Apollo 15 launches with 1st Lunar Roving Vehicle, July 26, 1971

Suzanne Deffree - July 26, 2018

Apollo 15 left Cape Canaveral on July 26, 1971, en route to the moon where it would land four days later and become the first NASA mission to employ a Lunar Roving Vehicle.
The fourth to land on the moon and the eighth successful manned mission, Apollo 15 was described as a “J-Mission,” one in which NASA’s crew would stay on the moon for a long duration with a great focus on science and discovery.

The mission concluded on August 7, 1971, after Commander David Scott and Lunar Module Pilot James Irwin spent three days on the moon and a total of 18½ hours outside the spacecraft on lunar extra-vehicular activity. (Photo: Irwin saluting flag next to Lunar Roving Vehicle)

With the Lunar Roving Vehicle, the crew was able to travel farther away from the landing site than previous crews. In total, they collected 77 kg (170 lbs) of lunar surface material.

The Rover had been in development since May 1969, through a Boeing contract. In addition to the obvious challenges of designing a vehicle that could travel the moon’s surface and in the newly discovered environment, the Rover had to be compact enough to fit in the tight spacecraft quarters. The Rover could be folded into a space 5 feet by 20 inches.

Unloaded, the Rover weighed 460 lbs. When carrying two astronauts and their equipment, it weighed 1500 lbs. Each wheel was independently driven by a ¼ horsepower (200 W) electric motor. It traveled at speeds up to 8 mph.

James Irwin salutes the United States flag on the moon on August 1, 1971.

At the time, NASA deemed Apollo 15 the most successful manned flight ever achieved. However, the mission’s success was tarnished by two unauthorized activities.
Unbeknownst to NASA officials, commemorative postal covers were snuck onboard Apollo 15 in astronaut space suit(s). They were to be taken to the moon and back, signed, and then sold after the Apollo program ended by a German stamp dealer who in turn promised $7000 in savings accounts. While it is not entirely clear who participated in the activity, reportedly, the astronaut(s) and NASA employee(s) who did participate did so to help finance their children’s college funds.

The crew had also contacted a Belgian sculptor to create a small statuette to commemorate those astronauts and cosmonauts who had lost their lives in the furtherance of space exploration. The aluminum memorial was left while the TV cameras were off, as it was a personal and unauthorized effort by the crew.

The statuette was noted during the crew’s post-flight press conference and the sculptor, presumably looking to cash in, began offering to sell replicas. Under pressure from NASA, the sculptor ceased such efforts.

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