AU Professors's book on first man on moon hits stores

More than 36 years after Neil Armstrong took his famous first step on the moon, historian James Hansen of Auburn University is launching a first of his own – the first authorized biography of the enigmatic astronaut.


The book details Armstrong’s life including his boyhood in Ohio, his time as a student at Purdue University and his accomplishments as an engineer.

“Neil is a lot more than just an astronaut,” Hansen said. “He was an astronaut for just eight years. He’s a professional engineer and a test pilot, and he flew 78 combat missions in the Korean War.”

It has been nearly three years since Hansen, a professor of history in the AU College of Liberal Arts, began work on the book and he said its release is somewhat bittersweet. “I’m glad it is finished, and this is such an exciting time in my life. But at the same time it is a little melancholy because this is sort of like saying goodbye to the work in some way.”

Hansen said he is happy with the way the book turned out and with the reviews, which have been very good. But perhaps the best and most important endorsement he has received came from Armstrong himself.

“Neil read all the way through it and said he thought it was a great book,” Hansen said. “That means a lot to me because this book does not hold back any punches. It is a three-dimensional look at his life, warts and all.”

Hansen said it was important to both himself and Armstrong that the work be an independent scholarly biography and not hero worship.

Published by Simon & Schuster, the book is 780 pages, including about 100 pages of notes, acknowledgments, an index and a bibliography.

“I wanted it to pass muster as a scholarly work,” he said. Hansen’s interviews with Armstrong will be placed in an archive at Purdue University along with all of Armstrong’s personal papers.

The book also includes a montage of photos of Armstrong on the back cover as well as three photo inserts inside. Hansen had access to Armstrong’s personal photo album and selected many previously unpublished pictures for “First Man.”
Hansen also selected the cover photo and named the book. “I think it is important to have a cover that communicates the central message of the book. And the title ‘First Man’ can be applied in so many ways to Armstrong’s life,” he said.

The AU professor specializes in the history of science and technology and the impact of science and technology on society. He has published eight other books, but none have had the impact on popular culture comparable to that of “First Man,” which has already created a lot of media attention in advance of its release.

The publisher has deals for the book’s release in China, Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Croatia, and is making arrangements to publish the book in other countries.

Warner Brothers Studios has an option for the film rights to the book, and Hansen has met with Oscar-winning director and actor Clint Eastwood to discuss adapting the book for the screen. “I am still keeping my fingers crossed that Eastwood will be interested,” Hansen said. “I think he would make it into an outstanding film and a vehicle to study American hero worship.”