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Where were you during the moon landing?



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Al Contessa (left), Richard Dunne (center) and Roger Schaefer (right) speak during a panel discussion.

IB/PERROTTA

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By **ANTHONY PERROTTA**

RONKONKOMA—Long Island Metro Business Action recently invited three individuals to discuss their roles during the first moon landing, which occurred 50 years ago this coming Saturday. The event, which was held on Friday, July 12, at Courtyard by Marriott in Ronkonkoma, was a part of LIMBA's 2019 discussion series.

Long Island's very own engineering giant, Grumman, along with the region's business community in general, played a major role in the U.S. space program, having tested, designed and built lunar landing modules for the Apollo 8, 11 and 13 missions. For the Apollo 11 mission, local companies contracted with Grumman to provide cameras, control panels, electronics, and other amenities for the landing module.

Richard Dunne, the former director of public affairs for Grumman and chief spokesperson for the Apollo Lunar Module, served as one of the event's panelists.

Dunne, a West Islip resident, began with a brief history of how various countries' space programs began, including how the United States utilized German scientists to gain an edge over the Soviets, who were making their own notable strides during the space race.

Dunne doesn't think NASA, in this day and age, would be able to make it to the moon with the same technology from 50 years ago, largely due to the "bureaucracy" behind the scenes.

"Everyone working [on the Apollo missions] at the time was very resourceful," he said, also joking that he might get angry phone calls for those comments.

Dunne and the rest of the panel agreed there was no backup plan if Apollo 11 wasn't able to leave the moon. "Once you commit to the moon, that's it," he told everyone in attendance. "You've all seen [the movie] 'Apollo 13.'"

The United States is the only country to date that has conducted crewed missions to the moon. There have been six lunar missions in total, between 1969 and 1972. Dunne explained that because of these six missions, there are six modules sitting on the surface of the moon.

There are photographs to prove this, Dunne added, noting that he has met a few people over the years that either have doubts or flat out deny we actually landed on the moon.

Another panelist, Al Contessa, the thermodynamics technician who "dressed" the lunar module in its thermal blankets, was 19 years old when his career began.

"I was in the right place at the right time at the right age," Contessa said, adding that he started making rockets in his basement while still in grade school.

As Contessa puts it, he basically got the job with Grumman "right off the street."

He also recalled a line from the film "White Heat" being a running joke among his fellow technicians. In the movie, James Cagney's character shouts, just before the flaming gas tank he's standing on explodes, "Made it, ma! Top of the world!"

"We had our lighter moments, but we were always very serious, even us young guys," Contessa said. "Nobody wanted to be the one who made a mistake."

Because he wasn't on duty at the time, Contessa was able to watch the moon landing from his home in Westbury. "I think we should go back [to the moon]," he said, adding his view that there's only so much we could've learned in the handful of times we've gone there.

Looking back on his personal experience, Contessa said, "I haven't done anything as important or as fun since."

The third and final panelist, Roger Schaefer, a technical advisor for Northrop Grumman, said he "fell into" his first job with Grumman as a simulation manager for the lunar module. Like Contessa, he admits that he didn't have much experience in the field.

Schaefer joked that his biggest qualification was watching the science-fiction show "Captain Video and His Video Rangers." He explained that the digital computers at the time were too slow, so analog computers were the way to go.

Some of the computers, Schaefer said, were twice the size of the 5,600-square-foot room where the panel event was held. A typical cell phone, he added, also contains about 1,000 times more memory than the lunar module he worked with.

Schaefer wasn't on duty at the time of the moon landing either, so he was able to watch from his home in Centereach. Reflecting back, Schaefer said the mission's success was a "miracle."

One of the event's attendees, Finn Mauritzen, recalled living in his native Denmark during the first moon landing.

Mauritzen, a Wading River resident who came to the United States in 1985, was in grade school at the time. He remembers his physics teacher being "very up to speed" on the specifics of the space race.

"We only had one channel then and the news anchor was stationed in the U.S.," Mauritzen said, noting that the moon landing was broadcasted in the middle of the night due to the time difference back home.

Another attendee, Alan Vitters, was a platoon leader in Vietnam during the moon landing. Vitters, now an assistant professor at St. Joseph's College in Patchogue, said he most likely heard about the moon landing in the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. "We, of course, didn't have television [in Vietnam]," he said.

Vitters also recalled seeing the astronaut who gave the famous, and frequently misquoted, "One step for man" speech in person, several months after the moon landing, while he was still in the Army. Neil Armstrong, he explained, was touring with Bob Hope as part of the USO shows.

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