

Eugene Cernan:

The Last Man on the Moon Has One More Mission

By Maria Papageorgiou



Astronaut Eugene Cernan

The scheduled telephone interview with former NASA astronaut Eugene Cernan started off nice and easy when we shared a good laugh. Speaking from his Texas ranch, the former NASA astronaut joked that when his assistant told him FAA had called two days earlier, he immediately wondered what the heck he'd done wrong.

Right off the bat “the last man on the Moon” flashed that easygoing and confident manner found in many classic American heroes – the cowboys of the silver screen, great figures in sports and, of course, our astronauts. After all, he was deemed to be one of the select few with *the right stuff* for America's space program, so his buoyant self-assurance should have come as no surprise. What was surprising, and emerged from talking with him several hours, was his genuine humility and gratitude for the opportunities life has brought his way. Throughout two interview sessions, he would often pause in the middle of recounting a hair-raising adventure or reflecting on a special honor given to him and wonder aloud, “Why me? Why not him?” Captain Eugene “Gene” Cernan (USN, Retired) has a bone-deep understanding of the random nature of life and its quirky reversals of fortune. He gets that fickle fate had a hand in carrying him along to success while others lost their lives or were otherwise eliminated from the race. As an aviator scaling the pyramid of aviation excellence in America during the 1950s and 1960s, he was determined to reach the pinnacle, an area reserved for a select few – the NASA astronauts.

Cernan understands that a large measure of luck went along with his steely determination and exceptional talents to create the accomplished, heroic figure he became. He just might be an “old soul” who came into the world with an enlightened perspective, or it could be that he developed his particular philosophical bent after viewing the Earth from the Moon and experiencing the mind-bending spectacle of an “Earthrise.” It doesn't really matter. What is important is his perceptive understanding of life. In his book, *The Last Man on the Moon* (written in collaboration with Don Davis), Cernan describes a peculiar phenomenon that he and his fellow Moon voyagers experienced following their lunar missions: Each of them became more reflective and developed a philosophical approach to life. Maybe that alone explains the contemplative side of his nature.

Blue-Collar Boy from Bellwood, Illinois

A few questions into the interview, it became clear that Cernan possesses the typical “friendly, agreeable and conscientious” characteristics that studies ascribe to many Midwesterners. Born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1934, Cernan grew up in the neighboring suburb of Bellwood. He was a child of America’s heartland, a region that produced a surprising number of astronauts (John Glenn, Roger Chaffee, Neil Armstrong, Gus Grissom, James Lovell, Frank Borman, Deke Slayton, and Charlie Bassett, to name a few). Come to think of it, if you’re going to be sent into space and confined to a tiny module with another person, someone with the typically mellow, laid-back Midwestern personality would be who you’d want along for the ride.

“I grew up in a blue-collar family,” Cernan says matter-of-factly, “but we never wanted for anything.” Revealing his easy humor again, he comments, “Sharing a bedroom with my sister, Dolores, in our two-bedroom, 700-square-foot home probably helped prepare me for the cramped quarters of a space module.” It seems to be Cernan’s inclination to perceive the positive in whatever has come his way in life.

As a youngster, his heroes were not the famous sports figures and celluloid cowboy stars of his day. Yes, he liked the popular cowboys Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger (his favorites) well enough, but the adventurers who really fired his imagination and earned his admiration were the aviators fighting in the Pacific theater during World War II. He calls them “my unsung heroes.” When young Cernan watched the grainy black-and-white *Movietone News* (a newsreel of that era) at the local movie house with his dad and saw the Corsairs and Hellcats swooping through the skies, he knew that was what he wanted to do. He just knew. His dream was born while watching newsreels and movies such as *The Battle of Midway* and *Guadalcanal Diary*.

Having this dream early in his life was a great motivator for Cernan. He acknowledges the power of having a dream, and that is why he believes the young people in the United States need to think big again. As he pointed out during our interview sessions, it was his vision of being a top-notch aviator that propelled him forward – up and out of his blue-collar background and, eventually, into space as one of America’s premier astronauts. During the interviews, Cernan dropped the statement “I was just a kid with a dream” several times, so there was no ignoring that it was the key to who he became. As he sees it, dreaming big was the incalculable force that helped America surge to the top in the 20th century. “This country did not grow and prosper for 220 years by being ‘average.’ We were the leaders in technology and, in general, civilization. When President John F. Kennedy promised that we would be on the Moon by the end of the 1960s, I was one of those who responded. We were all committed to getting this nation to the Moon.”

