

(2 interviews)

Dr. William Pickering 9/16/98

Q I know that you and Dr. VonBraun had a close association with you in JPL and, if not beginning with Explorer I, certainly including that early on...I was wondering if you had any favorite anecdotes or stories where Dr. VonBraun figured in them or you and he.

A Actually, when I think about VonBraun, one of the strongest impressions I have was that when I retired from the Lab in '76, NASA put on a wingding for me when I was back in Washington. When I came to that party, and it was about a month before he died, it was his last public appearance.

Q He was very ill at that time.

A Yes, very ill. I remember a sort of funny story that I can give you right now. Shortly after the Explorer went up, Eisenhower had a dinner at the White House at which the guests were military and science. So he invited generals and so forth, and he invited VonBraun and myself and Van Allen also for the Explorer, because this is about a month after Explorer. So we were going to this dinner. It turned out that Werner and his wife and my wife and I were all staying at the DuPont Hotel, the DuPont Plaza Hotel. We were going to ride a taxi together to the White House. Well, about ten minutes before the taxi was due, Werner called up to my room and said, "Have you got a spare white tie?" I said, "What do you mean? I rented my suit and I got one white tie with it." He said, "Well, I rented my suit and I got zero white ties." He said, "What are we going to do?" I said, "Well, why don't you start out with the manager; he might possibly have one." After a while he called back and said, "No, the manager was no help. But," he says, "I have decided that maybe what we ought to do is just go to the White House, and when we get there, they ought to be able to handle this problem." So, sure enough, the four of us went in the taxi. We got to the gate at the White House. They stopped us, of course, and VonBraun talked to the guard there and said, "Look, I have a problem. I don't have a white tie." The guard said, "No problem, sir." We drive up to the front door and somebody whips Werner aside and he's gone for about 10 seconds. He comes back with a white tie on.

Q Where did he get it?

A From somebody at the White House. You see, we actually went through the front door at the White House, and as soon as we got through the front door, somebody grabbed, took him off to the side, and he was back in a very few seconds. He hardly missed his place in the line. He knew it was a white tie dinner, but he had rented his suit and realized there was no white tie. All ended well, and we had a very enjoyable dinner.

Q When was the retirement they had for you?

V.B  
chess

Explorer I, white  
tie episode @ White House

Allen

A It was in '76. It would have been April or thereabouts in '76. And it was literally about a month before he died.

Q I have heard that Dr. VonBraun knew that he had cancer in '70 when he went to NASA headquarters. You may not have heard that.

A No.

Q And that he was quite quiet about it.

A One of the other stories about people who had problems at that time, General Medaris, who was running from Huntsville, had cancer of the prostate, and he came out here and went to UCLA, which probably had the best cancer work going on. They said, "Sorry, but we can't do anything." He went into remission and the cancer was cured. He felt so strongly about it, that he became a priest in the Episcopal Church.

Q So that's what led him to do that, yes. (Conversation about Medaris.) Let's see. Does anything else come to mind now?

A No.

Q Should I ask you to think about it?

A Give me a call in a few days. (Conversation continued.)

WP-- Hello. I got your little book. Very nice. ('TLS')

Q-- Hav you had chance to give a little thought abt what we talked abt earlier?

WP-- I've tried to think of something else & really I dont come up w/ anything. tht wd be very helpful. (referred to earlier recollections abt v.B frantically searching for a white tie at hotel, & then even at White House, at super-formal dinner there that Ike was giving to celebrate Explorer 1 achievement)

*See attached!*

Q-- Did you have much face-to-face contact w/ v.Braun?

WP-- We were involved in various meetings, but usually we went our separate ways w/ our people. Oh, we'd meet several times working

a year. It wasnt a day-to-day thing.

(He aware of Rees' death. spoke well of him. said he was w/ Stuhlinger or had seen him recently, in Iowa re: James van Allen, etc.

(mentioned Pickering crater on moon -- named for another W.H. Pickering, also astronomer, around 1900 -- no relation. hav to be dead to have crater named for you.)

Q-- you were aware tht v.B went to Wash/NASA HQs at Tom Paine's urging.?

WP-- Yeah

Q-- and v.B had mixed feelings abt tht--he foresaw tht it most certainly wd lead to th breakup of his original team, anyway?

WP-- yeah, that's right.

Q-- while were some positive results of his going there, it was largely frustrating experience?

WP-- yeah.

Q-- did he ever share any of that w/ you?

WP-- yeah, I'll agree--I think it was. I think the obvious reason for it (his move to Wash.) was <sup>that</sup> he had ~~been~~ a great influence on Congressmen. He was a very charismatic individual, anyway. In fact, he is the only witness at a congressional hearing tht I've ever heard of that, when he came into the room, all th Congressmen came down to shake his hand. (agreed tht v.B had a "star quality")

Q-- did he ever share w/ you his feelings ~~about going to Wash.~~ or thoughts abt his Wash. service, or abt joining Fairchild?

WP-- yeah--no, no, I never talked to him abt that (Fairchild), but I had th feeling that he wasnt very happy there (in Wash.).