

Epic collaboration lands Bible on the Moon

# On the wings of Apollo

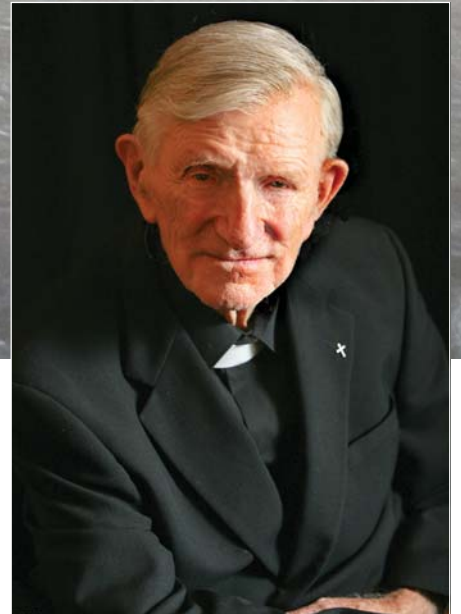
by Dwight Williams



Her office has been described as a shrine to the American space programme, her caller ID a Who's Who of American astronauts. Carol Mersch is a Tulsa, Oklahoma, businesswoman and author of *The Apostles of Apollo*, (*Spaceflight*, July 2011, p278), a chronicle of the little-known voyage of the Bible to the surface of the Moon during the Apollo era. It was a project that consumed the past five years of her life. At the outset she envisioned a tidy, coffee table book covering an interesting but little-known event, with the American space programme serving as a colourful backdrop. It turned out to be a story of an epic collaboration between astronauts and ordinary citizens during one of the greatest adventures in human history.

Mersch's journey began years ago when she heard Edgar Mitchell, the sixth man to walk on the Moon, speak at a business conference in Orlando, Florida. He stood at a podium, regaling the audience with the technical tales of his mission and the one that preceded it — the ill-fated Apollo 13.

Mitchell gave the ultimate insider's view of the unfolding drama that ultimately brought the crew back alive and ended with the summation: "After all was said and done, I'm convinced it was the power of thousands of praying minds that pulled that spacecraft back into Earth orbit." With that, he thanked the audience and left the stage.



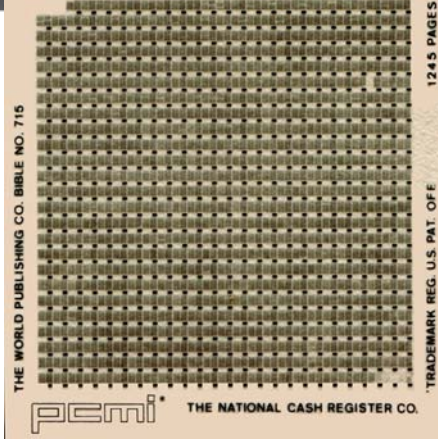
Rev John Stout.

Mersch was dumbstruck, amazed that this introspective astrophysicist with a reported IQ of 180 believed that something as intangible as prayer might have played a part in the safe return of the Apollo 13 crew. "My jaw just fell open," Mersch recalled. "I'm a spiritual person and what he had said

John Stout/CL Mersch/Ed Hengeveld



**MICROFORM HOLY BIBLE**



*The lunar Bibles are made of microfilm, each weighing only a fraction of a gram and measuring 1.5 x 1.5 inches. The pages are legible under a 200-power microscope.*

CL Mersch

As Mersch was leaving his office to catch a flight back to Tulsa, she noticed a black-and-white photo of Mitchell handing a man something. The photo hung on the wall behind a filing cabinet and when she asked what it was he and the man were exchanging, Mitchell said, "I had just landed the first Bible on the Moon and I was giving it back."

The Bible was made of microfilm, Mitchell explained, and the man he was handing it to was Rev John Maxwell Stout. Mersch wanted to know the whole story and the more she learned the more she wanted to write it. The first person Mitchell put her in contact with was a collector of space artifacts.