If he was able to achieve his dream, he figures others can, too. That’s why at this time in his life he seeks to inspire youth. He wants the younger generations to open their mind up to new ventures, new worlds – to reach for the stars, figuratively and literally. “Mars is the next frontier,” says the space pioneer whose latest mission is to rekindle the daring and inventive spirit of America’s youth.

An American Hero’s Hero

Without question, Cernan deeply admired his parents. The children of immigrants from Czechoslovakia, they did not have an opportunity to pursue higher education, and “their goal,” Cernan says, “was to get their children through college.” The future astronaut’s father thought a degree in

engineering was the ticket to success for his son, and when young Cernan earned high marks in math and science in high school, things seemed to be falling into place. But deep within, the teenager who played sports, worked on his flashy hot rods, and liked to meet with friends at a lunch spot where the jukebox played pop songs by Frank Sinatra and Doris Day, still had his dreams of becoming a naval aviator.

Cernan spoke movingly of the way his parents complemented one another in bringing up their children. His father was loving but “strict, a disciplinarian” while his mother was “the softie, a woman who would walk through a snowstorm to bring you your boots.” When he thinks back on his life, he realizes that, above all others, his father was his hero. “He was the most significant individual in my life,” Cernan says of the man who worked at a naval facility in Chicago. “He supported me 100 percent.” His father also gave him some of the soundest advice a son could live by: “Whether you are on the football field or in a classroom, just do your best. There's no one who knows what your best is but you.” It's that last part that's the kicker, and Cernan has lived by it all his life. For those who ever wondered where he got that extra wind, that extra boost that pushed him over the top, look no further. He was always competing against himself.

While making the movie *The Last Man on the Moon* (more about that later), he came across letters his father had written to him when he was a naval aviator at sea. “Until that moment, I hadn't realized just how much love he had for me. I worry that I didn't give back enough,” Cernan says regretfully. “I was always so caught up with my work. If I could have my dad back for one week, I would give God whatever he wanted from me.” Once again, a soulful understanding of life from this rare American hero.

Cernan's father was not aware of it at the time, but the many occasions he asked his son to work alongside him when tackling projects around the house or doing maintenance on the family car probably helped prepare him for survival in space as much as any college engineering course. Things can go south fast on a space mission, and survival depends upon an instant and successful fix to any emergency situation. As Cernan puts it, “In an emergency, you don't have time to think. You react.” With quiet amusement, he remarks that his father was not deterred by any project. The son absorbed that same can-do spirit.

Expanding his fix-it repertoire even more were Cernan's summertime visits to his paternal grandparents' farm in Wisconsin. The four- or five-week stays honed his survival skills and toughened him up. There was no electricity or running water – not even a tractor or milking machine on the working farm. Baths were once a week in a big galvanized tub filled with water heated on a wood stove, with an outhouse completing this scene of spartan life. Cernan remembers this experience with deep affection and appreciation. From his grandfather, he learned how to work hard, just as he had from his father. The few words of Slovak that he and his sister learned were picked up during these visits with their grandparents. Cernan's recollection of his bucolic summer vacations reveals much love and a bit of longing for times past. The informal education he absorbed from his elders helped fortify him for life and especially for those challenging journeys into space.

Purdue, a University for Future Astronauts

When it came time for college, Cernan, a strong student, headed off to Purdue University for a degree in engineering, as did 22 other future NASA astronauts. How and why did Purdue funnel such a phenomenal number of its graduates into the U.S. space program? (It was second only to the U.S.

Naval Academy.) It seemed to be a direct conduit to NASA's astronaut program. When asked why and if there was a recruiting program at the school, Cernan answers, "No, there wasn't even a space program at that time. I really don't know the answer." Think about the following piece of information regarding the "lunar landing bookends," Armstrong and Cernan:

Neil Armstrong, "the first man on the Moon," and Eugene Cernan, "the last man on the Moon," were both Purdue graduates.

It does make you wonder.



Cernan driving the lunar rover

A surprising fact comes to light when he says, "I never got to know Neil until the space program. Grissom, Chaffee, and Armstrong were there at about the same time as I was." Cernan continues, "Purdue is proud of its graduates who became astronauts. A few months ago, we had an 'Astronaut Reunion.' There were also a lot of key space program management personnel who studied at Purdue." As a final thought as to why Purdue had such a strong showing in the space program, he suggests it was because "they had outstanding aerospace and engineering schools."

