in the atmosphere approaches the saturation point. The Greens are superhosts for inviting, feeding, tolerating and even entertaining this crowd.

Immediately upon arriving, we learned that we must leave the Greens' home for the Press Center to get our credentials and take a tour. We found the Press Center in a downtown Merritt Island motel after a drive through a community conspicuous for its use of plastic,

tinsel and neon as construction materials. The presence of NASA was everywhere glaringly obvious: streets, hotels, used car lots and topless bars bore the names of ancient myths reborn—Apollo, Mercury, Gemini and Saturn. At the Press Center we obtained our credentials, colorful badges with our names and *The Daily Tar Heel* on them, and dashed out to make the 1:45 tour.

On the bus we formed our first impressions of Kennedy Space Center (KSC), a montage of images confused by travel fatigue, heat and tropical sun-glare. Flat, flat land always near sea level surrounded us, and our view of the horizon was obscured only when the palm jungles approached the road. We felt exposed under the open expanse of sky, excited by the sheer, open, almost weighty blue and white dome.

Man-made structures of any height at all were visible for miles, and the tallest ones were inevitably associated with KSC. Most of them were derrick-like gantries and service towers, the erector-set monoliths of this twentieth century Easter Island. The true monolith, though, was the Vehicle Assembly Building (VAB), a 525-foot-high white-and-black block behemoth in which the Apollos are put together.

Our visit to this truly overwhelming monster was the high point of the tour. Outside it was the great slab of "2001: A Space Odyssey." Inside it was one giant nursery for the moon ships. We were microscopic Davids on the floor of a room built for Goliaths: the floor was littered with spare-part alloy toys, while the ceiling and walls loomed at distances one normally experiences only outdoors, at the largest

football stadiums. One, single, huge, huge room!

Before and after the visit to the VAB, we toured a seemingly endless series of missile pads, most of which are being disassembled. The towers and gantries are to be torn down and sold for scrap as NASA adjusts to the economy moves of Congress.

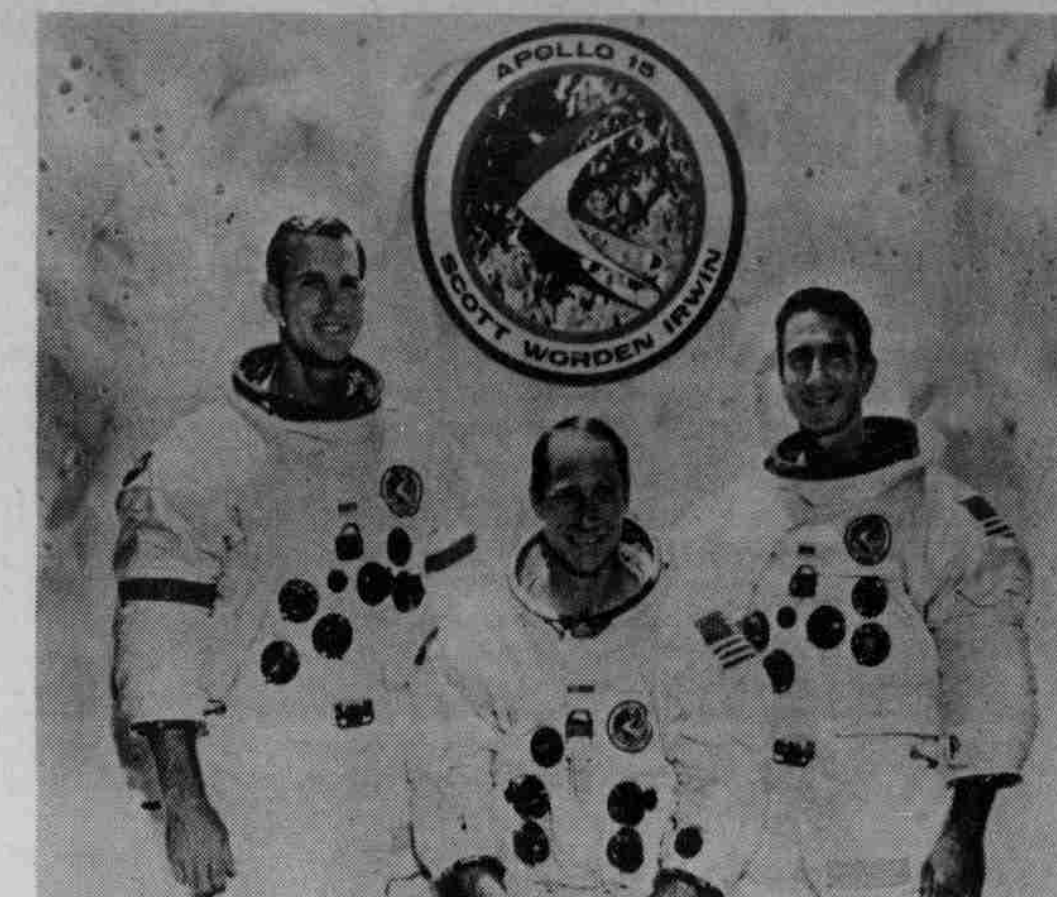
Always around us was the floor-flat land, always above us the empty sky. The tone of our guide's monologue alternated between pride in what the United States had achieved in space and nostalgic sadness at our decreasing efforts. As lifelong space enthusiasts, we rode sympathetically with his feelings.

