

1—phone interview w/ HARRY ATKINS, retired MSFC physicist (during v.Braun era)

(incident hap sometime in '67-69 timeframe, in MSFC's Space Sciences Lab, w/ Ernst Stuhlinger as Director. Atkins was physicist working there. That day he was performing infrared astronomy research, testing out an IR system, called photometer, in which th detectors are sensitive only in th IR part of spectrum. To do tht he was using, on an optical bench, a very small soldering iron that, when it heats up, does so in infrared- Was trying to align th optics in system at that time)--"I was a young research scientist at th time" -- "and in comes Wernher von Braun, E Stuhlinger, Gerhard Heller, Hermann Weidner" & maybe 1 other. "They were touring Ernst's Laboratory & seeing what people were doing. Von Braun had this extreme interest in science. In fact, he used to go down into the labs & hide from Bonnie (holmes) where she couldn't find him. With v.B, all you had to do was mention something scientific. He loved, and he'd ~~xxxxxxx~~ just get into it. I hap to mention that this detector I was working on was made out of a compound called lead sulphide. Well, that triggered him (v.B) bec they had used that before & he knew abt it from WW2 (Peenemuende). During that dis-cussion he was very very int & asking me all kinds of Q's, Hermann Weidner backed up against my bench & his ~~xxxxxxx~~ suit coat came in contact w/ this very small, pencil-thin soldering iron there.

"The Team"?

\*  
V.B sense of humor, quick wit

-lead-

We're all standing there talking & some ~~body~~ <sup>one</sup> smelled smoke. They're looking around, & ~~Weidner~~ about tht time Weidner looks around & jumps forward & starts beating his ~~xxxx~~ smoking coat, & they're all helping him. And here I am, thinking my career has ended very fast! Von Braun started laughing & said to Weidner, in English, of course, something like "This is good! Hermann, you needed a new suit. I'm certain the first time I saw you wearing that suit was in Peenemuende!" Weidner, a bug burly guy, was just stunned.

Weidner

~~Weidner~~ had on a full suit. I never will forget it. It was a brown suit, & you could tell it was an older suit. And you could say I was sitting there & seeing my career going down the tube.

It was funny. It wasn't funny to me at th time. von B's comeback to H Weidner was fabulous: "It's time you bought a new suit, ~~anyway~~. You've been wearing that one since the first time I saw you in Peenemuende!"

Actually the coat wasnt on fire. But it had a good-sized hole burned in it & it was smoking!

\* \* \*

NOPE

when I was abt .16

2-yr. (associate?)

early inspiration by v.B in W.Va

Another thing I told Dave C: I could almost out-hick Homer Hickam. I come fr W.Va where he's from. When I was in high sch, I read a book ~~in abt 1955~~ by Willy Ley. It was "Rockets Are Going to th Moon" or something like that. I read tht, & after working in the coal mines to get money, <sup>then to</sup> ~~working in college~~ to get my under-grad degree, & then coming back to work in th coal mines, I went to Marshall University in Huntington, W.Va, & I was majoring in physics, bec that what my instructors in high school & college <sup>be able to</sup> had told me: you gotta be in physics or mathematics or engrg to work on rocket systems. Anyway, I was the acting dir. or th director of the Student Section of the American Inst. of Physics at Marshall U. The physics (dept.) people & the chem engrg peop pooled their money & we all invited v.B to come.... This is like 1958, probably '59. Von B. came & gave this lecture to th combined chem engrg & physics students & drew th V-2, basically, & trajectories. Then at th end he said, "I want all of you to come to Hsv. We're going to th Moon & beyond!" I never will forget it, in his German accent. So I, in the process of graduating & (job) interviewing, I turned down a position w/ IBM in Poughkepsie, NY, at their campus, & headed south to join v.B, who all the students there at tht time had dubbed "the Space Pied Piper." He was like a Pied Piper. I came down here (to Hsv) bec of that. And Ernst Stuhlinger used to really push me -- & I never did, & I'll be sorry th rest of my life -- to tell v.B this story, bec, he sd, Wernher was so proud tht he was able to attract young scientists & engrs & compete w/ US industry. He said, "If you turned down a job w/ IBM to come here, tht would make his day."

Q--Tell him that you made th same kind of sacrifices really for a cause tht he (v.B) made?

A--Right, right. And turned it down bec you sorta ~~disbelieved~~ <sup>believed</sup> in the same dream tht he did. That was a story tht Ernst always tried to get me to tell ~~him~~ <sup>v.B</sup> & I never did. I dont know why I didnt do it. When I was talking to him I was always so interested in asking him abt other ~~ex~~ things...

Another interesting little story. (in early 1970s probably, Skylab days, vB may hav come back to MSFC, for annual picnic... 1 of French scientists there asked v.B for autograph...no piece of paper handy, so Frenchman took off his expensive, beaut, French silk tie, ripped it apart so v.B could sign the back, which he did. a unique v.B autograph. signed w/ felt pen. v.B did inscription, best of luck to x you with blah-blah, dated it, etc.