He then hastens to point out another trend in the space program – a predominance of naval aviators who commanded the flights. Five of the six lunar landings, he emphasizes proudly, were commanded by naval aviators. "Maybe landing on a small space on ships helped us perfect our skills and that's the reason we were selected."

When Cernan graduated from Purdue with a bachelor's degree in engineering in June 1956, "my father's dream and my dream came together," he states. How? When he received his sheepskin, he also received his orders for the naval flight school at Pensacola. Without hesitation, he says, his father jumped right in to support this step forward in Cernan's career. Anticipating the next question about what became of his engineering degree, he explains, "Even though I was never a practicing engineer, I used my engineering knowledge every day as an astronaut (and still do today). We worked with the NASA engineers, and I needed my technical skills and logical thinking."

Cernan, a born aviator, was in his element at Pensacola, completing his training before the others in his class. The guy was a natural. You can hear the joy in his voice when he recalls that "the first day home after I got my commission, my dad wanted me to put on my uniform and show me off at work. When I got my wings, of course both of my parents came down."

If Cernan had not become an astronaut, what would he have been? He enthusiastically responds, “A naval aviator.” Proving that you can’t keep a born pilot on the ground, the octogenarian still takes his small plane up into the clouds, even though in recent years he’s had both hips and both knees replaced – two times, no less. He laughs that he has become “a bionic pilot” who, at this stage of his life, has exchanged the challenges of navigating the Moon’s gravitational fields for more sublunary ones such as flying in the fog and rain.

Fate Steps In

Gene Cernan did not volunteer for the space program because he thought he didn’t meet the requirements. Unlike those who had tossed their hat into the ring, he had never attended test pilot school. Was he ever surprised when he received a call asking if he wanted to compete for a spot.

This was definitely one of those moments when fate stepped in and changed his life around.

Of course he decided to throw himself into the fiercest of American competitions; he was determined to gain admission to the pantheon of airmen. For aviators, there was no higher honor than being tapped for the space program. The celebrity surrounding astronauts of that era was akin to that enjoyed by rock stars today; astronauts were demi-gods. They were the superheroes of their day, taking risks as they forged ahead into the unknown territory of space. When they returned, there were parades in their honor, their images were captured on the cover of the very popular *Life* magazine, and they hobnobbed with notables from the worlds of show business, politics, and big industry. Their achievements were celebrated by the best.

Cernan never hesitated to compete because, as he puts it, “as a naval aviator, you know you can do it and do it better. It was sort of like *Top Gun*.” Then, too, he had that extra push inside that impelled him to go for the top rung. But there was one more thing that motivated him: “I always felt somewhat of an underdog and I had to prove to myself I could do it better, or better than it was ever done before,” Cernan admits.

When he and his rivals arrived at the ballroom of the Rice Hotel in Houston for the start of the selection process, he scoped out the competition and was impressed by a gathering “of the top 400 test pilots and aviators in the United States. *Every* altitude and speed record had been broken by people in that room,” he recalls with lingering awe.

The group faced a grueling week of testing, plus oral and written interviews. At week’s end, only 36 contenders were still standing. “Even though I made the cut,” he confesses, “I still felt like an underdog.” Then came the physicals, and the group was reduced to 14. It was at this juncture his good friend Bob Schumacher was disqualified. Fate had stepped in again, but for Schumacher, it was not a sweet re-routing. He went off to fight in Vietnam and was shot down in the first raid over Hanoi, ending up imprisoned at the “Hanoi Hilton” for 7½ years (“one of the catastrophic outcomes of the program,” says Cernan). He believes that had Bob not been eliminated, he – and not Cernan – would have been among the final 14. It’s at this point that Cernan speaks about fate’s hand in matters and questions why he was the one who “had my picture in the papers and my friend was the one fighting the war.”

The introspective astronaut also believes that a moonwalk would not have been in the cards for him had his close friend and fellow astronaut Charlie Bassett not perished in 1966, along with another astronaut,

Elliot See, in the violent crash of their T-38. Scheduled to man the *Gemini 9* mission, Bassett and See were flying to their simulator training in St. Louis, Missouri, when the accident occurred. Within hours of the T-38 crash, Deke Slayton telephoned the mission's backup crew of Tom Stafford and Cernan to inform them that *Gemini 9* was theirs. Just like that, the line-up of who would eventually walk on the Moon was shuffled. "Charlie Bassett and Bob Schumacher would have been walkers on the Moon and not I," Cernan states firmly. "I wouldn't have made it." But his fate was to moonwalk.

