

# TRAVELS WITH RANDY

Denny Holt, January 2014

Randy and I started work in NASA's Landing & Recovery Division on June 12, 1967. Since Randy was in the Engineering Branch and I was in the Operations Branch, we were on opposite ends of Building 30 and didn't know each other until we traveled together. These two adventures cemented our lifelong friendship.

## Guam – Test of Randy's Apollo Grapple Hook design

In early 1968, Randy and I had been in Guam for a couple of days waiting for the USS Grasp to make port. tow an Apollo boilerplate capsule 50 miles off-shore so that a C-130 could drop a flotation collar connected to a raft by a rope.

In a breeze, the Apollo capsule would float faster than any rescue swimmer could swim. This was deemed acceptable for aircraft carrier operation where a helicopter dropped flotation collar, life raft and swimmers down wind and adjacent to the Apollo capsule. However, for contingency landings in the open ocean the probability of a botched recovery was deemed to be unacceptably high. In this case, all that equipment and the swimmers was deployed by parachute from one of the USAF Aerospace Rescue & Recovery Service (ARRS) C-130's prepositioned around the world. The solution was Randy's Apollo grapple hook on a lanyard which the crew would push through the capsule vent hole if they landed anywhere other than in the primary recovery zone close to the aircraft carrier. The grapple hook would snag the rope connecting the flotation collar and raft as the Apollo capsule floated over it stopping the capsule's wind-driven drift. This would make the Apollo capsule an easy target for the ARRS swimmers. Testing under real-world conditions was required before Apollo 7, the first manned mission flew in October 1968.

Guam was selected as the test site since the ARRS squadron at Anderson AF Base had a flotation collar and there was a boilerplate Apollo capsule at the Naval Base. The plan was to tow the boilerplate 50 miles off-shore, have the ARRS crew drop the collar and raft, snag the line, drop three ARRS para-rescue swimmers (one at a time), declare the test a success and return home. Two days on Guam should do it, if everything went on schedule. In 1968, the Vietnam War was in full swing and our ship, the USS Grasp, was still in the South China Sea trying to free another ship that had run aground. Fortunately, we got the news after arriving in Honolulu where we met Lt. Col. Monty Montgomery and Capt. Charlie Colvin from ARRS headquarters. (BTW, Charlie was a Nebraska friend of Don White. Don was in Charlie's wedding, or vice versa.) Monty (a notorious liberty hound) decided that we should stay in Honolulu until we knew when the USS Grasp would be available. So, Randy and I drove all over Oahu for a day and a half before we were told the USS Grasp was on its way to Guam.

We got to Guam only to find that the USS Grasp was still at sea with equipment problems. Now, we had a couple of days to kill on Guam. A two lane road through Agana (the only town) connected Anderson AF Base on one end and the Naval Base on the other end. The only tourism was golf and none of us played. Monty showed us all the sights on Guam in about 4 hours. There was a WW2 museum, two restaurants and three bars. Then, we shot pool, played shuffleboard and ate. For fun, we watched the B-52's take off for their daily bombings of North Vietnam. After two days of this routine, we were nursing headaches as we met the ship before dawn the next day.

After three weeks at sea, the USS Grasp crew had made port only to be told not to get off the ship because they had to tow our Apollo boilerplate capsule off-shore the next day. They were not

enthusiastic with this opportunity to support the US Space Race. Understandable, since they had been taking salt water showers for a couple of weeks. Our operation was all that stood between a bath, a beer and a good night's sleep. They were highly motivated to get our test done ASAP.

I don't know how fast the ship was going, but the 3-inch diameter tow rope attached to the capsule was so taut that it literally "sang" as the capsule swung side-to-side across the wake like a water-skier. After observing that scene, Randy and I decided that the rope was stretched to the breaking point and that if it broke, it would wipe out everything on the rear of the ship (including us). We decided to stay forward inside the cabin just in case. Fortunately, everything went like clockwork. Randy's grapple hook snagged the line and one by one three swimmers parachuted to the capsule and attached the collar. The ARRS swimmers, two 23 year-old NASA reps and the older ARRS reps declared victory and Randy wrote his report from the safety of the ship's cabin as the tow line "sang" all the way to port. Randy headed back to Houston with the good news while I went on to another misadventure with Monty & Charlie in Tachikawa, Japan.

### Apollo 8 and Rio

In the Landing & Recovery Division, you were either on the aircraft carrier that picked up the Apollo crews and capsules, in a recovery control room, or you were deployed to contingency support at an USAF base or on a US Navy ship somewhere on the globe. The aircraft carrier had a cast of thousands, including the press, TV crews and Rockwell Spacecraft techs. It also had the comforts of home including updates on the mission. In the contingency recovery support sites, whether ship or Air Force Base, there was very little information about the mission.

