

• Charles Hewitt 2/9/99

Q I know you and Dr. VonBraun were quite close there for a period of time.

A Well, it was really late in his life, but I spent a lot of time with him in a very short period of time, really, if you look at it. I became executive director of the National Space Institute. I was the first employee, and Werner was, you know, the initiating founding chairman of the National Space Institute, and that was in 1974. Of course, Werner passed away in 1977, so for practical purposes, I only spent three years with Werner. On the other hand, I spent a great deal of time. We traveled quite a little bit together and tried to put the Institute together and tried to go along the lines to get that going. So, it was short but intense, you might say.

Q Hugh Downs was involved?

A He was president. Did you get a chance to talk to Hugh?

Q Yes. He was very responsive (Conversation)

A He was a great guy, and he was very dedicated to the space program and was a major factor in our ability to keep it going, especially after the untimely death of Werner. Although I have gone off in another direction, I am still involved in satellites, but I am no longer directly involved with that program.

Q You head up the SPCA?

A Yes, I am president of the SPCA. Have you had a chance to talk to Tom Turner?

Q (Conversation)

A Tom spent all the time with Werner before I met Werner because Tom was at Fairchild. He has some stories. I will relate one story to you because it was not unusual, in a way, but it illustrates sort of the way Werner was and also his brilliance and his magnetism that he had. For one thing, if you walked through an airport with Werner, people -- he had such presence, that even people that really didn't know who he was for sure knew he was somebody. He just had a magic to him. Of course, he was a very handsome man. Tom told this story: They were flying over to Oxford because Werner was going to give a lecture over at Oxford University. Tom had helped him put together a presentation. of Werner had put together a little too much and had two carousels, slides and had a twenty-minute film. Tom was very concerned and really tried his best to get him to cut some of it down. He did cut pare it down, but he said he went over and started to give a lecture. It hadn't been five minutes into the lecture and the power went out and they lost all of the power. So Werner went ahead and gave it without a slide and without his films. He spoke for a little over two hours. Just as he was ending, the power came back on, so he proceeded to go through all of the slides and it was four and a half hours. So that was

*Hugh Downs*

*in '75  
"Salesman" ?  
(Christmas?)*

*(cont'd)*

(cont'd.)

typical. His concentration level was so high, he had no idea it was four and a half hours. The flip side of that was, Tom said not a person went out of that hallway. They were mesmerized by Werner's presentation and sat through the whole four and a half hours!

Q Someone else -- I think it was Ed Ewell. I had talked with Ed, and he had some wonderful stories as well and a real warm place in his heart for Dr. VonBraun. Something similar happened in Iran when the Shaw was in power. The royal projectionist couldn't get the projection machine going and Werner had to do the same thing. Werner just kind of tap danced and an hour later they got it working and he proceeded. It was something along the same lines in that not a ~~sole~~ <sup>Soul</sup> left. This is good and I will certainly use this.

A -- Something similar but a little different, Werner and I had traveled down to Dallas. We were holding a big fund raiser down there to support the Institute. It was a gigantic dinner. Bob Hope was the keynote speaker. John Denver sang. This was in Dallas, and, unfortunately, Werner ultimately was not able to attend because he had become ill. We went down to have a reception with some of the leadership of Dallas to try to interest them in helping sponsor this big dinner. Werner and I sat down, and I said, "Well, Werner, these are the major points. I will talk a little bit, but they really came to hear you talk. You really want to keep focusing back in on this event and the need for funding of the space program and all the things we are doing in research and this kind of stuff." He said, "Yes, okay I got it. These are the three things I need to do." Well, we go in and I say my little piece and I introduce Werner. He said some very general comments. A lady holds up her hand and asks him a question about nuclear fission. Which, of course, was no place on our agenda. Of course, he proceeds to talk for 45 minutes on nuclear fission. This is a cocktail party. Not a person went for a drink; he had them all just -- of course, we weren't there to talk about nuclear fission. Now, we are talking about half the people in the room being just basically socialites, the kind of people who normally never would be interested. But when he spoke of it, it was just so fascinating. He spoke 45 minutes, at least, as I recall. It went over very well, ultimately. He said, "Did I get a little carried away?" I said, "Yes, but it worked okay." He was really fantastic person.