The Right Stuff. What Is It?

Those selected had *the right stuff*, a phrase that novelist Tom Wolfe came up with while preparing a magazine article that eventually became a book. What is it, though?

For those in the space program, it was the ultimate stamp of approval. Those who had it were strong, gutsy, smart, inspiring, quick on their feet, and brave. They were the top dogs.

Since Gene Cernan was elected into this select group, knew the type personally – was one of them – what does he think *the right stuff* is? "Believing that what you are doing is the right thing to do, being willing to accept the challenge, and taking the risk that is required to get it done."

Star Treks

Matt Kowalski is one of the astronaut characters in the movie *Gravity*. In the film, he is seen helping to repair the command module during an extravehicular activity (EVA) as he floats in space. While bantering with the command center on Earth, he utters words that foreshadow imminent tragedy: "Houston, I have a bad feeling about this mission." If Gene Cernan ever had such a dark premonition, it surely would have come to him before the bad-luck-riddled *Gemini 9a* (as *Gemini 9* was renamed). But he never had any uneasy feelings – not on any of his missions. In fact, he was never really afraid – not even when blindly barreling toward the Moon during *Apollo 10*. On that mission, the astronauts could not see Earth's satellite until they were treacherously near its surface. And even when they navigated to the back side of the Moon, where all communication with Earth was cut off, he experienced only some measure of "apprehension but not fear. You know something could happen that you have no control over, but that's exploration. We were trained to anticipate anything."

Gemini 9 (1966) began inauspiciously with the sudden and tragic loss of its original crew, but that same bad luck seemed to dog the *9a* mission. Even the first attempt at launch failed. When at last in space and conducting an EVA, Cernan's pressure suit stiffened into something like a full-body cast. Imagine wearing a suit of armor while conducting what were the first-ever work assignments in space – a significant mission – and you can easily understand why laboring under such duress caused his vitals to spike to freakily dangerous levels. To make matters worse, the spacecraft did not have enough handholds, which contributed to the problem. Cernan was exerting so much energy to move around and carry out assignments that he sweat profusely, which fogged up his visor. Unable to see, he had to drop his spacewalk. His next challenge was getting back into the hatch, and that proved almost impossible. There was a real possibility of leaving him behind or returning to Earth with him tethered outside the vehicle.

Despite his first rough ride in space, Cernan was more than eager to go up again when he received his assignment as lunar module pilot of *Apollo 10* (1969). A few minutes following its launch, he looked

out the window and then turned to fellow voyager John Young and said, “After three years, it seems a long time, but here comes the coast of Africa again, and it looks beautiful.” *Gravity’s* Kowalski said something similar that hinted at the awe-inspiring view of Earth from space: “You should see the sun on the Ganges. It’s amazing.” The *Apollo 10* crew experienced their first Earthrise on this mission, “and it was magnificent,” Cernan recalls.

Not too long after this transcendent moment came an episode that Cernan would probably agree could use a do-over. He and the *Apollo 10* commander, Tom Stafford, were in the lunar module and ready to reconnect with the mother ship when the module began spinning crazily. Baffled and realizing that something had gone critically wrong, Cernan let out a string of expletives that couldn’t be deleted because they had already been broadcast in real time to the entire globe. The world got a memorable earful.

Admittedly, the temptation was too great during the space mission part of this interview not to ask Cernan if *Gravity* got it right with its depiction of space travel. “The simulations of zero gravity were wonderful, and they captured the helplessness very well,” he responds. “The sunrises and sunsets were great.” However, he goes on to say, certain movements shown on the screen are not possible. “You can’t go from Point A to Point B – you cannot go directly from one space station or aircraft to another. You have to go to another orbit.”

The apex of Cernan’s aviation career was, without question, *Apollo 17* (1972). “Until the day of getting *Apollo 17*, I wanted to be commander,” he states with full candor. “Sure I would have liked to be the first man on the Moon,” he continues, “but Neil was on the Moon for six hours, and I was on it for three days *and* drove a car.” Cernan is definitely a glass-half-full kind of guy, and his sanguine Midwestern approach to life has remained intact.