The story Mersch pursued had an onion-like quality to it. With each revelation came more questions and more revelations. She

*Apollo 14 lunar module pilot Edgar Mitchell returns the microfilm Bibles to John Stout shortly after he was released from quarantine in 1971. This is the photo that first piqued Mersch's interest in the lunar Bibles.*

learned that the motivating force behind the lunar Bibles was John Stout, the man she had seen in the picture with Mitchell. During the Apollo era he had initiated a worldwide network known as the Apollo Prayer League (APL), which at its peak had a membership of 40,000 that included people of all faiths. This bit of information was enough to point Mersch in the right direction.

John Stout wasn't a typical pastor. He had been a NASA scientist and retained a mythical status among those who had known him 40 years ago. He was a veteran of the Second World War and the first person to successfully photograph the Soviet Union's Sputnik satellite. He had also been a professor and missionary in the jungles of Brazil. While working as an information scientist for NASA during the Gemini and Apollo eras, he had also served as chaplain to the astronauts. One of his closest relationships was with Ed White, America's first astronaut to walk in space, and crewmember of the ill-fated Apollo 1 mission.

White was a West Point graduate and devoutly Christian. During his spacewalk on Gemini 4 he carried a gold crucifix, a Star of David, and a St Christopher Medal in his left leg pocket. "I felt that while I couldn't take one for every religion in the country," he had said, "I could take the three most familiar to me."

Shortly before his death in the Apollo 1 fire on 27 January 1967, White had told a

Forty-three years ago this Christmas, a turbulent world looked to the heavens for a unique view of our home planet. This iconic photo of 'Earthrise' over the lunar horizon was taken by the Apollo 8 crew in December 1968. The crew took turns reading the first ten verses of Genesis 1 to an audience of millions back home.

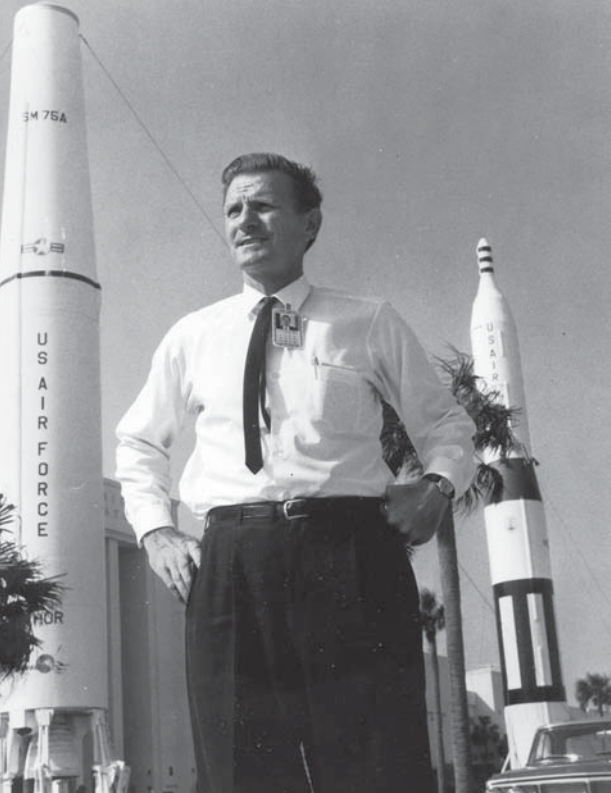


NASA/Ed Hengeveld

really intrigued me."

The encounter with Mitchell in Orlando was never far from her mind and eventually she met with him for breakfast in Palm Beach, Florida, during which he took the time to elaborate on his theories concerning the nature of awareness, quantum physics, and the interconnectedness of life.

"It was the most remarkable conversation I'd ever had with someone," Mersch says. As a result she began work on a book *Odds Against Chance* about Mitchell's quantum theories. It initiated a years-long dialogue during which Mitchell granted hours of interviews and access to his archives. Then everything changed.



Ed White, the first American to walk in space on Gemini 4. In the left leg pocket of his spacesuit he carried a Star of David, a gold crucifix and a St Christopher medal.

