

(V.B pilots in the 1960s)

• Ed Grubbs and George Fehler (10-21-98)

(I think AL is George Fehler and AS Ed Grubbs.)

Q Alex McCool just told me, "I bet that plane has 25,000 hours on it."

AL It's pretty close.

AS It was the best maintained of any in the country.

Q I'll bet.

AL And that was one of the things we enjoyed as crew members, that NASA would spend whatever money that was needed to maintain it.

AS And then when we got it back.

Q Oh, was that right. Why did they get rid of it?

AL Well, they didn't think it was -- it was due for an engine change, and they had another with a little lower time, and it had the cargo doors.

AS They gave it to some little old college in Saudi or something.

AL Hell, that cargo door is worth as much as the airplane.

AS It cost \$250,000 on that cargo door. They had to get the approval from Engineering.

Q It's always been -- except for when they traded it in or something -- It's always been based in Huntsville?

AL Yes, this particular one.

AS Each Center had a NASA 1, -2, -3, and -4.

AL Houston did, too, didn't they?

AS Yes. And another one is based in Washington. Bob, the National Space Society put this out. It's quite a -- here's the beginning.

Q The National Space Society?

AS Yes, he founded that National Space Society, VonBraun did.

Q You know, I have got a lot of stuff on him, but I don't think I have that.

AS This is "Penumunde to El Paso" and all the way through it.

Q Man of the year? (Discussion of photocopying whatever this gentleman was showing B. Ward from July 75.) I wonder if he knew he was ill then? What do you think?

AS He did. He realized it. I believe he was in Alaska when he first discovered it; you know, when he went to passing blood.

Q What year would that have been?

AS 1975.

Q So, he really didn't know he was ill until 75?

AS Right.

Q I have had some people sort of speculate that maybe he knew he was ill when he went to Washington in 1970, but I think it's just speculation. Paine

AS You know, Payne was the administrator then. He was the one who talked him into coming up there, and then he resigned six

MSFC planes

NASA planes

Going to Wash.

Gulfstream 1  
~~DC-3~~

(cont'd.)

(cont'd.)

*in Wash.*

*(mostly background)*

*Flying / Piloting*

months after he got up there and just kind of left him hanging up there.

Q That was a big disappointment to him.

AS They just threw him in an office down at the end of the hall and wasn't buying any of his ideas. He was just --

AL He wasn't the kind of a man to be just put in the closet.

AS That's when he left and went to Fairchild.

Q That corresponds to what I have heard from other people, too, that felt that was the case.

AS There was a lot of jealousy there.

AL I think Dr. Payne, really, in all sincere earnestly, wanted him there and would have utilized him.

AS Yes.

AL But then after Payne -- it just happened to be a political move when Payne left.

AS Yes, I forget the --

AL They really cut the budget or something, and he --

AS He didn't buy that, you know.

Q But VonBraun admired Tom Payne, didn't he?

AS Oh, yes.

Q They were really close?

AS He come from GE, you know>

Q Dr. Fletcher came in, too, and they didn't hit it off all that well. That's what I gather. When did you all start flying for NASA.

GRUBBS: George, it was '62 or '63. (Unintelligible)

Q It must have been right before they got the Gulf Stream.

AS He was flying for Huntsville Aviation, wasn't he.

AL Rocket City Air Activities. Russ Kyle owned the business.

AL Kind of charter work.

Q And you all had NASA business, I guess? They were one of your customers?

AL NASA was one of the prime customers.

AS They were the fixed-base operator at the old airport, you know, right off of --

Q South Parkway there?

AS Yes. I don't guess it was a parkway there then, or was it?

AL Yes, it was. The Parkway was there, and it had a beacon right over Airport Road.

AS Airport Road went right into the airport.

AL Yes. It was around that time that -- a friend of mine that worked for Grumman, Ken -- I can't think of his last name -- were wooing NASA to try to sell them airplanes. So they came down and bought one, right there at Rocket City, and that was when Ken, during that time, introduced it and had the Doctor take a flight in it. Then he arranged a hunting trip. Then Drummond and I got to go up on that hunting trip. We flew him up. Then -- the

(cont'd.)

(cont'd.)

Doctor would always invite you to go with him if he possibly could. He invited us to go on that trip, on the hunt with him. We had a great time. It was after that that NASA bought four of them.

AS Each one of the centers.

AL Each one of the centers got a Gulf Stream.

Q Where did you all go on the hunting trip?

AL Up at Long Island, New York. That was where Grumman had their plant.

Q Grumman makes the Gulf Stream?

AL Grumman built the airplane.

Q Gulf Stream is a turboprop?

