

Coming Full Circle and Hanging 'Em Up...

By J. Milt Heflin

After showing up at the Manned Spacecraft Center nearly half a century ago, I will be retiring on March 1, 2013.

I first reported to the Landing and Recovery Division on June 6, 1966, and over the next decade, rode recovery ships for the splashdowns of *Apollo*, *Skylab* and the *Apollo-Soyuz Test Project* (ASTP). I learned a lot about discipline and commitment working alongside the men and women in uniform who supported recovery operations.

Years later, standing off the side of the runway for the landing of STS-135, I laid claim to being the only person on the planet to have been on the scene for the landings of the last Apollo Command Module (ASTP while aboard the *USS New Orleans* west of the Hawaiian Islands, July 1975) and the last Space Shuttle Orbiter, *Atlantis*. What an honor it was to share that moment with the KSC ground ops team.

I have spent quality time with the greatest teams in the world in the *Christopher C. Kraft, Jr. Mission Control Center* during the Orbiter Approach and Landing Tests and several Space Shuttle missions. What a thrill it was being a member of the team that restored the vision of *Hubble Space Telescope* during the First Servicing Mission in 1993.

After 46 years, I have come full circle. My career at NASA began in landing and recovery, and I have recently been involved with the Orion and Ground Ops folks in the early concept development of water recovery hardware and procedures to be used after the splashdown of the *Orion* Crew Module. What's really cool about this is that today's team has the same fire in its belly as I experienced 46 years ago.

I have experienced a variety of management roles along the way. At each stop, I was fortunate to work with - and learn from - incredibly talented people with far more skills than I. Without fail, I always walked away with a greater respect for the challenges we face while serving in this noble enterprise of space exploration. I had a ringside seat for one of these great challenges - building the International Space Station - a zero gravity United Nations that works a heck of a lot better than the one on the ground.

A hope of mine for the future is that as a country we find the willpower to sustain our commitments in space exploration. In the meantime, we must be vigilant, always attentive to the dangers of spaceflight and never accepting success as a substitute for rigor in everything we do.

For me, it can't get much better than this. A few weeks after I've retired and figured out what the heck I've done, I'll pick a time to host an old fashion "splashdown party." However, I doubt if they'll let us close down NASA Rd. 1...

I've come full circle indeed. As a very dear friend and former colleague of mine would say, "Holy Cow"! Thanks to you all for making this the best job anyone anywhere has ever had.

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