

## Whirling Dervishes #2

This is really a story about Paul Chaput...

It may seem strange to start a story about Paul with a quote from Gene Kranz, but Gene has said that the world needs both “poets and plumbers”. Or to say it another way, we need both thinkers and doers. Paul was very creative and wrote a number of short stories about his life and experiences. I was unaware of most of the stories until his funeral when his works were displayed for those who attended.

Paul loved Charlie Chaplin. He did a few things to imitate the actor such as the way he walked. I don't remember that Charlie Chaplin did a whirl, but Paul's whirl may have been a “spin off” from him (pun intended). Paul would sometimes be walking down the hall and as a way of greeting, he would simply make a 360 whirl and continue on his way. He did it a matter of fact way, just as you would maybe nod at someone when passing them in the hall. The rest of the group, being a bunch of plumbers, started imitating the move. Soon it became a signature of the group. We would just make a 360 whirl to each other as a matter of greeting when we passed in the hall. We usually did it without comment or even a facial expression. Of course, we all knew what was going on, but other members of the division would either crack up or stare in disbelief that engineers would do something so goofy.

I have no idea who coined the phrase Whirling Dervishes, but I suspect it was Paul since he was our poet and spiritual leader. I am certain that Paul wrote the “memo” that Milt referred to. I believe Paul assigned the names of each Whirling Dervish and put them in the memo. As far as I can recall, we never used those names or called each other by any code name like that. It was simply another building block of the great esprit de corps of the group. By the way, Wayne Koons was the section head and tolerated this behavior, but it was not his nature to promote such sophomoric stuff.

One of the great things about Paul's leadership of this group at this time was that he helped shape the character of the young engineers that were assigned. While we all had certain talents, we learned to work together to achieve common goals. We all had projects assigned to us that required support from other members of the group. When I first got to NASA and the Landing and Recovery Division's Systems Evaluation Section, I suppose C. Mac Jones and Harry Clancy were the senior members. Milt Heflin had been there a little over a year. Randy Stone came along a little later. I do not recall exactly when Mike Sellers (our Air Force “rent a troop”) joined the group, but he was later replaced by Paul Kruppenbacher. Members were assigned mentors for early projects and allowed more responsibility as they earned it. I personally credit C. Mac as well as Paul for shaping my early work ethic. But that process did not take long and soon members were running their own projects or being deployed around the world to represent NASA.

We supported each other in ways that engineers today could only dream of. Most times, our projects required “test subjects”. We were each other's test subjects, often subjecting ourself to great risk or humiliation. It was very active, in the field stuff...maybe on the MV Retriever, maybe with the military, maybe in Bldg 260. But all very exciting stuff with great responsibility

at an early point in our careers, and directly in line with the nation's goal of a lunar landing in the decade of the 60's. The stories are endless...

The Whirling Dervishes group was a microcosm of the entire division. That is one of the reasons we still get together more than 50 years later to celebrate our association with the great folks of LRD.

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