AL Right, with two Rolls Royce jet engines.

Q Jet engines?

AS Jet engines with a prop. You have a gear box, but it is a jet engine.

AL They called it a "Turboprop".

AS British built, Rolls Royce.

Q Obviously, it's a fine plane, very serviceable.

AL Oh, yes.

AS Well, it was the Cadillac of the corporate and business aircraft.

Q And it still is?

AS Oh, yes.

AL It's got the G5. The G5 sells for \$35 million or something like that. This one was around a million dollars when they bought it.

AS It was about two and a half.

AL Two and a half million?

AS Yes.

Q And NASA bought four of them?

AL Right.

Q Were you all ever NASA employees or did you always work for the --

AS M.S. contractors.

AL There was a brief time where I worked for Rocket City Air Activities, and I don't think it's of any value to you, but and Russ Kyle was the owner of it. Russ was a pilot, and he was very close to the Doctor. They had hunting and fishing trips and weekends together. Russ, in my opinion, abused that privilege because he really got enamored with the country club life and so forth and didn't take care of his business to the point that our paychecks were bouncing and all of this. When we complained to NASA, they said they couldn't do anything about because we, as employees, worked for Russ Kyle, Rocket City. Finally, they said that if we refused to fly, then they would have to do something. And I said, "Well, I'm not flying any more if I can't get paid

(all background)

Flying /  
Piloting

(Management Services, Inc.) - (took over from Russ Kyle and)

(cont'd.)

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Grubbs & Fehler  
10-98

(cont'd.)

Piloting/Flying  
(background)

not even my expenses." So they said, "Would you fly the airplane over to Redstone Airport?" When we did, we flew it over there and they came out and met us at the airplane, and we became civil service employees on a temporary basis for around two weeks or whatever until they could get all of the things ironed out and until they got a contract. That's when MSI, Management Services, Inc., came in and took over.

Q Took over from Rocket City?

AL Yes. They figured that was a default of that contract, I guess, and until they could get another contractor, they just made Drummond and myself and the crew chief civil service employees on a temporary basis.

AS NASA owned the airplanes, but MSI furnished the bodies.

Q I see. When the Gulf Stream was bought, where was that located? Was Russ Kyle involved when that plane was bought?

AL Yes.

Q So the government owned --

AL It was property leased to or made available to the charter service. Well, it was a government-owned airplane, and he had the contract to maintain and crew. He just didn't take care of his business.

AS He needed to take the bull by the tail.

AL He had a great thing because of the close relationship with the Doctor.

Q I am not going to go into the gory details of that, but it is very good to know the background so I can present what stories you all have correctly. I was here when Russ Kyle was operating, and I remember how he lost that. I say "how;" I remember when he lost that business.

AL Russ was a fine man, individually, a super salesman. He got along with people, and I think that the downfall of Russ was he had a heart attack, and he couldn't fly anymore. I think then he took up a lot of activities at the Country Club, and, it's only my opinion from what I have heard, he did a lot of playing gin rummy and so forth, living a lifestyle that was a little beyond what he should have been doing. He really had the world by the tail, as far as NASA and where he was going and everything else, but he just didn't stay there and keep the shop going.

AS I will say one thing: You still stayed boned up on things, because he was going to ask questions. He wasn't trying to make you look dumb, but he just had such an inquisitive mind that he had to know why you didn't know something.

Q This is Dr. VonBraun?

AS Yes.

AL I always said that he had the curiosity of a child, always asking anything. If there was something he didn't quite understand or know, he would ask.

V.B curiosity

(cont'd.)

V.B. Curious

AS Sometimes <sup>people</sup> A have an condescending attitude --

AL But he didn't feel that way. It would make you feel good, because you would think, How come someone that smart is asking me something?

AS It would make the individual feel good, and he wasn't trying to make you feel good, he just wanted to know why it was that way.

Q Just soaking up knowledge and information.

AS Yes.

AL I remember one time -- it's such a little thing. We were flying and, of course, he liked to fly in the rough seat. He liked to make the takeoff, and then, when we got up to altitude, then he would go back and do his work. He would say, "Could you call me when we get within range?" We would get in range of Washington and things would get hectic, a lot of traffic and everything else, and that's what he enjoyed. He liked to come up and listen <sup>in</sup> on the activity and do what the controller told him and take it in and land it. And he did an outstandingly good job.

AS He might not make but one landing a month sometimes.

Q Before I forget, how many people does the Gulf Stream, the G1, seat?

AS Ours was outfitted for 16, but it had tables and bars.

Q A dozen then?

AS It would seat 24 if you just put in seats, you know. It had television and bars.

