

LOVE YOU TO THE MOON AND BACK

Tracy Woolie's father, astronaut Eugene Cernan, was the last man to set foot on the moon and wrote her name in the sand as a token of love

Written by Tassie Hewitt
Select photography by Layla Zakaria

The relationship Tracy Woolie has with her father, Captain Eugene Cernan, retired navy pilot and NASA astronaut, proves that despite being miles apart for much of her childhood, a family's love really can stretch to the moon and back.

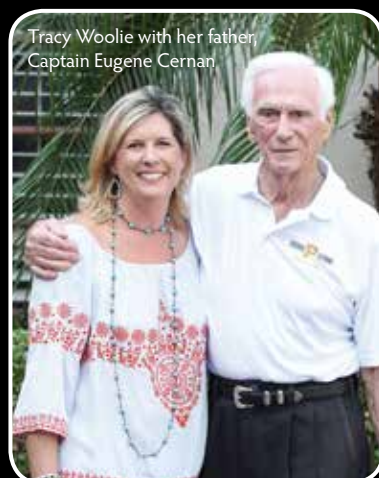
Name in the Sand

When Woolie, Katy mother of three, was growing up, she believed she was just like the other kids on the street. Her mother was the homeroom mom for her class, and her dad took her horseback riding, camping, and fishing when he was home.

When Woolie was 3 years old, Cernan took his first flight to the moon on *Gemini 9*. "He was gone a lot during the week. His business trips were just a little farther off," she says. She was 6 when he was the lunar module pilot of *Apollo 10* and 9 when he commanded *Apollo 17*, and landed on the moon. It was on this last mission he wrote his daughter's initials, TDC, on the lunar surface, discovered orange soil, and earned the distinction of being the last man on the moon.

"Writing my initials was not planned," says Woolie, who also has a crater named after her. "He was mapping out the landing spot, got out, and wrote my initials in the

lunar dust. There's no wind, and they'll be there when somebody goes back. They'll be there forever."



Tracy Woolie with her father, Captain Eugene Cernan

An Exciting Childhood

If her childhood was ordinary, it had extraordinary moments. "It was exciting. We had a bright red telephone that was a direct line to mission control that my dad could

call and we could talk to him from home. As a kid, that's really neat stuff."

Her dad's job opened a world of opportunities for Woolie. "I was at the White House, I spent my birthday at Camp David, and I've flown in *Air Force Two*," she says. "The impact of watching the lift off of *Apollo 17* at night burns great memories in my mind."

Challenges at Home

While her dad was away, Woolie's mother had the challenge of keeping the household running smoothly. Unlike her daughter, she realized the dangers involved. "Astronaut wives play an important role behind the scenes," says Woolie, who credits her mother with keeping life normal, and insisting they always had quality family time when her dad was home. "Mom said, 'If you think it's hard going to the moon, you ought to try staying home.'"

In fact, the first time Woolie recognized the dangers her father faced, she was in her twenties and watching the *Challenger* blow up. "I sat there and thought 'that could have been my dad'. He never expressed the danger. I don't think he ever believed he might not come back."



Cernan explored 21 miles of the moon's surface in a lunar rover

MAY 1969

Cernan served as the *Apollo 10* lunar module pilot and flew the module 10 miles of the moon's surface on an important pre-flight for the *Apollo 11* lunar landing.



Cernan and his crew collected 250 pounds of rock and soil samples

NOVEMBER 1963

Cernan was among the third group of men selected by NASA to participate in the astronaut program.



In 1972 Cernan flew to the moon as the spacecraft commander of the *Apollo 17* mission and spent 22 hours walking on the moon

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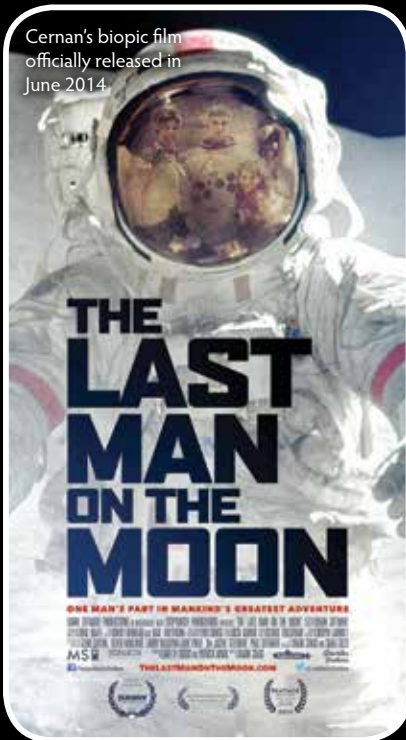
- Tracy Woolie

JUNE 1966

Cernan was selected as a backup pilot for *Gemini 9*. His record two-hour, 10-minute space walk took place while his spacecraft completed one full orbit of the Earth.



Cernan with his family, Tracy Woolie is on the right in red



From the Moon to the Big Screen

The passion Cernan has for his work continued long after he retired from NASA. He wrote an autobiography of his adventures, *The Last Man on the Moon*, in 1998, which was recently made into a movie of the same name. "They tried to get him to do this movie for years and years," says Woolie.

The documentary, which explores the life of the astronaut, his missions into space, and his personal loves and losses, is based on accounts of Cernan, and his family. Woolie and her three daughters, Ashley, Katelyn, and Whitney, all Taylor High School graduates, are also featured in the film. The movie is very emotional for the Woolie family because of its accuracy. "Every time I see it, I think what a great legacy it is for me. It's a great legacy for my children, and for my grandchildren. My great-grandchildren who won't know him will know what he was about. It is his life."

Reaching for the Stars

Above all, Woolie believes her father has a message to share. Don't give up, work hard, and do your best. "He loves talking to young people. He tries to inspire them because he believes that's what this generation needs," says Woolie. "One thing he has always told me that I tell my kids is that if you're going to do something, do it right the first time."

Despite his stellar accomplishments, Woolie is quick to say her father is a humble man with strong beliefs and morals. "When he stood on the moon, he said he truly felt like he was sitting on God's front porch looking back home. He believes there is a God because this is too beautiful to have happened by accident." **KM**

TASSIE HEWITT explores the universe from her backyard and moonlights as a freelance writer.



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