*Rev John Maxwell Stout is a NASA scientist, chaplain, and the organising force behind the effort to land a Bible on the Moon. Stout worked on the Gemini programme at Cape Canaveral before transferring to the new Johnson Space Center in Houston to work on the Apollo programme. John Stout/CL Mersch*

reporter of his wish to take a Bible to the Moon. In the aftermath of the tragedy, Stout resolved to see this wish realised.

He went on to found the Apollo Prayer League (APL), a group committed to praying for the astronauts during each mission, and ultimately, to landing a Bible on the Moon.

The information Mersch had on Stout was incomplete and virtually all of it second-hand. During her initial investigation, she was told by former APL members that Stout was old and unable to communicate. One rumour had it that he had recently died. All had lost contact with this man whom each had recalled as a mythical figure. If he was still alive, Mersch wanted to meet him. "I had heard these legendary stories of John Stout," she says. "He was this man history had lost track of."

In the autumn of 2008 she discovered that Stout was indeed alive and living in Mont Belvieu, Texas. After dozens of attempts she eventually made contact.

The story Mersch had been working on suddenly came alive in her hands. Instead of finding an old man suffering from dementia, she found John and his wife Helen not only lucid but eager to share their vivid memories of their days at NASA. "He was overwhelmed that someone had finally found him and was going to write his story," Mersch said.

The interviews began that very afternoon, which were followed up by several trips to Mont Belvieu and still more interviews.



Mersch would come to know John and Helen well. Moreover, Stout had all of his old correspondence from President Johnson, Norman Vincent Peale, and the legendary Madalyn O'Hair. "He was a master collector," Mersch says. "Walking into their apartment was like walking back in history."

Of course Mersch wondered what had become of the lunar Bibles and in an extraordinary moment, Stout produced an old green 8.5 inch by 14 inch registry journal. Tucked in its pages were several of the remaining lunar Bibles. "I had my camera going like crazy," Mersch recalled. "He had a list of those that had been given to public figures, such as Yul Brynner, President Nixon, President George HW Bush, Spiro Agnew, Bob Hope..."

The story of the lunar Bibles was the centerpiece of the mosaic Mersch wanted to create. She also wanted to capture the high adventure of the space programme, especially the personal side of those who rushed headlong into the greatest endeavour of exploration ever undertaken by man.

With the first-ever loop around the Moon, came the transcendent broadcast beamed back to Earth from the Apollo 8 spacecraft on Christmas Eve, 1968. From lunar orbit, commander Frank Borman turned the camera toward Earth and gave mankind the first look at itself from deep space. The crew then took turns reading from Genesis 1 to a mesmerised audience of millions back home. The moment in time took the world aback. Suddenly Apollo had become a



NASA/Ed Hengeveld

The crew of Apollo 1, (from left) Roger Chaffee, Ed White and Gus Grissom, as they prepared to expand on the success of the Gemini missions. This was the first Apollo mission with its sights set squarely on the Moon. Before his death, Ed White (centre) told a reporter of his wish to land a Bible on the Moon.



NASA/Ed Hengeveld

Gus Grissom (front), Ed White and Roger Chaffee.

500,000 signatures in support of it. The entire controversy naturally had the effect of raising O'Hair's profile.

She had deftly latched onto the eternal American debate over the separation of church and state, a controversy she knew would keep her in the media spotlight. But Stout was shrewd enough to understand that it was a publicity bonanza for the APL as well. As cheques poured in to O'Hair's organisation — the American Atheists — membership in the APL mushroomed. The controversy intensified as NASA made the final push to the Moon.

O'Hair and Stout would play the principal roles in a drama that posed a central question to the modern American democracy — could the greatest spiritual event in centuries be carried out by a society that values a degree of separation between the church and state?

Stout's answer to this was 'yes' — and it would be done ingeniously and subtly. O'Hair and her supporters insisted religion had absolutely no place on a state-funded endeavour but, in spite of the O'Hair's warnings, the religious rituals aboard Apollo spacecraft continued as the astronauts understood their First Amendment rights.