Q As outfitted?

AS Sixteen. (conversation)

AL I think it was 12. (conversation)

(They decided that this plane for NASA <sup>seated</sup> ~~sat~~ 12 and the Chemstrand plane sat 16.)

AL (continues) The little thing that I think is interesting about his asking questions: He was flying out one day. We were going to Washington. In route to Knoxville, he noticed that he was holding a drift correction, and instead of having 30 degrees or 40 degrees, he was holding a heading with a drift correction of maybe about 15 degrees with a pretty strong wind. Then he got up to altitude, and he was holding a drift correction of about half that. He said, "George, why is it ~~do~~ I have a drift correction here of less than what I had down below?" It's a very simple question and very simple facts. I said, "The difference in your speed, Doctor." And it's just like a light. That was all you needed to tell him. It's just like a light came on and he said, "I understand." We were doing about 130 knots or something like that and we would get up to altitude and doing about 150 knots. As soon as you gave him the key to it, of whatever, he had the answers.

V.B. Piloting

V.B. Piloting  
(curiosity)

(cont'd.)

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V.B. piloting

AS We would be doing 285 knots, which figures out to 320 miles an hour. That was what we cruised at.

Q 250 knots is about 325?

AS 285 is what we were doing. It's about 320 miles an hour.

Q Right. You all called him, to his face, Dr. VonBraun?

AL Oh, yes.

Q And then you referred to him as "the Doctor"?

AL Yes.

AL Did you have a chance to get a copy of what Dr. Lucas had to say?

Q I did.

AL I think he described the man so well and his personality and his work ethic. I thought he did an extraordinary job.

AS I called him when I got home. I called him, and I meant to bring you one down.

(conversation)

Q You all are telling me some stories, and that's good, but rather than do a narrative biography, I am going to do these anecdotes. A lot of times a little story will illustrate these character traits you are talking about. Usually, rather than just say what he was, I need to be telling stories. Whether they are humorous stories or stories with a point, they will kind of illustrate a side of this man's personality.

AS I picked him up at Tullahoma one time. He had gone up there in a car or something. Something come up and they wanted him at the Arsenal. I flew NASA 9, which was a QueenAir, there by myself. They didn't even let it go around the field by itself normally. Everything was out on the road, and I flew 9 up there a picked him up. But there was some Air Force general --

AL O'Conner.

AS No. It was another one; he was at the same meeting with his wife. Maxwell Field was supposed to pick him up, and I got up there -- they were supposed to pick this general and his wife up, but they had called, and the airplane that was supposed to get him had a malfunction, mechanical, and it was going to be five or six hours. So it was just me and the Doctor going to Washington and he invited them to come along in NASA 9 with us on the trip.

We got up there and approach control took us. We landed at Langley, which is up the Potomac. It's a difficult site to start your approach down the river. We went down and were coming down the river. The Doctor looked over in the backend and at the general -- that little airplane had a backseat -- and he said, "If this wing flies up down here, don't get alarmed. It's just all the hot air coming out of the Pentagon."

Q He had a good sense of humor, didn't he?

AL He really did.

AS He just liked people. I don't care whether it was the

V.B. piloting  
Quip (political)

liked people

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(“AS”) (“AL”)  
Grubbs & Fehler  
10-98

janitor or a corporation president, he liked everyone.

Q He never took that left-hand seat without having been checked out in the plane, did he?

AS They come out with an edict that he couldn't be in the left seat if there were passengers on board. They come out with a letter that said you had to have a type rating. See, anything over 12,500 pounds, you have to be typed in that particular airplane or you are not legal to fly it.

AL I remember that so well.

AS He said, "I get me 'vun'."

AL We got a bunch of literature and manuals together for him, and we went up to Flight Safety and stayed a week. He got him a type rating.

Q Is that right?

AL And they put him on the board of directors at Flight Safety.

Q What did you call that rating?

AL ATR -- airline transport rating.

AS That particular rating --

AL The highest level you can have of ratings -- you had to be ATR rated in each particular airplane. Like, I could be rated in a Gulf Stream, but I wouldn't be rated in another airplane. In order to get that, I would have to go to school and be trained and so forth and take a flight test.

AS I got a type rating in the old Convair, DC3. There is an airline transport rating on multi-engine, DC3, Convair, T43, T44.

Q So VonBraun got the same thing?

AS Yes. He didn't get his rating in each particular airplane, but he did get his type rating for the Gulf Stream. It come out of Washington. They were trying -- I don't know whether someone was complaining or what. When it come out, he said, "I get me 'vun'." He had flown gliders and stuff in Germany. They couldn't have powered air, but he knew what one was and what made one fly.