"Fame/Celebrity"

Didnt know in '61 <sup>how</sup> to get intouch w/ v.B at MSFC. So wrote letter w/ his resume to new W.Va US Sen. Byrd, who forwarded it

to v.B. Was hired & joined MSFC on July 3, 1961. in Research Projects Lab then, head by Stuhlinger. Had B.S. in Physics. During late-'60s incident w/ H Weidner in lab, was working on M.S. degree, & then Ph.D. Got master's, didnt fin Ph.D. at U. of Ga.)

*Atkins' background.*

b. in Van, W.Va, Boone County ... Oct 20, 1935. I'm gonna out-hick Homer Hickam: I was in a school that had 12 grades in maybe 15 rooms. And That's where I read Willy Ley's book & that started me on a career out of th mtns. of W.Va., to NASA.

Retired in '94. Willy Ley book turned him on to technology & science generally, not rocketry or space -- was no space program then. Got turned on later, at Marshall U. & w/ v.B, to rocketry & space specifically.

One of my assignments, in abt 1977-80, was to br part of a team tht wd devel these joint endeavors w/ industry, where you fly experiments in orbit, mat'ls processing ~~xxxxxxx~~ in space type program. Bill Lucas was MSFC Dir. I brought to th Marshall Ctr this man named Wm Hunt-- Bill Hunt, who was from Reynolds Metals. We were in Lucas' office & they were reminiscing abt th gold ol days & how things got started. And he told a story tht Bill (Lucas) didnt agree with, & they got in an argument abt. Will tell you story & dont know quite how to prove it. Mr Hunt then was VP or something of Reynolds, but in '55 (earlier) or whenever, when story took place, he was asst ~~of xxxxxxxxxx~~ in a cadre of people to Mr. Reynolds, the founder or whatever of Reynolds Metals. Hunt told fol. story: He said Mr Reynolds & John Sparkman were good friends. And when Sen Sparkman wd come back from Hsv He wd ~~always~~ bring an adequate supply of Jack Daniel's & that Mr Reynolds wd always have good Cuban cigars, & sometimes they'd go out to place in countryside & sip on their Jack Daniel's & smoke cigars & talk abt th good ol' days, th govt & all. And it was during 1 of these discussions tht Sparkman told Reynolds tht he ~~was~~ had a problem w/ what to do w/ Redstone Arsenal -- so it must hav been well before '55. ... '49 or something like that. He had had a proposal to bring a bunch of Germans from Texas

*Reynolds Metals / Sparkman / RSA  
& V.B team story*

given to him  
there (to RSA) to revive th place, & tht he was looking at that. Hunt said Reynolds asked, "Well, what do th Germans do?" "Well, they build rockets." They evidently discussed rockets & the Germans & the war. Reynolds then said to Sparkman, "Well, what do they build the rockets out of/" "I think they build them out of metal." Reynolds said, "Can they build them out of aluminum?" Sparkman sd, "I'm sure they can." Hunt said that Reynolds then picked up th phone & called the President (Truman) ~~and said~~ <sup>told him</sup>, "Let's get them Germans to Hsv. & I want to give them the aluminum to build those rockets."

cont'd: Reynolds/v.B team story

Now, I cant prove that. I was just sitting there listening to that. Bill Lucas had a totally different view of why the Germans came here. He & Hunt disagreed on it. They got into a pretty damn hot argument abt it. When we left th bldg-- I was taking old man Hunt to th airport -- and he -- these metals guys are always tough anyway -- he was a tough old engr., and he said to me, "I really pissed off your boy there, didnt I?" I said, "Well, I dont think he was pissed off. Dr. Lucas can be mean if he wants to, but he just has his own version of that." He said, "I tell you what: Here's my no. & if he fires you I've got a place for you in corporate HQs."

Hunt said, "Do we not have a big (Reynolds) aluminum facility over in northwest Alabama?" Whether he was telling th truth or just having fun, I'll never know. Lucas was so damned stiff, & this guy was a rough-and-tumble guy, he may hav just been doing a no. on Bill Lucas. I've never had a way of verifying that.

Atkins no Hsv area marketing mgr. with Raytheon Systems Co.

Atkins' HIGH regard for v.B

"It's my pleas<sup>ure</sup> to talk to you. Anything that adds anything (positive) to Wernher v Braun & the Germans tht I spent my life w/, I'm ~~glad~~ willing to do, bec I think -- even v. B was maligned by a certain element tht wanted to put him down. I'll do anything I can to make sure that his name & what he did always remains positive. ... I understand some of th Jewish people's concern abt that, I really do. But on th Other hand, by God, I represent somebody that had a different viewpoint, and I've got th right to say it. I know what happened with me. I do accept what hap in Germany, & I dont condone it, I dont try to justify it. Those of us who saw for years a different picture hav to present tht picture. As I said, we students dubbed him the "Pied Piper of Space," bec he was so effective at generating enthusiasm w/ the peop he came in contact with."