

● **Eugene Cernan was the last man to walk on the moon. “The landing,” said the astronaut, “is like being immersed in a sheet of fire, a comet, a shooting star.” Cernan, with crewmates Thomas Stafford and John Young, also travelled faster than any human being in history: Apollo 10 reached 24,791 mph.**

His journey to the moon

Born in Chicago in 1934 to a Czech mother and Slovak father, Cernan became a naval aviator before being selected by NASA for astronaut training. He went on to pilot Apollo 10 in May 1969, before finally being selected as commander of Apollo 17, which carried out the most recent moon landing, in December 1972. It was on this voyage that Cernan became the twelfth – and last – man to walk on the moon.

He survived that great adventure, without becoming capsized by it, as Buzz Aldrin was, using alcohol; or retreating from it, as the reclusive Neil Armstrong did. Like many

astronauts, he retained a military matter-of-factness: ‘We were there to do a job.’

Occasionally, though, his reticence gave way to a sense of wonder. ‘You can hear yourself breathe inside the suit,’ he said of the long moments of stillness just before the launch. Five hundred thousand people watched the night launch of Apollo 17 from Kennedy Space Center, in Florida, including his then wife, Barbara.

He spent three days on the moon’s surface. ‘People say, “What was it really like up there?” We saw some dazzling, extraordinary things. I mean, not too many people get to see an Earth-rise.’ He pauses for a long time. ‘When I was boarding the lunar module for the last time and I looked at my footprints, I knew I wouldn’t be coming back. That was the one moment when I wanted to stop time.’

After the moon

Unlike the first man to walk on the moon, the late Neil Armstrong, with whom he became friends, Cernan relished the celebrity the moon landing gave him. He made many

public appearances. He said, ‘I enjoy meeting people.’

‘If you think going to the moon is hard, try staying at home’

There was a personal cost to that celebrity, and Cernan’s first wife, Barbara, did not enjoy it.

‘If you think going to the moon is hard, try staying at home.’ Their marriage did not survive. The Apollo astronauts were an elite group of alpha males, to which family often took second place. Cernan said, ‘We were so “tunnel vision” about going to the moon, but sooner or later, you’ve got to come to grips with who you are and what’s important in life. All I ever wanted to do was fly. For a long time, there was nothing else.’ Cernan died on 16th January, 2017, surrounded by his family.



● **We all have dreams, but Christina Noble, OBE, had a dream that was to transform the lives of 700,000 children. In 1971, at the height of the Vietnam war, Christina went to bed after watching the news and dreamed she could go there and help the children. At the time she was raising three children of her own. She had had little education and knew nothing about Vietnam. She called an aid agency. They listened politely and said they would call back. They never did.**

A childhood of appalling suffering

But there was one qualification Christina had for the work. She had had a childhood of appalling suffering. ‘It doesn’t matter whether you’re in a gutter in Dublin or Ho Chi Minh City, it’s still a gutter,’ she says. ‘Every child deserves love and cuddles and kindness and warm food and a bed.’

Born in 1944 in the slums of Dublin (the worst in Europe), Christina was the eldest of eight children. Her mother died when she was ten

and she had to become a mother to her younger siblings. ‘I tried to feed them, I tried to get them to school. I’d go to the market at 4 a.m. to get oranges and cabbages.’

It was hopeless, made impossible because her father was an alcoholic. ‘I’d go from pub to pub looking for him. When I found him I’d say, “come home, Daddy!”’

Eventually, someone reported the family to the authorities. ‘We were taken away,’ says Christina. ‘We were all screaming, “Daddy, Daddy, please don’t let them take us. We’ll be good, we’ll go to school.” I remember him shouting back: “Your mammy is dead and I can’t look after you. It’s for the best.”’

The children were put into separate institutions. Christina was told all her siblings had died and it was many years before she was reunited with them.

‘Mamma Tina’

But Christina never forgot her dream. In 1989, her children now grown up, she simply got on a plane to Vietnam, checked into a hotel and started talking to street children. When she saw kids who were dirty, hungry, and

afraid, she smuggled them into her hotel room, and gave them a bath and food. They called her ‘Mamma Tina’.

Eventually, in 1991, she got two oil executives to donate \$10,000, and she set up the Christina Noble Foundation. Based in Vietnam and Mongolia, it now has offices in 14 countries around the world, and 700,000 children have been helped to a better life.

The pain has never left

It’s impossible to recover fully from a childhood as horrific as Christina’s. The pain has never left her, and she doesn’t want it to.

‘The most important thing in life is remembering that we’re all the same, we’re all human beings,’ she says.

‘I learned in the slums of Dublin how to help a child in the slums of Vietnam.’