AL And any damn thing they flew in there or any time he got around an airplane he hadn't flown yet, he would make some kind of remark or hint, you know, "What's it like to fly?" And they would invite him to fly. The Super Guppy, when they brought that in here, he flew that. Conrad -- what was his name that built that thing?

Q It's airline transport type rating.

AS For that particular type of airliner. The big thing there is you have critical speeds and critical emergency procedures. You had to know the malfunctions and the speeds.

Q I recently interviewed a German lady named Doretta Schlit. Her name was "Kirsten" when she was a single girl. She went to work at age about 20 or 21 for Dr. VonBraun in Penumunde as a secretary. He had an older, battle-ax secretary, and he hired

V.B. Peop

\* V.B. Piloting

\* V.B. Piloting

this young girl. She just speaks very kindly of him, too. He was a handsome man, but there wasn't ever anything between them. I think she maybe had a thing for Magnus and maybe their were romantic during those years. She said -- and of course, Magnus was a pilot, too, and I didn't know that -- in the early and mid-40s, they would take a small plane to Berlin a lot of times over the weekends. There would be some business excuse like having to take some papers or having to get some papers, but they would also fly in for a little R & R on the weekends. She said VonBraun had a girlfriend there, and he was always happy and relaxed when he came back from these weekends. They would fly in regularly.

AS I think he had access to a plane over there, personal type.  
Q Himmler accused him of keeping it ready to defect to England when Himmler got suspicious of him or something.

AS Well, because of the malfunctions they had on the test stands and stuff like that, he thought he was sabotaging the deal or something like that. He really wanted to take over, was what he was wanting to do.

Q The Army had it, didn't they?

AS Yes.

Q It was Army and not --

AL Dorenberger was the general in the Army that was over the --

Q I am familiar with that name.

AL He later came to this country and went to work for Bell Laboratories.

Q When he retired, it was to Mexico, I think.  
(Unintelligible)

AS The Doctor was making a civil service salary, and he could have been making a million dollars a year.

Q I heard when we landed on the moon the first time, Dr. VonBraun was making about \$37,000 or something and he could have been really raking it in with industry.

AL Of course, that was more money then than it is now, but it still wasn't fabulous. But he had his dream that he was chasing.

AS Yes.

AL And that was more important than dollars and money and everything else.

Q Tell me (conversation repeating story about letter and rating)

AS The letter that came from Washington didn't concern just him. It concerned anybody. The flight mechanics or anybody else couldn't be in left seat if we had passengers on board.

AL You see, he had some few people in the earlier days that were uncomfortable with him being up front and flying, and he loved to fly if there was weather, if there was a thunderstorm or

V.B. Low Salary

V.B. piloting

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(Cont'd.)

whatever. He loved the malfunctions that we might have, like an alternator going out or something, and he would piece these things together that had redundancy. In rocketry, we have redundancy. In an airplane, we have two alternators and we have two engines and we have this and that and so forth. When they finally came out with this thing that you had to be type rated in the airplane to fly it with passengers, like Ed said, he looked around -- and I was there the day they told him that -- and said, "What must I do to get this?" And that's when Bill Martin said, "Well, George can tell you." On that flight, he was very curious about the steps to take. I told him the manuals and so forth and the flight check and all of these things. After that, he went to -- and I have always felt a little embarrassed about it, because I told him, "Doctor, they will ask questions on the written examination that are completely useless as far as operating this aircraft. They are just questions of knowledge that you have to study and multiple-choice type things." And I said, "It's a difficult test." He said, "Well, I have always done pretty good with books." He went to Rome for ten days or two weeks shortly after that, and he set aside something like from 4 in the morning to 6 or 7 in the morning to review these manuals and study. He came back from that trip and took that test and I think he made -- I forget what it was -- 87 or 92 or something in that bracket on the first crack. Then the next step was, you know, the flight check.

AS Simulator.

AL Simulator. I went with him up to New York and went through the simulator and went through the thing. That was interesting, because the prop on that airplane is very complicated with the warping and so forth and pitch and settings and the way it works and functions and so forth. He just sat there and sucked all of that up and absorbed it. Every once in a while, he would ask a question, and it was old Bob Campbell that had him.

AS He was good, the best one that day.

AL And he would come back with another explanation of the same thing. As soon as he did, then Doctor would say, "I know. I know." He would relate that to something he was familiar with.

Q When that letter came about the new ATR requirements with passengers, he was already able to fly the plane?

AL Yes.

AS He had been flying. *it.*

Q In order for him to do it legally, he would have to get that?