We had a lot of really great personal visits. Of course, I am sure you have heard all the stories of how he came over in a ~~trawling~~ <sup>trolley</sup> car from Mexico. Some of his good colleagues in Huntsville know those stories better than I do. I have heard them several times.

Q Let me ask you this, it is on the downside, with his

2nd Story

Master Communicator

Renaissance Man?

(advance trip)

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illness -- I have talked with Ed and others who were close to him when his months were dwindling down -- do you recall any comment by him about his illness?

A Oh, absolutely. As soon as you brought that up, that came into my head. Werner never was without his sense of humor. I came to the hospital the last time I saw him alive. It was very difficult because at the time he must have weighed about 110 pounds or something like that. Of course, he was very, very weak. He was able to sign a few letters that we were sending up to the Capitol Hill to ask for some things. We came in and he said, "Well, Chuck, you know, they can't say I am not American now, I have had 467 pints of American blood flowing through me."

Q That's wonderful. So, there, as sick as he was, he still was able to maintain a sense of humor. Most of us would have had a difficult time. A: He was quite a guy.

Q I know, and I have learned even more lately researching, what a hunter he was and sportsman of all kinds and a passionate pilot. I knew that he flew. (Conversation)

A He was fascinated by everything and is an example of a man who constantly sought knowledge whether it was from his outdoor experiences or from science and technology. I recall we were going over to a satellite conference here in D.C., and he was going to -- I think that was the time he was going to receive an award. We were walking down through the exhibit area. Here is a man with vast knowledge of more things than I could even remember all the areas of. All of a sudden we stopped at the replica of the Mars landing, the Viking. He started looking at this mechanical arm on the scoop that goes out to collect the dirt and stuff. We were late because he just couldn't pull himself away before he clearly understood how the mechanical arm worked. It was just fascinating to see how he could get so caught up in trying to garner the information and knowledge for him to understand this. I think that is what drove him through all of his life and drove him through his great dream of going to the moon and rockets, but it also drove him in his personal life, too. He loved Alaska. In fact, that's unfortunately where he learned of his illness. He was in Alaska and it was really unfortunate. He came back -- I believe that was in the winter of '76 when he found out and he only lived about six months after he discovered his illness.

Q It may have been '75.

A It may have been, but I know it was winter or late fall or something.

Q Anything that <sup>comes</sup> to mind regarding his family? He was, as busy as he was, a pretty good family man.

A Yes, he was.

Q Husband, father, three children.

"Too Soon  
Dymis"

(Great curiosity;  
thirst for knowledge)

(Alaska/  
illness)

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A Yes.

Q Does anything pop into mind about that?

A I guess the only thing that kind of stands out is the fact that he was such a busy man that it was very hard to give the amount of time that it requires to take care of children. Yet, I think they all loved him dearly. I don't know how much they understood him. I think it would be awfully intimidating to have Werner as your father.

Family

Q I would think so, and that apparently has been felt by some of the kids, which I am not going to go into that.

A That was very difficult. I only met his ~~younger~~ son. I didn't meet any of the kids. I think they had a very difficult time.

Other

Q Peter either lives with or near his mother in the Alexandria area there.

A Yes.

Q I understand he kind of went through rejection or denial or whatever and didn't want to go by the name of VonBraun.

(Conversation)

A I think it was just overwhelming for him. I just think -- when I had met him, he was not very responsive; he wouldn't talk very much, almost a recluse. I think he did only average in school. I don't believe that Werner put any real pressure on him, but that might have been a mistake. I just can't say. I am certainly not the person to pass any judgements or anything. I think it was not easy, and I know it wasn't easy for Maria.