The bus stopped briefly for picture-taking less than a mile from Pad 39, the launch site of Apollo 15. The great white bullet was being prepared for firing, and we were overawed once more. Our

entire stay at the Cape was to be characterized by the same manic-depressive emotions we experienced on the first tour: brief periods of intense elation and awe at what man has wrought alternate with long hours of dull, visceral reactions to the heat, glare, and enforced inactivity.

Perhaps the rhythm is a good one: the lax hours give our subconsciouses opportunities to try to sort out our periodically overloaded senses. The VAB, the six million pound Transporters, and Apollo itself—all seemed too impossibly huge and complex for mere men to have fashioned.

In the backs of our minds we anticipated the even more incredible event we came to witness; we tried in vain to picture that great white needle actually moving upwards. It could not happen; such things just do not happen.



Astronauts Scott, Worden and Irwin

...to the unbelievable blastoff

T-03:30. We arrive at the Press Site Monday morning at tee-minus-three-thirty. Behind us are twelve hours of heated, sweaty, front-yard camping and a delightful gourmet spread at the Greens' home.

Giddy behind the eyeballs and nearly exhausted with excitement, we had bounced through the pre-dawn darkness in a crowded NASA bus from the Press Center. From miles away all our eyes had been focused on the great white bird, spotlight on the near horizon.

The lights crisscrossed in the mist at the top of Apollo 15, giving the ship a Statue of Liberty crown of white beams. Again in our hearts we knew that this fixed, immovable structure could not conceivably go skyward.

There have been other Apollo launches, and we have seen most of them on television but this one is somehow ours. We are here at the specified place and time, but we just cannot grasp emotionally that what we came to see will actually take place.

This one is our Apollo: it must succeed, it must fly, but that great white Thing—that massive Thing cannot possibly move. Only audacity bordering on sacrilege could make one believe that that Thing could move.

The Press Site is a security-guarded area dominated by a large bleachers-type structure. There are chairs and long, bench-desks for the reporters, with telephone facilities for the gilt-edged representatives of the fourth estate. The seats face the East, toward Apollo 15 and the sunrise. A large, angled slab of a roof will provide shade, but only after the sun is several hours high.

T-03:05. The public address system announces and the television monitors show the astronauts leaving for their space ship.

The air is clear now and we witness a once-in-a-lifetime sunrise. The rocket stands glistening three-and-a-half miles away, across a reflecting mirror of calm water. Behind it the sun knives through the dark sky with sharp, distinct shafts of vari-colored light. All anyone can do is point and say "Look! Look at that!"

As the heat of the day sets in, we notice to our left the VIP Site. The VIP's came to the launch in air conditioned buses, but someone neglected to provide their bleachers with shade. We will simmer, but they will broil. Could the arrangements be a commentary on NASA's public relations priorities?

We begin this journal/travelogue as we sit in the press stands, counting the minutes and trying to ignore the increasing heat. As we attempt to record something of both the scene around us and our own reactions, we are all too aware that our account will be far from original. All our words will be repetitions of those scribbled by journalists who covered the earlier missions, and we know that we cannot escape unintentional plagiarism.

Our emotions and our observations are not-so-instant replays of those experienced by thousands in the past two years. But this time we are here; this time the Apollo is directly before us, not an image on a screen; this time we are somehow more than spectators.

Now the waiting time is upon us, the time to try to sort out the memories, the scrambled impressions of the past hours. Articulation fights a hopeless battle against the sweat and chatter around us.

T-02:22. The sun is about ten degrees above the horizon, just about eye level when we look at Apollo 15. The roof of the Press Site is gathering condensation, and it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the press beneath.

NASA has been treating us members of the "working press" very well. Tours by bus were free, and on every hand we receive, gratis, all sorts of NASA and Department of Defense literature and press releases. These publications, comprising "The Selling of the Space Program" for some future author, tell us more about the mission than anyone could possibly want to know. After the launch we will get more free goodies, including coffee and donuts, back at the Press Center.

The KSC people, or perhaps it is the government itself, seem addicted to the formation of acronyms. Besides the more common ones like NASA and KSC, there are the VAB (Vehicle Assembly Building), the S-IVB (Saturn-IVB rocket stage), ALSEP (Apollo lunar surface experiments package), PLSS (portable life support system), MSC (Manned Spacecraft Center), the LRV (lunar roving vehicle), and hundreds of others. Several of the publications we have received include back-page guides to this alphabet soup.