AL This was a new requirement, in other words.

AS He wasn't offended. He didn't question it. The thing was just, How do I do this? That was it and he just ate it up.

AL I had the pleasure of going over with him when he took the

V.B. Carubbs & Fehlee  
(more on V.B. getting his ATR)

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("AS") ("AL")  
Grubbs & Fehler  
10-98

flight check. Of course, the man that gave him the flight check was very impressed with his having to do this. The Doctor did a good job. It happened to be in instrument conditions, because we had this ceiling of around 400 feet.

Q Where was this done?

AL I think it was over Charleston, South Carolina.

AS Savannah.

AL No, the flight check in the airplane. We met the inspector up in --

Q Charleston and Savannah are right there pretty close, aren't they?

AS Later on, we did our maintenance in Savannah, but every center don't have an examiner with \_\_\_\_\_. Sometimes you have to go \_\_\_\_\_. (Unintelligible)

AL He took the flight check and did everything they asked. There was only one thing -- and I don't know that I ever told Ed this or not -- part of the procedure in an approach if you are making an approach and you come down to your minimum altitude and you don't have contact with the ground or the runway, then you call it a missed approach and it's gear up and go out. Then you need to make another approach in hopes the weather has improved or go to our alternate. He was familiar with all of this, the missed approach and what you do and so forth. Well, we happened to have a low ceiling when he was actually flying, and it required a circling approach around the airport. You came in to your minimum altitude and sighted the runway, but you couldn't land there. You would circle around to where the active runway was. As he was circling, he got back up in the clouds because they were low and he got back in the clouds. He looked at me -- and the inspector was behind us. The inspector wanted to help all he could, but he wasn't going to give him anything. He looked at me and he said, "George, we are back in the soup." I said, "It's just about like a missed approach, isn't it?" He said, "You're right. A missed approach." And he followed the missed approach procedure and went on out. It was how quick he picked up on that. I said, "It's like a missed approach."

Granted he was hampered somewhat with the language, you know, and our common phraseology that we would use sometimes, but a sharp man. He really was a sharp man.

Q Did he quick to recognize whatever limitations he might have --

AL Oh, yes.

Q -- if he wasn't familiar with a particular airport he was coming into or --

AL He told me one day, "George, I love to fly, but you should always keep in mind if the weather is too bad or if it is not convenient or if we have airplane problems, tell me. I

(more on V.B getting ATR)

V.B Considerateness  
\* (Pilot's)

(cont'd.)

Grubbs & Fehler  
("AS") ("AL")  
10-98

\* V.B. Pilotage

understand. I remember one time we were flying going into -- he would never have a drink if he was going to fly. One night we were going into O'hare and it was bad weather. We weren't that familiar with O'hare because we didn't go there that much. Each of these places have got maybe 20 different approach plates, you know, and we weren't familiar. The weather was bad. I said, "Damn, I hate for the Doctor to come up here because it's going to be a tough job with us taking care of this." I sent word back to him, I said, "Fix him a martini and take it back to him and tell him that if he doesn't mind to have a drink and enjoy the flight because we had bad weather and we weren't that familiar with it and just enjoy it." And he thought that was the greatest thing that we thought of him to give him a martini.

Q It was also a signal?

AL Yes. You know, the way he took things like that.

AS I wasn't on it, but who was on the trip with him to the World's Fair in Montreal?

AL That was me and George Holt.

AS Now, that was on the wine deal, when you all went through the German pavilion. Tell him about that.

AL Like I said, I think he enjoyed flying so much he tried to repay us by inviting you to the different events that he was going to be attending. That might be a chore for whoever was in charge of arranging things, you know, transportation and so forth. They would often try to tell him that, Doctor, we don't know if we have that many cars; and if we have the crew in there, they don't have time to get their flight plan ready and make excuses. But the Doctor would say, "Well, I think these boys know enough to use the telephone to file a flight plan." He invited us to go to the World's Fair in Montreal, and it was the day before the opening. We got just a first-class tour of everything through his courtesy of asking us to go to the dinner that night. At the table that night, they brought wine around and little token gifts and a bottle of wine for us to carry home. He was at one end of the table and I was down at the other end quite a ways apart. He took the wine and he looked and said, "George, one glass of wine would be all right, wouldn't it?" I said, "You have got it, Doctor, me too." What else was it about that trip?

AS I know. He told them to give you all one of each. You all couldn't take the wine because you were flying. He said, "Just give them one of each."

AL He wanted to see a friend of his there that was from Russia that he had worked with. While the Doctor came to America, his friend had gone to Russia. He had made a comment to the man that was taking us through about whoever his friend was. He said, "I hope to see him on this trip." He said, "We'll see if we can

considerate  
V.B. Pilotage / of his pilots!