While researching the Apollo 11 mission, Mersch learned of Buzz Aldrin's

collaboration with his pastor, Dean Woodruff, to take communion on the Moon. NASA administrators were careful to steer clear of any direct involvement and permission was quietly granted.

Aldrin's plan was to place a cup, a small vial of wine and a piece bread in his Personal Preference Kit (PPK), a small 4x6 inch pouch, making a 'communion kit'. Once safely on the surface, he would say a few words and quietly take communion. The only thing he didn't have was a suitable cup. "Go find me a silver chalice," he instructed his pastor, "but it can be no heavier than two ounces."

On 20 July 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the lunar surface. After prepping the lunar module for an emergency takeoff, Aldrin prepared to take communion, carefully pouring the wine into the chalice. In the one-sixth gravity it poured slowly and gracefully. Then he read the verse from John 15:5 he had printed on a card, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me'.

spiritual odyssey, with a vast population on the planet participating in the experience by live television.

The reading from Genesis introduced another character to the story. This was Madalyn O'Hair, America's most renowned atheist activist famous for getting prayer banned in public schools. After hearing the reading, she sued NASA in 1969 for engaging in 'religious ceremonies and in an attempt to establish the Christian religion... while on scientific-military expedition to, around, and about the Moon'.

News of the suit galvanised religious communities around the world. When O'Hair claimed she had 28,000 signatures objecting to the reading of Genesis on Apollo 8, Stout and the APL responded by gathering

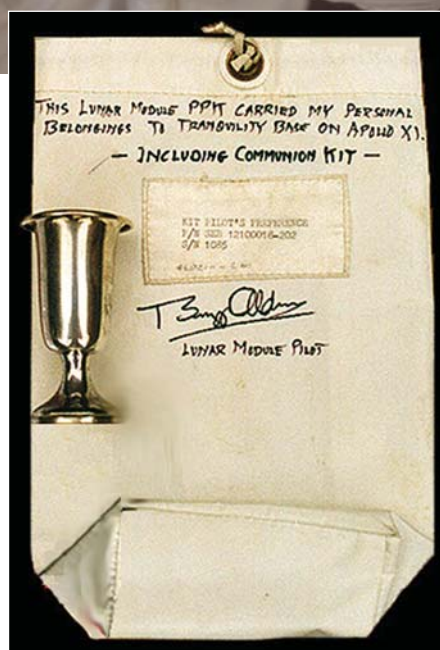


NASA/Ed Hergveld

A mesmerised world watched as the two men became the first to set foot on another world. O'Hair later expanded her lawsuit to include Apollo 11 when she learned that the crew had left a silicon disc on the Moon with quotes from world leaders, including a passage from Psalms by Pope Paul VI. Meanwhile, Stout made plans to take a Bible on the next voyage, fulfilling Ed White's dream.

As a NASA scientist, Stout was well aware of the physical limitations of such a venture. A Bible would have to be taken aboard by one of the astronauts, and it would have to fit within one of their PPKs. A traditionally bound Bible was too heavy, but Stout learned of a photo-reduced text of the King James Bible produced by National Cash Register Company that weighed only a fraction of a gram. Captured on a piece of microfilm the size of a large postage stamp were all 1,245 pages that could be clearly read with a 200-power microscope.

Taking such a Bible on a moonshot meant enlisting the cooperation of several



key players. Stout first went to NASA officials who quietly referred him to the crew of Pete Conrad, Alan Bean and Dick Gordon. Lunar module pilot Bean agreed to carry the package in his PPK, along with a small banner representing the Methodist Church and a grain of mustard seed, symbolic of Christian faith.

Apollo 11 lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin and (inset) the silver chalice that was stowed onboard his Personal Preference Kit (PPK) on Apollo 11. Aldrin quietly took communion with this silver chalice shortly after landing and securing the Apollo 11 lunar module Eagle on 20 July 1969.

