v.Braun interview w/ JAMES B. ODOM ("Jim") -- 9-23-98
(started at RSA in '56, w/Army)

JO-- We were going to L.A. one time, in mid-'60s ('64 or '65) -- Dr. v.B & I & 3 other guys. And he left Hsv on our MSFC) plane. We stopped in, I believe it was Kansas City, to refuel th plane. And we left here late, like 6 or 7 pm, and it was 9:30 or 10 o'clock when we got there. We stopped at th fixed-based operator for refueling. I saw this golf cart over there & asked if we could borrow it to run in to th terminal to see if we could get a snack. They said sure, so 4 of us got on th [redacted] cart. The restaurant was already closed, but they seated us. This lady came over & looked us all over but she kept coming back to v.Braun. She thought she recog. him but she wasnt sure. So finally, after she'd taken our orders, she came back. She asked v.Braun, "Do you mind telling me who you are?" He said no, so he told her. And she said, "I thought I recog you but I [redacted] wasnt sure. Would you mind autographing a napkin for me? My son would just be tickled to death if you would." So he said, "Sure" and he autographed it for her. When she left he had this half-grin on his face and he said, "That's how it is once you've played piano in a brothel. Everybody thinks they know you!" (borrowing line from Truman) But that was typical of his sense of humor. Nothing more was ever said about it. But that was his way(of making light of his celebrity).

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He had a tremendous sense of humor. But quite often it wd be so subtle, you'd hardly pick up on it. He didnt try to be funny. He liked being humorous but he didnt try to be funny.

There's another story that's absolutely typical of how he liked to just talk to people. I was a young engineer -- in abt '66 or '67 -- we were going out to L.A. It was a quick trip: going out 1 day, stay overnight, come back next morn. Lear Jet had just come out w/ a new plane -- only 1 I knew abt was a leased plane in Nashville. Our planes (MSFC) were [redacted] tied up (all they had was a G-1). So we leased a Lear -- it was Gen. O'Connor, and v.B & I -- only 3 of us. Those things fly at such hi altitudes. He (v.B) liked to refer to them as "the executive fighter." Of course, he loved to fly. That was his first chance to fly it (first [redacted] Lear jet on mkt.) He'd sit in the right seat [redacted] (co-pilot) & fly it. This was the 1st Lear Jet model. That thing was really a hotrod. Anyway, we'd flown out there & were coming back & I would guess we were somewhere over Kansas. It was in mid- to late afternoon & we were at abt 40,000 ft. And he loved weather. Flying was his hobby & he just loved weather, & the formation of weather was of such keen interest to him. To me, this [redacted] an example of how he would talk

(more)

to anyone. Here I was, a young engineer in my early 30s & had no idea, really, of the significance of what I was doing. I was this young engineer down in the ranks. But here I was, working with him. Whatever the problem was req'd me to go out there (to L.A.) w/ them. On th way back we were at 41,000 ft. The Lear had a big window in th door, and he & I were sitting back there. You could see the cloud above us & th cloud below us. It was an anvil cloud formation, & hail is associated w/ it. The pilots obviously didnt want to fly thru it so they flew around it.

v.B said, "Jim, let me tell you abt that cloud." He started at th ground level, describing this cloud, what was happening, slicing it verbally in sections, the temperature gradients, the moisture content, the airflows, the air currents -- he described that in layers, this way & then that way. To this day, I hav an absolute vivid picture of exactly what happens in an anvil cloud.

Here we were: we could see the thing above us, way below us, & we flew all th way around it, so you saw ~~literally~~ virtually all sides of it as we flew around it. But here's a guy now, he's got a briefcase full of work, both of us were working, he he stopped. That probably took us 15 or 20 mins., even flying like mad, but that thing was huge. And he described the mechanics of tht cloud & th function of it, and how it forms & how it performs & how it generates hail & how much falls as rain and so forth, just as we flew around it. He was such an articulate narrator & engineer that he could -- the next day I could almost write a paper on how it all functions, just from those few minutes. He just wanted to share that knowledge he had w/ me. He just took time to explain that to me, a young engr. As a pilot, you need to understand weather. I think he just had an absolute desire to understand the atmosphere in the universe, as part of his reach.