The Press Site's bleachers are now nearly filled. Most of our seat mates are foreign correspondents and domestic reporters of small town publications. The big boys of the broadcast networks are ensconced in a semicircle of air conditioned trailers to the left of the Press Site.

Some of the broadcast units have even engaged breakfast trucks, complete with jacketed waiters and chafing dishes. This is conspicuous consumption with a vengeance! The coat and tie costume are symbols of monetary status: only those with air conditioning can afford to be formal.

The biggest, most permanent press building is a clapboard, black and white cube occupied by the minions of CBS. Walter and Wally are presumably behind the tinted glass front. We miss their television accounts of the launch, but not enough to go home to catch their show.

The secondary press in the stands is made up of a wildly varied assortment of perspiring humanity. Dress varies from casual—we are in shorts and floppy white hats—to hot-weather formal. Most of us are male WASPs, while perhaps one-third are females of the same genre. A scattering of African correspondents gives us the illusion of being integrated, for only a very few black Americans are in evidence. Probably half of us are under thirty, the rest are trying hard to look under thirty.

Our best guess is that the combined weight of the privately owned photographic and electronic equipment present is greater than the combined weight of the equipments' presumed masters. Long lenses abound; glass optical guns worth fortunes are aimed at the silver cartridge of Apollo 15.

Radios, tape recorders, videotape equipment, still and moving picture cameras, and typewriters—all are so much in evidence that the human beings who flit to and fro to service them seem to be fleas dividing their attentions between a wealth of electronic and mechanical dogs.

NASA has provided television monitors visible from the bleachers, and the public address system is intermittently interrupting our literary efforts. At times the announcements are from Launch Control regarding the count-down status, but more often they are pained requests that the stupid s.o.b. who parked his Buick in the fire lane move it.

T-01:20. The press presents some aspects of a Boy Scout Jamboree. Patches of previous launches adorn the windbreakers and camera bags of the old hands. We

witness the reunion of friends who apparently meet only at the Cape at launch times. One dowager wears a red-white-and-blue creation—a hat?—which boasts a styrofoam replica of the Apollo 15 emblem.

Everyone wants to know where they can pick up a decal kit put out by RCA or a plastic sun visor from North American Rockwell. It's a tight market for souvenirs, and we imagine impassioned patch-swapping parties back at the Press Center. "I'll give you two Apollo 12 and three Apollo 13 patches for one Apollo 11..."

This is our first trip here (no emblems on our shoulders) and even we are filled with almost-nostalgia for the declining space program. We have been space boosters for years. Now the dream-come-true is already beginning to fade: many of the old launch facilities are being scrapped.

Hotels, once filled with VIPs, press, and technical people from the contractors, now stand vacant. The same goes for the buildings of Merritt Island: many are being taken over by a right-wing religious "patriot" and his followers.

The hermit crab of NASA is shifting homes here, but to smaller and smaller shells. We hear that real estate and home values are dropping as the space establishment contracts. All good space nuts, ourselves included, can only feel saddened by the increasing modesty of the program. To us, sixteenth century Spain is abandoning its New World exploration after six brief voyages.

T-00:35. Just three-and-a-half miles away stands the shining triumph of twentieth century daring and technology. But in the stands, the sweaty members of the press are concerned almost solely with how fast the shade is moving down their tiered ranks.

Only two hours or so after sunrise and most of us are broiled, roasted, burned. The VIPs must be over-done, with no shade at all. Relief from the heat is much more crucial at this point than the steaming spaceship on the near horizon. Even the expensive, tripod-mounting cameras are shrouded in white towels, their owners apparently concerned with radiation sickness.

T-00:04. No worry now about the sun, shade, or heat. The press is becoming quiet, attention and cameras focused on Apollo 15. Three men are going to the moon, and we have little thought for anything else.

T-00:00-T+00:08. The launch. There are no words for it, no possible words. Those who find their voices keep repeating nonsense phrases over and over: "Omigod, omigod, omigod!" or "Go, dammit, go, dammit, go, dammit!"

The sound breaks in clear, discernible waves over the stands: we feel our bodies pressed-and-released, press-and-released by giant hands. The bleachers quake beneath us. The colossus is on fire with a blast-flame far brighter than can ever be recorded on television or film.

So loud, so bright, and then so fast! Nervous hands fumble with cameras. There is time for five or six fast shots, and then Apollo 15 is gone, gone gone: in eight minutes she is a thousand miles away.

The public address system is deafening with announcements and ship-to-ground communications. Too much, just too much for the human senses to gather it all in. Our impressions are too intense, too crowded and crammed. Excitement, adrenalin and heartbeat, both distract and concentrate the overloaded eyes, ears and mind.

But the great white Thing did go up. The pad is vacant now; a white contrail spirals upward in the silence. We are numb.



This is a relief map of the Apollo 15 landing site. Taking part in what is considered to be the most difficult mission yet, the astronauts have left the moon and are scheduled to splash down in the Atlantic on Saturday.

Stories by Ray and Ann Sweeney