Stout announced the plan to the APL, which elicited a vintage response from an outraged Madalyn O'Hair: "I read with absolute disgust your plans to take your [expletive] so-called Bibles to the Moon... [expletive]. If you persist in contaminating the space programme with your foul, disgusting [expletive] Christianity, we must take steps."

Nevertheless Apollo 12 launched and arrived in lunar orbit in November of 1969 with a small cargo of religious artifacts aboard. Upon their return nine days later, however, Bean had unfortunate news for Stout. The Bibles had indeed made it to the Moon, but had not actually landed on the surface due to an error in the log manifest. The support crew had stowed the PPK on the command module (CM) rather than the lunar module (LM).

Stout immediately set his sights on the next mission, enlisting the help of a young Texas congressman named George H Bush, who had taken an interest in the space programme and offered to approach Jim Lovell, the commander of the next crew.

Just before launch in April 1970, the future president accompanied Stout to Lovell's home where he presented him with the Bibles. Lovell's wife, Marilyn, agreed to serve as a liaison between Stout and her husband regarding stowage and handling. The PPK would hold 512 Bibles, one of which would be left on the Moon with an American emblem affixed to it. The entire packet weighed just over an ounce.

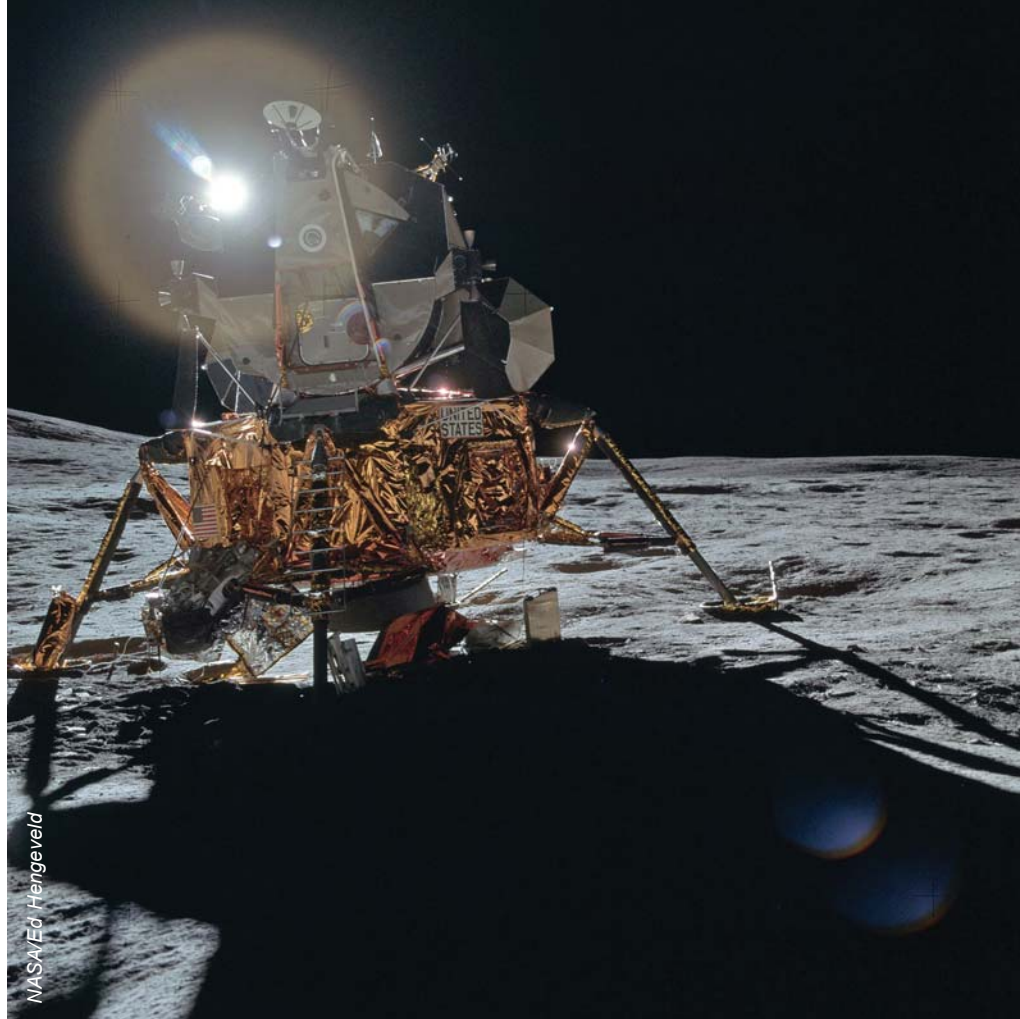
Of course the Apollo 13 lunar landing was not to be. Four-fifths of the way to the Moon disaster struck when a faulty oxygen tank exploded in the service module. The LM was converted to a lifeboat to return the crew to Earth alive, rather than as a vessel to and from the lunar surface. After an unprecedented series of feats of ingenuity, the Apollo 13 spacecraft was slung-shot around the Moon and three days later tore through Earth's atmosphere with its cargo of crew and 512 Bibles.