During Apollo 8, Randy and I were the recovery team on the USS Francis Marion, a troop carrier assigned to contingency recovery duty to the Atlantic. In stark contrast to today's constant barrage of 24 hour news, the USS Francis Marion was literally an island isolated from all but the basic communications. As the world watched Apollo 8 unfold in awe, we received a daily status from Mission Control and cryptic teletype messages like these when something significant occurred;

- a) launch nominal – all systems go;
- b) in orbit - all systems go;
- c) trans-lunar insertion burn nominal – all systems go;
- d) Apollo 8 in lunar orbit - all systems go;
- e) trans-Earth insertion burn nominal – all systems go.

Finally, we got the order that said "released from Apollo 8 recovery support". After spending Christmas in the middle of the Atlantic, Captain Gene Masica wanted New Year's Eve in Rio de Janeiro and wasted no time in getting underway. On December 27, 1968 as the world watched Apollo 8 slashdown in the Pacific Ocean broadcast from the USS Yorktown, Randy and I were crossing the Equator into Neptune's realm and enduring initiation into the "Solemn Mysteries of the Ancient Order of the Deep" thereby earning our Shellback certificates.

We arrived in Rio de Janeiro harbor at Noon on New Year's Eve to perfect mid-summer weather. The ship's five piece band announced our arrival as we cruised past Sugarloaf Mountain with the Christ of the Andes statue in the distance. Captain Masica had reserved rooms for the ship's officers and us at the Hotel Italia on Copacabana Beach. Of course, Randy and I were chomping at the bit to get to the beach ASAP while the officers had to secure the ship before going downtown. We could see the taxis just outside the fence. Our problem was that a taxi couldn't come on base and we had too much stuff to carry it outside the gate. Then we noticed a US Embassy staff car and driver waiting at the foot of the gangplank. It belonged to the Naval attaché from the US Embassy who was greeting Captain Masica. With a little help from Mr. Todd, the deck lieutenant, Randy and I commandeered the staff car and driver just to get outside the fence and catch a taxi. Seemed innocent enough. Of

course, all the taxi drivers were taking a siesta and our Brazilian driver, sensing he could get fired, started talking to us in rather animated Portuguese. I replied in the only Portuguese I knew, "Copacabana, Hotel Italia." The next thing we knew, we were careening through tunnels at speeds well in excess of 100 KPM in a Brazilian Jeep Aero Willys. I glanced in the back seat at Randy, who had his foot on the back of the front seat and was holding on to both door handles for dear life. Disconcerting, since Randy was driving race cars on the weekends and understood the danger. In 1968, Brazilian cars didn't have seatbelts.

Copacabana Beach is magnificent with an expansive promenade lined by hotels, restaurants and bars. I made a quick call to Pan Am Airlines and I was informed that they were sorry but they couldn't get us out of Rio for five days. Since we had left Norfolk in a snow storm and 20-foot seas, it seemed only fitting that we would receive paid R&R on Copacabana Beach with a little sightseeing and an Embassy social for the USS Francis Marion and us. We were relieved that the Naval Attaché had a sense of humor and hadn't fired his driver.

Since we had virtually no information on the Apollo 8 mission, nothing could have prepared us for the air of excitement surrounding Apollo 8. Randy and I were amazed to see the iconic Earthrise photograph on the cover of almost every publication in newsstands on Copacabana Beach. Fortunately, there was an English language version of Life Magazine, and we finally read an account of the Apollo 8 mission and could answer a few questions. We dodged the local press but Captain Masica had the Apollo boilerplate (used for recovery practice) painted white for the Rio newspapers and TV. Randy advised against opening the boilerplate because he said the stench would turn your stomach.

Our Apollo 8 adventure ended when Randy decided he needed to get home to prepare for the Mobile Quarantine Facility sea trials to be done in February out of Norfolk. My American Express card was about maxed out, so if he left, I had to go. I reminded him of the miserable Norfolk weather and tried to convince him that we should milk it for another couple of days in Rio. In the end, "we" did the responsible thing and got on an overnight flight to Miami, but not before getting seriously sunburned on our last trip to the beach. Made for a miserable flight.

A year later, I was married to Kathleen and Randy was married to Susan. During the ship ride, we had discussed the ladies in our lives. To this day, I don't know how Randy got past Jean Ellis (LRD Division Secretary) long enough to ask Susan out.

In retirement, I have seen a few Apollo 8 documentaries and am still in awe of the achievement. In many ways, it was more audacious than Apollo 11. The iconic Apollo 8 Earthrise is captured in this 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary video [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE-vOscpiNc&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE-vOscpiNc&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

I miss him.

Denny Holt