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Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

An ordinary man

Neil Armstrong, the most famous of the astronauts on Apollo 11, has been called the ultimate professional. He was hired to do a job. He did the job and then he went home and kept quiet about it. In 40 years, he gave two interviews. But how can the man who first set foot on the Moon, a hero to millions of people, remain such a mystery?

People like Armstrong often develop their interests at a young age. He followed a career built on a passion for flying that he developed in his childhood in the 1930s. He learnt to fly before he had graduated from high school in Wapakoneta, Ohio. He then did a course in aerospace engineering at Purdue University in Indiana, sponsored by the United States Navy, which meant that Armstrong was obliged to serve as a naval pilot for three years. He saw action almost immediately, flying 78 missions in the war in Korea.

He left the Navy in 1952 and two years later got a job with the Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory where he flew experimental aircraft. He reached speeds of 6,615 kilometres an hour and altitudes of over 200,000 feet. When he decided to become an astronaut is not clear. Certainly, it was not his ambition to be famous. An extremely talented pilot, his aim was simply to push the boundaries of flight.

He was selected for a space plane pilot training programme in 1960 but shortly after news began to circulate that NASA was looking for astronauts for their Apollo programme. Incredibly excited, he applied for the job and in 1962 was accepted. The rest, as they say, is history.

When the astronauts returned from the Apollo 11 Moon landing of July 1969, Armstrong was a worldwide celebrity and could have done anything he wanted – TV shows, public speaking. Instead, he became a teacher at the University of Cincinnati and at the weekend went flying to get away from all the attention. He subsequently worked for two private avionics firms until he retired in 2002. In 40 years he only gave two interviews. Why? Certainly he felt fortunate to have had the chance to fulfil his dream, but he did not feel any more special than the thousands of people who worked on the Apollo space programme. He was just the pilot.

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