

Aldrin still dreams of the stars

Rachael Bolton speaks with astronaut Buzz Aldrin about identity crisis in the face of success — especially when that type of success was never part of your plan.

In the United States, Avis holds second place in the rental car market and they have a slogan: "We try harder".

That's how Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin views his life and career too.

Dressed in a blue NASA jacket and a striped shirt, Aldrin sits in a room at the edge of the water. To his right, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and to his left the Opera House, he is framed on each side by a wonder of engineering.

As one of the world's most famous engineers, he immediately turns the conversation to famous bridges and the geometry of balance and suspension.

It is easy to see he is a man of great passions and it comes as no surprise that one of those — perhaps his greatest — is space.

In 1969 Aldrin made history as the second man to walk on the moon. It is an achievement that has defined his life, both as a monumental accomplishment, etching his name into the bedrock of the grand human narrative, and as a blight, becoming one of the world's most famous runners up.

"As I look back, I was in the right place at the right time," Aldrin reflects. "I made a few decisions that turned out beautifully. What I was going to write my doctoral thesis on turned out to be just what NASA needed to do — that's join spacecraft together to bring people back to the moon."

Aldrin graduated from West Point Military Academy in 1951, third in his class, and a fighter pilot through-and-through.

"People think, jeez, you've got to be scared about something when that rocket's going to lift off," he says.

"Well, I tell you, we're fighter pilots. When you've got a jet engine and your rolling down the runway with an afterburner and a jet engine and that engine quits —

you've got to do something in a hurry. So you don't sit and worry about that as you take the runway. If you do, you're in the wrong business. You should be selling insurance or something like that."

Although his first space flight went so smoothly he felt his "grandmother could have done it", Aldrin says there is a lot the corporate world could learn from the preparation involved in a space flight.

"We get to deal with training on things that can go wrong. Probably 80 per cent [of our training] is dealing with emergency procedures," he explains.

"But most businesses don't train their people quite as much as we do, on things that can go wrong. I think different businesses maybe need to think about what happens if the competitor gets ahead of me? What do I do then? Do I just fold up?"

"Not everybody is a winner," Aldrin quips. "Somebody has to be number two."

Even after his famed second billing Aldrin always intended to go back to the military.

"When I came back from the moon I was with NASA but I really am a military guy," he says. "I wanted to return to the service. That was my loyalty. That's what I knew. That's how I flew aeroplanes and I felt it was a great future in the service with my experience — even though I had become a dust-kicker on the surface of the moon."

But he came back to earth bizarrely over-qualified.

"The airforce really didn't know for sure what to do with someone who had been [to the moon]," he recalls. "That was disillusioning in a way."

The experience brought with it depression and alcoholism, demons he has since worked hard to overcome.

"When I came back I decided to write a story about this unusual problem of somebody having a very structured life and now things aren't working out the way he'd like them to," he explains. "He gets depressed and seeks help. I wrote a book called Return to Earth — not Journey to the Moon like you might have thought, but about what was challenging to me."

Following his retirement from NASA in 1971, Aldrin in fact wrote two autobiographies discussing the emotional aftermath the moon had wrought on his life, but his love for space travel did not abate. He has remained an active advocate for investment in the space program and in educating new generations about space.

In 1998 he founded a not-for-profit organisation called ShareSpace with the mission of sharing "the wonders of space with children of all ages" and to "foster affordable space travel opportunities for all". Aldrin believes in a world where space is accessible to everyone.

As such, the matter of "affordable space travel" or "space tourism" is a central concern.

Aldrin laments what he sees as under-investment in space programs around the world over the last three decades.

"There has to be a really good, strong reason to invest in something that isn't going to have a pay off for a very long time and is a very expensive, long process," he says. "You're not going to find the banks or private industry [clamouring to invest] because they want a return on investment sooner.

"That's what plagues the commercial space travel business."

One of his plans to spur on investment and attention for the space travel cause is a worldwide space lottery. People around the world would pay for a ticket after which a winner would be drawn.

In this way everyone would together fund the project, and moreover the commercial entity involved would be able to sell advertising on the project, hopefully making it a commercially viable scheme.

"If we've got a lot of people doing this, we can afford to purchase what they're going to win," Aldrin explains. "I think the enthusiasm of people wanting to do these things will rise high."

He argues space travel betters economies, furthers technology, and even helps maintain world peace.

"Competition challenges people to come up with better technologies, better solutions, and maintains enthusiasm," he says. "Space is also a high technology, defence-oriented business so the security of a nation depends on the advancement of technology in the aerospace industry. There is also an element of national pride."

Aldrin believes we will see a viable commercial space tourism industry emerge within the next 50 years, but his eyes are already fixed on the next frontier — Mars.

Physicist Stephen Hawking has said the human race will need to find a new landmass to secure its continued existence.

"It will be difficult enough to avoid disaster on planet Earth in the next hundred years, let alone the next thousand, or million," he said in a recent interview for ideas forum Big Think. "The human race shouldn't have all its eggs in one basket, or on one planet. Let's hope we can avoid dropping the basket until we have spread the load."

Aldrin says Mars may well be the answer, and he believes mankind will also have attained Mars travel by 2100.

"I'm sure that will happen [this century]," he says. "Some people think it could have the potential of ice and ice is water, and water is hydrogen and oxygen — and that's rocket fuel."

Aldrin says, when approached by an eight-year-old boy whose dream it was to be the first man on Mars, he asked, "How long are you going to stay?"

"He says, 'Oh, a couple of days'," chuckles Aldrin. "I told his father, the pilgrims on the Mayflower that brought the first people to America — those people didn't wait for the return trip.

"We need to really begin to establish an off-Earth sustainability. And I think we're beginning to be able to do that."