I dont know if you want to use this, bec it was not something he advertised -- and tht was his Christian beliefs. He was th most articulate speaker on th relationship of science & Christianity, of any man I've ever seen. I got int. in tht subject a no. of years ago & have done some talking & writing abt it. Bonnie Holmes gave me just abt every speech he had ever given on tht subject. He was by far th most articulate in being able to relate Science, physics, Christianity, nature the cosmology of nature, the whole 9 yards, & how complementary science is (to religion) -- but most scientists dont realize it & cant handle it. But he was th most articulate I've ever seen or heard or read abt. It was very real to him. But he did not advertise it; but if asked to talk on the subject, he would.

Another thing: If he had 5 minutes to spare, we'd go (while on trip) in a gift shop & he'd pick up a toy or something from where he'd been to bring back to his children. Interfacing with him, he didnt talk a lot abt his family, but he was very proud of them, his children & his wife. He was really a good father, & I think a good husband, it sounded like. He was certainly a great man to work for & with.

He was an absolute master in his ability to run a very complicated mission. It was 1 of th last reviews before ~~a~~ th 1st Saturn 5 launch, & we were having really ~~the final~~ kind of a final review at Marshall, where everybody was going around & saying their systems were ready to launch. Dieter Grau was head of th Quality organization. I've never seen this print, but I remem very vividly, we were in th 10th-floor conf room, & something was bothering Dieter abt some of the checkout--we'd had some problems w/ checkout, & I think it was 1 of th stages, but I dont remem th details. But what v.Braun would do is go around & make sure that everybody was comfortable & were ready to launch. We called it "the Peenemuende pool," where he was pooling really everybody, and we facetiously called it that, bec at tht time th Germans were heads of all th labs. It was the German "pool," but it was a poll he was taking. But Dieter had a problem, he wasnt quite ready. He had a problem & he was really agonizing. Dieter was th ~~ka~~ last one v.Braun asked. Everybody else was ready to go, and v.Braun got to him & he said no. Well, that was a "tilt" for v.Braun, bec. he wanted everybody to be comfortable & ready to go. Well, he talked with Dieter abt his problem, Dieter would give him more info, and he (v.B) wd. go to the lab dir tht might be resp. for tht partic hdwe or whatever it was. He talked to Dieter and whoever was in tht group -- it seemed like forever, but I'm sure it was an hour -- before he convinced Dieter tht it was really all right. He wasnt going to twist his arm, but he wanted to make sure that he worked Dieter Grau's problem.

(JO: that story gets a little bit touchy bec. you're getting into such specificity -- (personalities) -- of how he worked w/ his team. But will leave it to your judgment. Dont want to hurt D.Grau, but could relate it generically.)

Is an example of how he wanted a consensus (unanimity??) before moving forward. And he did that during th design phase, during the dev phaae, he did it all th time.

Q-- He wanted unanimity?

JO-- That's right. Absolutely. He wouldnt force you, he woulnt try to change you if you didnt genuinely ~~[illegible]~~ agree. He really

wanted technical unanimity.

Q-- Interesting. Does anything else stick out in his manner of running meetings?

JO-- Oh, yeah. The best words you can use are what Lucas read (said) yesterday (in induction speech in B'ham). Of course, Bill Lucas is such an articulate speaker. But v.Braun had an absolute -- he was a genius at it. You would have, sitting around the table, all the lab & development directors -- propulsion guys, structures guys, astrionics or avionics guys, flight mechanics. You had all of th disciplines, and if we were working a real technical problem, it might involve all of the, or half of them. But each one of them could very articulately describe their concern abt the problem, but not all of the others thoroughly understood it or could communicate it very fast. So v.B would listen to all of them & then he would come back and say, "Okay, now: here is my understanding of th problem." And he would say it in a way that everyone understood it. To me, it was 1 of th most significant attributes the man had -- being able to listen to diverse inputs & coalesce them into an absolutely clear, precise definition of th problem. Having done that, then, he would start back around working the solutions. He could go back to th individuals that had to be a party to the solutions, [redacted] replay the problem, and say, "Okay, now, is this what you think from, say, a propulsion standpt," or some other standpoint? Pretty soon, everybody would agree to a solution. And he could get to a solution of a very complicated & diverse problem [redacted] the best of any man I've ever seen. Lucas' words yesterday were perfect.

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