

Three decades ago, in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, I met the first man to walk in space. As a broadcaster, I was, at that time, a member of the on-air crew of Boston's Kiss 108 morning radio show.

Entering the studio, I was greeted by the show's producer, Rocky (the late Richard "Rocky" Buono), who informed me that Russian hero and cosmonaut, Alexei Leonov, was set to visit our studio that day.

Rocky knew that I was a lifelong space enthusiast who would be thrilled to meet General Leonov, and he had purposely not let me know in advance, as he had wanted this space legend's visit to be a surprise.

It was a surprise, all right.

For some inexplicable reason, earlier that morning, while dressing for work, I had abandoned my nearly-constant wardrobe of plain black clothing, and had chosen to wear a bold red, white and blue outfit that had been presented to me at a radio promotion. I looked, said Rocky, "like a walking American flag" on the day that a Russian icon would be visiting us.

For the radio crew, my uncharacteristic fashion choice was a source of general hilarity.

For me, it was a nightmare.

As a proud American, I respect others who feel pride in their own nation, and would never wish to signal otherwise. I was about to meet a Russian hero... and I was concerned that my loud red, white and blue outfit might, inadvertently, send an unwelcoming message to a great man for whom I held tremendous admiration.

Before I had a chance to find more suitable clothing, General Leonov arrived at our studio.

There I stood, face to face with the first man to walk in space, who happened to be wearing a classy suit jacket, which happened to feature a large Russian emblem.

Instantly, Alexei Leonov pointed to my all-American outfit, then to his Russian emblem, let out a wonderful laugh, and said, "Detente."

He placed me at his side, and signaled for his accompanying public relations team to photograph us.



Our producer explained to him that I had not known of his visit in advance, and General Leonov said he liked the symbolism even more, because it had been unplanned.

This warm, gracious space pioneer spent time talking with me, off-air, about exploration, art and writing. We talked about his role as Russian mission commander for Soyuz 19 (the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz Test Project), and he spoke of the importance of the historic US-Russian project collaboration.

His face, I remember thinking as he spoke, exuded character and love of life.

In the decades since this encounter, I have interviewed numerous NASA officials and astronauts. All of them speak glowingly of Alexei Leonov.

He is, universally, respected and loved.

I believe in the type of fate that places the right people in certain circumstances, so that, through them, mankind can understand the magnitude and wonder of a moment.

Alexei Leonov, a brilliant pilot, cosmonaut, artist and communicator, was perfectly placed as the first man to walk in space.

Beyond that moment, he was perfectly suited to become an ambassador for space exploration, given his ability to command respect and facilitate friendship across all boundaries.

Tributes flowed from all corners of Earth, at the news of the death of General Leonov, on 11 October, 2019, at age 85, in Moscow. His friend and co-commander of the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz Test Project, US astronaut Thomas Stafford, attended his formal Moscow funeral on 15 October.

My deepest sympathy goes out to the family of this great man... to the Russian people who are so proud of his life, accomplishments and character... and to explorers, pioneers and dreamers everywhere, whose lives have been touched by this universal icon.

To many of us, across the globe, Alexei Leonov is a giant. He is a source of inspiration that lives on, far beyond a single wondrous encounter... and, now, far beyond the span of his lifetime.

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