Some of what would become known as the 'Apollo 13 Bibles' would be given away. One was forwarded to George W Bush and several returned to Stout, who turned them over to the APL archives. When Stout returned to his office at the Manned Spacecraft Center, he received a call from O'Hair. "You know why Apollo 13 exploded, don't you?" she asked rhetorically. "Because it was carrying all those Bibles!"

Stout assiduously turned his attention to the next Moonshot and its crew of Alan Shepard, Edgar Mitchell and Stu Roosa. His request to take a package of Bibles aboard was accepted by an unlikely astronaut — Edgar Mitchell.

Mitchell's mother would have preferred him to be a preacher. As an adult, however, he chose science, earning a PhD in astronautics from MIT. In 1966 he was invited to join the Astronaut Corps where he was known as 'the Brain' and became one of the agency's best lunar module pilots. After being tapped by Al Shepard to be his LM pilot on Apollo 13, the entire crew was pushed back to Apollo 14 — a stroke of luck masquerading as a setback at the time.

Mitchell was nothing if not unique. He was becoming intensely interested in theories of consciousness — specifically in how awareness evolved out of inanimate matter. In time he would come to believe that mind could indeed shape the world



On 5 February 1971, John Stout's dream of landing a Bible on the Moon was finally realised. One-hundred microfilm Bibles, wrapped in fireproof beta cloth and stowed in Edgar Mitchell's PPK, landed safely on the surface of the Moon.

around us which, it could be argued, is the very core of the concept of prayer.

During the run-up to Apollo 14, Mitchell agreed to log Stout's lunar Bibles in his PPK. In light of the near-disaster of Apollo 13, Stout decided to separate them into two bundles — a packet of 200 would fly aboard the CM, and another of 100 aboard the LM.

On 5 February 1971, around 2:00 am Houston time, with less than 60 seconds of

fuel remaining, the spindly legs of the Apollo 14 LM Antares sank into the lunar dust in a mountainous region known as Fra Mauro. Aboard were 100 Bibles. Orbiting overhead in the CM piloted by Stu Roosa at some 17,000 miles per hour were 200 more. All were wrapped in beta cloth and simply labelled 'large microfilm package' and 'small microfilm package'.

Three weeks after splashdown of Apollo 14, Mitchell handed the contents back to John Stout, the man who had made it possible. The event was captured for posterity by a news photographer and a copy of the picture still hangs on the wall of Mitchell's office.

The story of how these Bibles made it to the Moon went largely unreported at the time. And it would likely have been lost in the ether of forgotten history had it not been for that single photograph noticed by a writer some 35 years later.

The theme woven through *The Apostles of Apollo* is its transcendent spiritual impact. Landing a man on the Moon wasn't a mere technological achievement nor was it just a geopolitical contest between superpowers. What history had lost sight of, and what Mersch reminds us of, is the fact that Apollo was a collective, multi-faceted odyssey that altered human perspective forever.

Ed Mitchell and writer Carol Mersch with one of the lunar Bible presentation cases.