Apollo 17 lifts off

When his turn came as commander, the space program was winding down, a situation that forced him to carry another role along with commander, that of cheerleader for the continued exploration of space. Just as the Moon wanes, so did America’s interest in the space program after we had obviously won the space race, and Vietnam was requiring more funding. Funny thing, he is still cheerleading to this day.

Of course, as the last man on the Moon, Gene Cernan secured a permanent place in the history books, but a few other memories linger on about this particular mission. Who can forget that Cernan drew his daughter Tracy’s initials into the moon dust? He hadn’t planned on it. Just thought of it on the spot, grabbed a tool, and etched capital letters about 12 inches high into the sand.

Apollo 17 collected the largest number of lunar samples (240 lbs.) and captured that spectacular and unforgettable “Big Blue Marble” image of the Earth that still captivates its inhabitants. “The first

picture of Earth was taken on *Apollo 8*,” he informs, “but we took the near-full-Earth photo at 70,000 miles out.”

It pleases him immensely that Tracy’s initials are still there, undisturbed. What doesn’t please him, however, is that the Hasselblad camera he deliberately left behind as part of an experiment is also still there. The camera was supposed to have been retrieved during a subsequent lunar exploration, but over four decades have passed since the last scheduled manned mission to the Moon, and the Hasselblad camera is still waiting.

A Rocketman’s Take on the Future of Space Travel



Cernan salutes the U.S. flag he planted on the moon

Is there any hope Cernan’s camera will someday make it back to Earth? Probably not anytime soon. He still believes in the dream of space exploration but knows the focus is now on Mars. After all, to explore is to step onto unknown territory and report back about it. “However,” he advises, “we should not forget that we can still learn much from the Moon.”

Cernan believes we will reach the Red Planet someday, but the venture will succeed as an international effort, not solely an American one. Admittedly, the journey to Mars as presently envisioned does seem extreme. It’s like something from science fiction.

When hearing about one proposal that suggests putting six astronauts into rotating stages of torpor (hibernation) for the 6 months it will take to reach Mars, Cernan instantly responds that we will have other, better options. Surmising that the proposal’s authors are thinking of coasting to Mars just as he did to the Moon, Cernan believes that the trip can be shortened to 30-60 days by using ion or nuclear propulsion. “The propulsion technology will get us there faster, plus the mission on the planet will not have to last 500 days, as proposed. We can stay as long or as little as we want,” he speculates.

Asked if he would have volunteered for such a Mars trip in his day – even one that required hibernation and a 500-day stayover – he pauses for a bit and then answers with a firm yes. Still thinking about how to reach Mars, Cernan quickly appends the thought that there are more efficient ways to make this journey. As bizarre as the notion is, he’s heard the suggestion of a one-way trip. As he says, “No idea is a crazy idea when it comes to innovating space travel but, boy, this one comes close.”

The topic of commercial space travel really got a rise from him. “It’s not really commercial because we pay for it; it’s another way to spend NASA’s money. But it’s the only game in town. However, two or

three of the six companies out there doing this are using their own money.” He cleverly sums up his view with, “We have abandoned space exploration for space exploitation.”

Although discussing this topic soon after the Antares rocket explosion at Wallops Island, Virginia, and the Virgin Galactic SpaceShip Two crash, Cernan has only praise for Orbital Sciences (“they’re a good team”) and Richard Branson (“he’s serious” – “spends his own money” – “is an adventurer”). As for Branson’s vision: “When they build a system that can get into Earth’s orbit, the trip will be worth it. When passengers see a sunrise, space tourism will really give the people their money’s worth. You’ve got to give Branson credit for space tourism.” After Cernan described Branson as an adventurer, he was asked whether he regarded himself as one. With a little nudging, he agrees to the description but more readily describes himself as an explorer. “Curiosity is the essence of human existence,” he says.

What he does not want while moving into these new exploratory realms is the unnecessary loss of life. “Accidents are going to happen because space is still an experimental world. But, first and foremost, we must put safety above all, including making a dollar.” Thinking back to the beginning of the space program, he remembers that “we lost eight guys in two years. When I went to Arlington National Cemetery and looked at their stones, I would think, ‘Why them and not me? Why am I not beneath that headstone?’” The losses were never easy, of course. Roger Chaffee, who died with Gus Grissom and Ed White in the *Apollo 1* cabin fire, was Cernan’s next-door neighbor, close friend, and hunting pal.

