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HOUSTON, Dec. 19—When Apollo 15 astronaut Alfred M. Worden reported to his new job at the Ames Research Center last month, he walked into a back office that hadn't been cleaned in four years. The walls were smudged, the paint was crumbling and all he found was a desk, a bookcase, a credenza and a telephone.

"The real world had been sitting there all along," he recalled not long ago, "but when I finally got back into it I had a real shock."

Astronaut Worden isn't the only member of the Apollo program going through real shock these days. Hundreds of men and women who have spent half their lives in Apollo are learning what an end to an era can mean to their life styles.

The race to the moon was a crash program that dominated the lives of everybody at the Manned Spacecraft Center, and in a way that today seems to leave them alone in time and space.

"We had the feeling we were on foreign assignment and away from it all," explained Mrs. Saul Feldman, whose husband has been with the space program for 14 years. "It wasn't a real life at all."

"You take a group of people and isolate them for 10

years," Worden explained, "and then flush them back into the system and they're going to have problems adjusting."

Ironically, the end began with the first Apollo landing back in 1969. The national goal set in 1961 had been achieved. What could possibly be left for people who had been told that goal was everything they had in life?

Employment at the Manned Spacecraft Center has already shrunk from 5,046 at the time of the first landing to less than 4,000. It will shrink further to 3,727 by June of next year. Jobs are even harder to find at the aerospace companies who lived off the Apollo contracts from 11,000 in 1968 to half that number today.

In one company employing almost 700 people, two men committed suicide last year. One left work in the afternoon, took a motel room

and shot himself. The other man drove into the side of a bus.

In another company of 300 engineers, 15 of them got divorced last year, which is high even in the aerospace industry. Another tried to hold up a bank, while three men in the same company below the age of 50 had heart attacks. One life insurance company refused to make refunds to one contractor for the first time last year.

Some engineers have been seen around the space community managing pizza parlors, television repair shops, a furniture store and a garage. Others stay on to the end, in a blind refusal to think about the end.

"It's almost suicidal the way they kept on the job," said an engineer who worked on the now obsolete lunar landing craft. "They acted

like men sailing off of cliffs."

Part of the space worker malaise today is due to the natural aging process. When MSC Director Christopher C. Kraft organized his team of flight controllers 14 years ago almost 60 per cent of them were 22 years old and fresh out of college. Their average age today is 35.

Gone are the challenges of landing men on the moon, which attracted these kids in the last decade. The Manned Spacecraft Center is now involved in the earth-orbiting Skylab, a joint docking mission with the Soviet Union and a returnable space shuttle bus for the late seventies.

"They don't present any real challenges," said Clarence W. Pittman of TRW, Inc. "We know how to get into earth orbit and the shuttle is only an exercise in aerodynamics."