1967

("AS") ("AL")  
Grubbs & Fehler  
10-98

arrange that." Then twice during the tour going around to the different events, he would ask about the man. The Russians evidently would not allow that. He didn't get to see him as a result, yet it would have been so easy for them to have made that arrangement, but I guess at that time they just didn't want him to meet and exchange thoughts or whatever.

Q When was this?

AL This was in Montreal.

AS The World's Fair in 67.

Q And it was in the Cold War era and all of that.

AL Yes. So, you know, we were in a race at that time with the Russians. The Russians just didn't want -- I think all the Doctor really wanted to do was see an old friend, but they just didn't get the chance to meet.

AS This is a copy of the manifest when we flew the Doctor down to the ~~Cape to Apollo 11 launch~~ Apollo 11 lunar landing coverage @

Q Is that right?

JSC - Mission Control / Houston.

AS That's the passenger list we took down there.

Q I bet that was an interesting party.

AS When we landed there, he asked us if we wanted to come over to the site. We told him that we would have to get the airplane serviced and secured and tied down. His \_\_\_\_\_ was there waiting, you know. We told him that we would certainly like to do it.

Q That was Apollo 11?

(Unintelligible)

Q You all were going from Redstone -- let's see, the launch was the 16th of July.

AS This was the landing, though.

Q Can you imagine the ----- at the Cape?

AS (Unintelligible)

Q I see.

AL He invited us to mission control for the lunar landing. You know, what a treat. When we finally got there, after he was already there, we didn't have a badge or anything to get in and they didn't recognize us and weren't going to let us in.

AS When we got over there, you see, he done been gone an hour. When we got there, they was going down a list and said, "Your names are not on the invitation list." The invitation list had come down from Washington. About that time he walked by and saw us there. I don't know whether he had been waiting on us or looking for us or what, but he showed up. He said, "Get them a badge," and they got us a badge. Anywhere he thought you would enjoy, he would take you. (Unintelligible)

Q (conversation and looking at items brought)

AS We flew in a crew down there (Unintelligible).

(conversation that is garbled but pictures and items and

v.B. Considerateness toward his pilots

(“AS”) (“AL”)  
Grubbs & Fehler  
10-98

newspaper articles continue to be viewed.)

AS This was the time when they retired NASA 3. They wanted us to take this other airplane that had lower hours and a big cargo door. They spent a quarter million dollars just getting the engineering done on this cargo door for the backend. There's a D1. When they retired NASA 3, they went back and got it back later.

Q Who would have done this? Somebody in Public Affairs? ?

AS Yes, when they had this -- they had a little ceremony out there and they come out with this. He was a unique individual.  
(conversation)

AL He sure was. He was truly a genius, but he had both his feet firmly on the ground. He enjoyed jokes and humor.

AS He liked to eat, too, didn't he?

AL He sure did. He could cut an apple in two just like a horse with his teeth. He always had food there on board. He had that unique way of charming everybody. I mean, he just had the

V.P.'s traits

AS He was the same way before those appropriation committees in Washington. He would go up there and get anything he wanted.

AL We always had the feeling from a number of little things that he was unaware of his importance, unaware of his charisma. I remember he was going to Washington and up to New York one time with Russ Kyle. Russ said that the Doctor turned to him and said, "Russ, I didn't bring any money with me. Can you help me get a check cashed?" He said, "Sure, Doctor, I know everybody in New York and they don't know you."

example of humilitiy

Q As if they wouldn't cash it for him.

AS He pretty well looked at himself that way in so many ways.

Q That's a good story and it says a lot, doesn't it, about his character. I have heard that he did make a practice of not carrying money with him. He evidently didn't want to be bothered with it or let other people spend. Did you all find that to be the case?

AS We weren't around in those situations all that much. I know the night after he got his ATR, he took us to dinner, and he ordered the chateaubriand for two. There was he and I and \_\_\_\_\_, but he suggested that, and he suggested wine, and it was his treat. That is the only time I ever sat and had dinner individually with him. It was a thank you. One of the things he told the waiter was, "May I put the tip on the bill," to make sure that it was understood that it would be there.

V.P.'s "treat" for pilots

AS I went to \_\_\_\_\_ with him one time, up there northwest of Las Vegas. They were supposed to fire one of these nuclear engines. It was just going to be used on a deep space probe. They wouldn't fire it down here, so they had to fire it from a satellite. We got up there and the wind was wrong. He

Las Vegas story  
"Travel" story

(cont'd.)