Life’s Lessons Learned

In aviation, there is the concept of lessons learned. The lessons are derived from costly experience and a hard-won understanding of that experience. The information gathered is then shared as guidance to make the future better, easier, safer. So, what insights, what lessons learned about life, might we gain from someone like Gene Cernan, an exceptional and gallant man, a man of character? He has pushed physical and emotional limits, reached the highest measurable markers in some of the most competitive arenas, and has literally gotten a cosmic view of life on Earth. Because of his contemplative nature and unique experiences, he seems a fitting choice for this sort of question. So, as he sees it, what’s it all about? What are his takeaways from a life lived as “the best of the best” in aviation and with sublime, transcendent moments in space?

He’s the first to tell you that it’s been his good fortune to enjoy a long and eventful life. He also gives grudging respect to that capricious force, fate, because, as he says, “Fate has played many tricks on me throughout my life. Some bad but mostly good.”

What Cernan learned from life – his big, conclusive lesson – is this: “Don’t forget those people who helped you get where you’re going. As I become older, I have been thinking about what are the most important things in life, and they are family, friends, and time to enjoy them.” This from a hero, a risk-taker who went to the Moon, drove over its mysterious scapes, and safely returned in triumph.

He is someone who is regarded as having *the right stuff*, and he believes the most important thing is *the real stuff*. Good to know.

Cernan did not escape the reach of fate’s “bad tricks” altogether and points to the disintegration of his first marriage. “Unfortunately, about 60 percent of the couples in the space program divorced,” he says. The husbands’ absence on the homefront took an incredible toll, and “it was not easy being a ‘Mrs. Astronaut.’” Cernan’s insight into this matter again underscores his philosophic nature. To pay

attention to your loved ones is rich advice. As he puts it, “They’re always there, but we’re too busy doing something else.”

He has remarried, and his family expanded with the addition of two stepdaughters. As someone whose walk in life has been male-dominated, he is delighted with his “family of girls.” There are now nine grandchildren who call him “Popie” and visit often at his small ranch near San Antonio. “It’s my tranquility,” he states in a reverential tone. He enjoys the smell of horses and listening to country music.

Loving relationships and simple pleasures are what it’s all about, it seems.

The Last Man on the Moon: The Movie



Apollo 17 SIM bay on the service module, seen from the Lunar Model in orbit around the moon

There is still one big mission left for him to carry out, and Cernan is the focused, dynamic force who will complete it. He wants the youngsters in America to dream big once again. They just don’t seem to have the same deep yearnings for something larger than life as they did generations ago. In his book, *The Last Man on the Moon*, yearning and dreaming big are the elements that energized Cernan’s best efforts and lifted him high. He fervently wants to pass this message on. And he wants to reach as many young minds as he can.

When someone first suggested filming the story of his life to get his message out to the widest youth audience, he adamantly rejected the idea. “I was not keen on a movie about me,” he admits. The book was fine because it dealt comprehensively with the space program and its line-up of the American Space Race All-Stars. It told their story and that of their wives. But having the movie focus on his life somehow seemed different.

It took a boldfaced Hollywood name to convince him otherwise. The two were attending a function when the Big Name took him aside and said, “Look, this movie is not about you. It’s about the story, a story that should be told.” Cernan then understood the imperative to tell his inspiring story “about a kid with a dream who makes it. My life does read like a storybook,” he says.

Cernan enthusiastically reports that production of *The Last Man on the Moon*, the movie, has wrapped, and it’s now full steam ahead to give audiences an opportunity to see it. “We’ve got a good production company, and they’re passionate about the story they’ve put together,” he says. There is real excitement in his voice when he recalls the standing ovation that greeted the film after its recent premiere at the South by Southwest Film Festival (SXSW) in Austin, Texas. “The reception was phenomenal,” he

continues. “There were multiple screenings and multiple standing ovations. The many kind words I’ve been hearing have been heart-warming. We’ve gotten a lot of positive comments from the media and on the Internet.” An early cut of the film, which was screened at the Sheffield Documentary Film Festival in the United Kingdom, thrilled that audience.

There are now invitations to film festivals in Toronto, Sarasota, and Newport Beach. The ultimate goal is the mass distribution of a movie that aims to do one thing – to inspire the youth who see it.

Cernan knows he was inspired many decades ago by the silver screen images of World War II bombardiers. Those unsung heroes, some of whom are still living and are today counted among his friends, put an idea into his head, and he became one of the leaders of his generation. He hopes that maybe his life will ignite hopes and big dreams in the kids who see his story. Another of life’s lessons here – pay it forward.