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When a hero was more than just a sandwich

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NCR Today

The death of astronaut Neil Armstrong was a stark reminder of how many other losses our culture has suffered since the day he walked on the moon in 1969.

Obituaries reviewing his life described Armstrong as "stoic," a quality that has little currency today, when no one holds anything back, ever. The dictionary defines a stoic this way: "A person who can endure pain or hardship without showing their feelings or complaining."

Yes, let's all take a minute to chuckle in astonishment and remember a time when that described the essence of American heroism -- the ability to overcome real challenges, to forge through new frontiers, and do it with a quiet grace unruffled by the crisis of the moment.

Armstrong kept his hero's title not simply because of what he did -- and, recall, he lived in a time when fame was still largely granted to people who did actually achieve things beyond the mere will to become famous. Apart what he accomplished, Armstrong was a hero thanks to how he behaved. In his day, fame was a bit less of a commodity -- yet even then, he avoided the pitfalls others dove into. He could have easily found himself on a box of Wheaties or holding up a six-pack of Coke as a cardboard cutout in the local supermarket. No doubt General Motors would have paid him handsomely to drive a Buick or -- better yet -- a Chevy pickup. He did not.

Imagine the temptations today. Modern offerings of fame make the Wheaties box gambit seem like undercover work. Now there would be a reality series on Discovery with Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins as the ice road truckers of deep space: burly men who drink and cuss and fight then bond over the hard job ahead. Later, TLC would record the home life: jealous, competitive wives who degrade Collins because he actually never set foot on the moon's surface, now did he? Armstrong's children would

grow into wannabe rock stars with drugs habits and rehab programs that would land them their own reality series and the cover of Us Weekly.

Armstrong did none of this, because he would not let it happen. Those choices were not part of his code; modesty and humility were. The *Los Angeles Times'* article on his passing noted that, in a rare public appearance in 2000, Armstrong said of himself: "I am, and ever will be, a white-sock, pocket-protector, nerdy engineer."

Compare that with something else I stumbled on in my newspaper, just behind the Armstrong obituary: a full-page, four-color ad congratulating American Jennifer Kessy for her Olympic silver medal in women's beach volleyball. The cheers come courtesy of CoverGirl makeup, which signed up Kessy and female American Olympic boxer Marlen Esparza as models. According to a press release back in April, CoverGirl products "LashBlast Volume and Outlast All-Day Lipcolor will be available in special, limited-edition packaging to honor both powerful women as they compete in the London 2012 Olympic Games." It goes on to say: "Beginning in late-May, Kessy and Esparza will appear in both print and television advertisements for COVERGIRL. In the advertisements, Kessy and Esparza showcase how powerful makeup can make you look and feel confident from the inside out."

Look, that's better than a cheesy reality series or some photos online at TMZ showing you in a less-than-flattering light at some nightclub on the Sunset Strip. And, yes, sports heroes and product endorsements go back more than a century, when baseball players began shilling for chewing tobacco. But Neil Armstrong could have done them better, made millions more and set up generations of his family in style and comfort and trust funds built on all the trappings of fame.

That he didn't is what made him a real hero. The kind that lasts.

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