10-2-98

(Cont'd.)

(See attached V.B Vegas trip / Follies note!)

took us right along into the office where we could view the thing from TV, but they didn't get to fire it because of the wind would drift it down over Vegas. But we went to Vegas that night, and we all had reservations at the Tropicana, and they marched us right around a big line of folks waiting to get in the Follies Berge there and took us, the Doctor and the whole group, right down ringside. We were sitting there with all them bare breasted gals right above us. The Doctor had ? (Unintelligible)

listen to tape?

AL I remember he was sitting there with ----- coming by with those feathers and he was allergic to feathers.

AS They marched the whole group around the line that was standing there and took us right down to ringside.

Q This was a casino, nightclub show?

AS Yes, this was the Tropicana. I think the old Tropicana is tore down now, but it was the Tropicana back then, and the Follies Berge was the show.

going see added notes!

Q The Doctor let his hair down in situations like that, didn't he?

AS Yes.

Q Somebody told me once that Dr. VonBraun had a tendency (tape off) Oh, is that right. If you go to any military installation?

?? (see Notes)

AS Yes. When we got a trip or something on the manifest from Montgomery, it would just say "Montgomery." We were halfway down there and word come up to me that there had been a situation at ----- Field. I called (Unintelligible) and changed my destination, but I didn't file a code. When I landed and taxied up on the runway, the base commander and quite a group was there, but they were there meeting a Navy guy. When Dr. VonBraun stepped out, he saw the band, you know, and the base commander felt that somebody in operations had dropped the damn ball. They were getting everybody damn body in the whole operations (Unintelligible background noise)

Q The commanders did turn out, though, and they were required to whenever he came in?

AS He was trying (Unintelligible) with Dr. Mueller. We had to have fuel. They got the base commander off of the golf course, and he was highly tuned, you know, on a Sunday afternoon to have to leave his golf game.

Q When there might be a low point in the Apollo program, for instance, and, of course, after the pad fire, the fatal fire there, did he take to heart some of these setbacks in the program and could you tell when he was a little down?

AL I don't recall him being down at all about things. I have an interesting little story. With that airplane we had a fire warning light and so forth. When you had a fire warning light, the procedure was to shut the engine down, you secure that thing. I don't know whether Ed was on the trip or not, but we used to

Flyin's geo.

(cont'd.)

("As" ("AL")  
Grubbs & Fehler

10-98

(cont'd.)

Flying (usable?)

get on (Unintelligible) and a lot of (Unintelligible) would give you a false light. Well, we didn't know whether it was a false light or not, you know, and you have to treat it like it was the real thing. Well, after two or three of these things, you know, the crew would tell us -- the mechanics -- as soon as air blows across that engine, it's going to dry those sensors out and you are not going to have -- it's a false light. So this particular trip, we were going to the Cape for a firing, and we knew that it was a very boring rainy night and we were apt to get a false light. ----- reached up and pulled the circuit breaker, but we always tried to be straight and keep the Doctor informed to the very best that we could, because he was just too smart of a person. So when he got on, I told him, "Doctor, we pulled the circuit breaker for the fire warning lights." I told him the reason why and explained that to him. He said, "Yes, I understand." I said, "When we get to altitude and after about five minutes, then we are going to put the breaker back in and it's going to probably be dry. If it is, then we will procede with \_\_\_\_\_ and have to come back." So that's the procedure we used. On the way back from the Cape, he got aboard and he was (End of side of tape.)\*\*\*\*\*

See notes

Add photocopies  
of notes made  
after tape ended!

V.B. told Ed (or Geo.?)  
that he "helped" V.B. w/ play  
that circuit-breaker  
- used it w/ Saturn to  
avert a launch "scrub"!

get on (Unintelligible) and a lot of (Unintelligible) would give you a false light. Well, we didn't know whether it was a false light or not, you know, and you have to treat it like it was the real thing. Well, after two or three of these things, you know, the crew would tell us -- the mechanics -- as soon as air blows across that engine, it's going to dry those sensors out and you are not going to have -- it's a false light. So this particular trip, we were going to the Cape for a firing, and we knew that it was a very boring rainy night and we were apt to get a false light. ----- reached up and pulled the circuit breaker, but we always tried to be straight and keep the Doctor informed to the very best that we could, because he was just too smart of a person. So when he got on, I told him, "Doctor, we pulled the circuit breaker for the fire warning lights." I told him the reason why and explained that to him. He said, "Yes, I understand." I said, "When we get to altitude and after about five minutes, then we are going to put the breaker back in and it's going to probably be dry. If it is, then we will proceed with \_\_\_\_\_ and have to come back." So that's the procedure we used. On the way back from the Cape, he got aboard and he was (End of side of tape.)\*\*\*\*\*  
(Tape side B begins mid-statement: there is a great deal of background noise on this side of the tape)

Q -- celebrity. Was he uncomfortable with it or were there times?