(Peter)

Q I hear that Margaret is a college teacher and has her Masters in physics. I think it's physics or one of the physical sciences. She's doing quite well and teaching in the Midwest in one of the Dakotas or Iowa. (Conversation)

A I didn't really know them well. I think he felt guilt over this, and I think part of the problem was I think he pretty much let Maria call all the shots and make all the decisions. I think she had to in the earlier years, and then when it came kind of time when he could, I think it was too late. Like I say, not that there's any blame anywhere for any serious problems, I don't think there are any super-serious problems, but certainly the kids, I think, had it pretty rough.

Q Did you say that nothing really co to mind regarding his love of hunting?

A I am not a hunter myself, so therefore I would be very handicapped because I never took any trips with him for hunting. I never really spent a lot of time doing that kind of thing.

Q Was most of your travel together domestic?

A I did not do any international travel with him.

Q (Conversation C.C. Adams -- Hewitt did not know him.)

A I liked Werner an awful lot, and I miss him in a lot of

(Cont'd)

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ways. He was someone you could admire. There are the questions through the years. He was in Germany through those years, and he talked to me at great length about that. Not at my request, interestingly enough, but sort of volunteered.

Q Did he share any recollections or impressions of some of the key Third Reich figures?

A Yes. He told me a story of the time when he was in Penumunde and he suddenly got notice to report back to the main headquarters there. He went back and Himmler was there. He said that Himmler said, "We are going to fly to Berlin." So the got on the plane and, "Of course, back in those days," he said, "you didn't know if you were flying to Berlin to be killed or given a medal." As it worked out -- he said he had to be awfully careful because everyone had their enemies. As he went back, he walked in and they took him to the headquarters where Hitler and Himmler and Hitler made him a member of the Nazi party. Werner said that he had to make a very difficult choice, and he said that he felt his choice was to live or not to live and he decided to live. Of course, a lot of people, especially in England, hold that against him. A lot of people believe that he was a Nazi. I know he wasn't. Whether that story is 100 percent accurate or not, Werner had too much compassion for his fellow human beings and for mankind to have ever believed the Nazi doctrine. It is something that was very difficult for him to live with.

Obviously, he did receive threats from time to time, and I think it was difficult for him, because it was something he would just have to live with. To make a long story short, he said that -- my opinion is that thank God he accepted it or we would still be going to the moon.

Q I have to totally agree with you. He was the perfect and unique combination of managerial and leadership abilities and inspiration and technical knowledge. I have never heard exactly that story. I know that a commission in the SS was also forced on him, really, and he conferred with some of his colleagues on Penumunde and they said "you had better take it."

A That was the way it was, you know. It's probably awfully easy for people to condemn those decisions, but it's also -- if we were put in those types of positions, it's not clear to me that we wouldn't have made the very same decision.

Q Some of those "revisionists" -- and we just had one visit us -- just don't factor in that pervasive climate of fear, coercion, fearing for your life, and of oppression there in the middle of a dictatorship that started long before Hitler appeared on the scene and kept going long after he was gone.

A He was always focused. He said -- he told me, and I truly believe him -- that he wasn't building rockets to bomb people, he was building rockets to go to the moon and ultimately he went to

(cont'd.)

WWII Years: Hitler, et al.!

were,  
Hewitt add this here??  
Nazi links were "bitter pill" (trying to)

WWII  
to the  
Moon  
" (cont'd.)

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the moon. He was one of the many who were very responsible for us getting there. I think that we owe a lot as a country to his dedication and to what he was able to accomplish.

I think you may be the first person I have told that story to. I am not sure, but I can't recall ever telling ~~to~~ <sup>it</sup>. I always felt he told it to me privately. It was on a flight to Seattle when he told me. I had never asked a question; I never raised the issue, ever. He just all of a sudden started telling me the story. I think it gnawed on him. I think it bothered him a lot.

Q There is a Dr. Michael Newfeld or Norfeld, Canadian, who is the curator of military history at the Smithsonian here at the Space Museum. He wrote a book about three or four years ago, The Rocket and the Reich, in which he holds VonBraun in complicity for 20,000 deaths. I think those are mostly concentration camp forced laborers and some of the 10,000 that died in England and Belgium, I think.

A The English have held him responsible for the rockets.

