

Rocket Man

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Wayne Koons '56 was busy training as a Marine Corps pilot when an opportunity came about that would change the course of his life. The National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (what would later become NASA – National Aeronautics and Space Administration) approached the Marines about the possibility of using helicopters to retrieve spacecraft from the ocean upon landing. When the squadron commander asked if they had an engineer in the group, it was Koons who was called into the meeting.

Koons—like most people back in 1956—had never heard of a man in space and was baffled by the conversation that followed. However, after hearing more, he found the possibilities exciting and was up to the challenge of leading the retrieval planning for Project Mercury. He and his team spent the next several years developing, refining and testing the retrieval process.

When the time came for the first American manned space flight in May of 1961, it was Koons who served as command pilot of the helicopter crew that retrieved Alan Shepard and his spacecraft from the Atlantic. Both the flight and retrieval went as planned, and Shepard was grateful. “After the flight, I was shutting the helicopter down,” remembers Koons. “Shepard climbed into the cockpit and gave me a friendly slap on the leg. ‘Good boy,’ he said, and then back down he went.”

Just 26 years old at the time, Koons was shocked at the media attention he received after the retrieval. He was flown to New York, along with his co-pilot and their wives, to appear on a television show called *I've Got a Secret*, where they met Johnny Carson and Bess Meyerson, among others. “For a couple of young guys, that was quite an experience,” said Koons.

After leaving active duty with the Marines in 1961, Koons went to work for the Space Task Group. He was the 87th employee to sign on with the space program and spent the next 22 years at NASA, receiving numerous promotions throughout his tenure.

The first decade of Koons' career at NASA was spent in flight operations, and it is this era that Koons remembers most fondly. “The decade from '59 to '69 was really exciting,” said Koons. “We went from the first manned flight to the first landing on the moon in just over eight years.”

Koons was in the Control Center on July 20, 1969, when Apollo 11 landed on the moon—a significant moment for the space program and the country as a whole. “To watch that happen...to realize that for the first time in human history we had actually gone to another celestial body...it was tremendously fulfilling,” said Koons. “It was quite

a feeling to stand there outside of the Control Center (that night) and look up at the moon.”

For all of the successes within the program, there were also serious setbacks. Koons particularly remembers the tragic Apollo 1 fire in 1967, which killed all three astronauts inside. “That was really, really tough,” he said. “For me personally, that was tough because Gus Grissom and Roger Chaffee were friends of mine. It was truly difficult to go to work for awhile after that happened.”

NASA continued to explore new frontiers, however, and during the late 1960s, preliminary talk about the Shuttle had begun. By 1970, Koons was one of just 41 people transferred to the Space Shuttle Program office. He spent the next 13 years working on the Shuttle, reaching an executive leadership position as manager of the manufacturing and testing office, where he was responsible for the manufacturing and acceptance testing of Space Shuttle Orbiters, equipment and facilities with an annual budget totaling \$250 million.

Koons remembers watching the first Shuttle, Columbia, launch in person on April 12, 1981. “That was quite a rewarding experience, to see that launch up close,” he said. “We were probably a couple of miles away, but it was still close enough that you felt everything shaking when those solid-rocket boosters were building up to full thrust.”

Koons retired from NASA in 1983, moving back to his hometown of Lyons, Kansas, where he took over the family farm until his retirement in 2000. He spent a total of 31 years in the Marine Corps and Marine Corps Reserve, retiring in 1987 as lieutenant colonel.

Koons built a solid foundation for his work in the Marines and at NASA during his time at Ottawa University, graduating in 1956 with degrees in physics and mathematics. Looking back, it was the critical thinking skills he developed while at OU that he values most. As he now tells his granddaughter, “What you learn in the way of facts is important, but what is most important is learning how to think.” In 1991, Koons’ parents created the Marvin G. and Fern K. Koons Scholarship in their son’s honor. It has been awarded to 44 Ottawa University students.

Koons is an active volunteer in the Lyons community, having served on the school board from 1989 to 1997 and currently serving as president of the school district’s endowment association. He is also a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry for the Kansas West Conference of the United Methodist Churches. Koons and his wife, Cynthia, raised five children and have two grandchildren.



MR-3 Recovery on May 5, 1961 (Photo Courtesy of Life Magazine)



MR-3 Astronaut Alan Shepard talks with Wayne Koons and George Cox (Photo Courtesy of Wayne Koons)



STS-1 (Photo Courtesy of NASA)