*Celebrity*

AL The thing that I noticed so much, and I think you have heard this from a number of people, it could be the high-level person, the director or the administrator of all of NASA, and Dr. VonBraun could walk in the room and it seemed that a whole host of people would walk away from this (Unintelligible) -- say hello to the Doctor and see what he had to say and make notes and so forth as a reporter would do, or whatever an interested person would do. He seemed to be oblivious to this attention that he had.

*immediately the center of atten.*

AS If he walked in the room, he was (Unintelligible)

*he asked, didn't tell*

AL He always asked, and I am told with his people that worked for him, he would ask them to do something and never would tell them to do something. Like he would ask about flying and accept your comments and so forth. He never did tell you anything to do.

*Leader*

AS You know, he was down through every shot over there, and those people know that he wasn't the only one that was running the thing. He recognized their ability and their labor, and they appreciated it. They all worked like hell for many hours.

Q And that helped him keep informed in some of the nitty-gritty details, too, didn't it?

AL To tell a man how important that particular facet was that

he was working on; you know, without that function being right, it just wouldn't work. I would imagine it would give them a great sense of importance.

AS They felt like they were really a part of the team.

AL And he liked to refer to himself as "a part of the crew."

Q I heard recently -- or heard or read -- where he was with Alan Shepard for that first shot, the sub-orbital flight, and that there were several people around. I guess in the bureaucracy, although Shepard was still military then, Shepard referred to VonBraun as -- he told his guys, "I work for him." VonBraun stopped him and said, "I work for you, too."

AL It was a two-way street there.

Q On this pulling the circuit breaker, was that a launch and it wasn't any kind of static --

AL It was a launch they had down there, and I am sure that what he did was it just occurred to him that what we had done and why we had done it and explained it to him, it was probably -- caused him to ask questions about how the thing would affect the total launch, was it necessary, and so forth. When he, along with the others, realized that there could be some way to isolate the circuit, it was probably very insignificant as far as what they really did, but he came back to sort of say, "You have helped me here."

Q It's a pretty good analogy, I guess.

AL I know that my sister was the dietician at the hospital and he went to have his sinus problem cleared up. He was going to be there overnight or for a couple of days. They gave him the best room. She had asked if there was anything in particular they could do for him. I said, "Get him some food. If you can find good, hard, fresh apples, he loves them. He will bite into that thing and bite half of it off with one bite." So she got him a bowl of fruit and everything and beautiful apples and took it in there. That really pleased him. Then she introduced herself to him and said that she was my sister. She said that he just lit up like that was the greatest thing and was so impressed that George's sister was there in the hospital and brought this fruit to him to the point that when Maria came he said, "I want to meet someone," like it was something important. But he had a unique way of making people think they were that important.

Q Stemming from his just genuinely liking people, too.

AL Yes. And I think it was truly felt on his part.

Q Instead of like a lot of people where the bigger they are, the bigger they act. (Conversation about VB signing book) I have heard other stories about VonBraun and other people who are really giants in their field not forgetting to be thoughtful to people.

AL We found that to be so much so with all of the people. We

*Leader*

*Kindness in hosp.*

*you*

(“AS”) (“AL”)  
Grubbs & Fehler  
10-98

flew some pretty influential people, and it seemed that the higher up they were on the totem pole, they had the most consideration, the easiest to get along with, and didn't make demands or anything. But overall all of the NASA people that we flew were just topnotch people. Every once in awhile you could catch a lower-level management person looking around to see whether he rated first if the Doctor wasn't there to have that seat, that type thing.

AS That's true. The true measure of a man is not the number of servants he has but the number of people he serves. That was like VonBraun.

Q That's true.

AL I have heard some tales about (Unintelligible)

Q There is actually a former neighbor of mine, Jerry McCall, who was an assistant to VonBraun, and I got along fine with Jerry. At our first home in south Huntsville, the McCall's moved in right across the street, and Jerry was obviously very bright and was VonBraun's assistant for a time. I have heard some stories that he just kind of was too filled with his own self-importance at times. There were some stories going around about him at Marshall.

AS We found that out. Some of the smaller ones would insist on everything in the world on the airplane and there wasn't anything you could do to satisfy them. They always had a senior passenger listed on the manifest. (Unintelligible) -- things that they wanted that was different.

(end of tape)

#