Q There is no doubt about that, but even British military intelligence, I understand -- who knows, maybe it was some pressure from the U.S. folks -- have absolved him of war atrocities, other than building weapons for war, and they did, of course, kill a lot of civilians. But that has happened before and since and nobody had been tried. ~~New~~<sup>BY</sup>feld came down in the heart of Werner country here and I think he has pulled some of his punches. He maybe held him responsible for sins of omission as much as anything else, and that he didn't stand up and say I refuse to work in any way that is connected with slave labor.

A Well, that's awful brave of him to say. I wonder if he would have done that.

Q (Conversation.)

A It's awful brave to be sitting here after the fact and talk about how wrong someone acted. I have real reservations that he or the great majority of any of us would have done anything different. I think you have to also take into account that -- I still maintain that we are awfully lucky that that is what he did.

Q Mankind if awfully lucky.

A And when you look at the record, I think you will find that -- it would be awful hard for me to ever believe that he was in any way or form a Nazi or someone who was involved in this because he just had too much compassion.

Q And not a committed believing Nazi.

A It would just be beyond me that he could be.

Q All the empirical evidence around suggests that that is not the case, that he was not a believer at all. What about matters of religion and spirituality. Did he ever get into that?

A You know, we seldom discussed religion. He was a religious

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man. We just never discussed it.

Q I interviewed his Huntsville Episcopal pastor -- or the closest that was a pastor to him -- from where the family went and Dr. VonBraun went less than they. (Conversation)

#

He in Alma Padua, VA

- lots in V.B.'s life  
- but lot of time w/ him  
- in '79 - fell death in '79  
was short but intense

- Hugh Downs

- Tom Turner / heard from?

Q

- a favorite story,  
flying to Oxford, Eng.  
Tom had helped w/ presentation - but too long -  
started to give lecture @  
Oxford - power went out  
- 2 hrs. w/ slides / -  
then power came  
He has in all!

- not a soul left

Q NSI fund. narrow div. (?)

in Dallas - V.B. attended, but  
ill - puppet - V.B. speaks -  
surprise pres. w/ Canadian

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> Charles "Chuck" Hewett

taped

good one!

he in Alexandria, VA

- late in V.B.'s life
- but lot of time w/ him
- in '74 - till death in '77
- was "short but intense"
- Hugh Downs
- Tom Turner / heard from?

① → a favourite story:  
flying to Oxford, Eng. -

Tom had helped w/ presentation - but too long - started to give lecture @ Oxford - power went out - 2 hrs. w/o slides! - then power came. 4 1/2 hrs. in all!

- not a soul left

② NSI fund-raiser din. (?)  
in Dallas - V.B. attended, but ill - prepped - V.B. speaks - surprise ques. abt. nuclear



fission! at cocktail  
reception!

- he ~~talked~~ spoke 45 mins.  
no one left!

↳ "Did I get a little  
carried away??"

— "Yes, but you did OK"

• illness?

"W. never w/o his sense  
of humor."

@ hosp. -

W. weighed abt 110 lbs.  
very, very weak

• able to sign a few

blood - "all American."

Peter's problems

"he was fascinated  
by everything. Example  
of man who constantly  
sought knowledge. " etc."  
etc"

story

→ replica of Viking  
Mars lander - V.B  
examined mechan. arm -  
didn't leave till he could  
understand, how it worked!  
exactly

---

• He loved Alaska - but there  
learned of his illness -  
winter of '76?

---

• family?

> was very busy man, tough  
finding enough time  
to spend w/ children -  
but tried -

- Peter's problems

-

- he
- felt guilty abt. children, perhaps — had to leave much of their rearing to Maria — until was too late —

— all travel w/ V.B. in U.S.

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- V.B. in Germany —
  - told story of when in Peen.
- surprise mtg. w/ Herringer
- anxiety
- flight to Berlin
- was taken to Netter's HQs.
- they made him hon. mem. of Nazi party —
- felt had to choose to live or die — decided to live quotes quotes

• rec'd threats from time to time

"He was always focused"

- not building rec's to kill people, but to go to the moon."