

#3

INTERVIEW WITH Frank Williams 11-11-98

FW: Let me just start chatting if that is all right with you. I am an ex- Air Force Officer, in flight testing, and I tried to get that kind of assignment or something that had to do with rockets and space in the Air Force at the time and I couldn't convince them to do that so I decided that I would get out of the Air Force and find a job some place on my own that would get me into missiles and space, or actually missiles, but I could see space coming. That was in '57. So, I accepted a job to join ABMA in the fall of '57 and actually started working in February, right after Explorer I, in '58. Explorer I went up January 31. In fact, I was already in Birmingham getting everything ready to come up here so I just heard about it on the radio. When I interviewed for the job they told me about, they wanted to set up an advanced design facility. And, I had done a lot of advanced design work. I went to work for a guy named Herman Koelle in the structures and mechanics lab (Mrazak's lab). So, I got there and they started hiring people to be in the design group. About that time, NACA decided to form a group of advisors for a launch vehicle and they had von Braun.

So, von Braun came down and asked Koelle and I if we would be on it. I said, I would go to the first meeting and we would talk and I would come back and tell Koelle what he needed to know. So I talked to Herman and we put together a little package to take, a little portfolio of the kinds of things we thought they might want to do, a planned attack and all that jazz. So von Braun took it off and presented it to the group and he came back just full of enthusiasm. He said they liked what you have to give. The next go around, I put a bigger package together and tried to give it to him and he said, why don't you go with me. So I did. He presented the stuff and they asked a lot of questions and so forth. So to make a long story short, I went to the next meeting and things went well and then after that, I went to all of the meetings. So, von Braun and I got off to a good start. After that, a couple of years later, he asked me to be his assistant. Jerry McCall was his first assistant and he left and took over another job and I became von Braun's assistant. That was in '63 and until '65.

After that, he asked me to set up a program development group, a large group, about 75 people in all and I did that. I convinced them to start rotating the guys out of the laboratory through this group for a period of six months as required so I didn't have to hire all these people.

Then, he asked me to go to Houston and take over the space station office with Frank Borman. During that year, two things happened. One, the agency decided they couldn't do but one thing, the shuttle or the space station. So, they decided on the shuttle. Then von Braun wanted me to come to Washington. So we went in '72 and stayed until '78. After '78, I joined Martin Marietta and stayed with them for 14 years. We had a change of management so I left.

~~Braun when he was at NASA. He didn't want to leave NASA but it was just too uncomfortable and so he left. Tom Paine and George Low both wanted Von Braun in Washington. He was a visionary and he could mesmerize Tom. He got along well with a lot of people. He could mesmerize people. He could talk about the space station, the shuttle.~~

GET
INSERT

Wash.
years

Q: You went to Houston to set up the space station program with Borman when?

FW: That was in '69. I was there for nine months, during the summer of '69, let me see ^T went

(Pg. 1)

FW -- I had seen what happens when people are in an awkward, personal situation. And it ain't worth it. (Explaining his leaving ~~FRWxxxxxx~~ Martin Marietta after 14 years) Just like Wernher when he was up there (in Wash.) He didnt want to leave NASA, but it was uncomfortable. So he said, "Sayonara," and he left.

Tom Paine and George Low both wanted Wernher up there. He was ~~xxxxxxx~~ going to be the visionary, the promoter, the future activities planner. They even used the term "Mr. Outside," because he could mesmerize Congress. He got along well w/ the public. He was a great public speaker. Anytime that anybody could stand up and make NASA and space look good and just mesmerize the people, Wernher could do it.

We talked about space station, the shuttle, Earth observation from orbit, going to man on Mars, nuclear propulsion and all that.

FW -- (vindictive) against anybody. He did not mind anybody to disagree w/ him, as long as they were willing to talk abt it -- why they thought what they thought, how they arrived at their conclusion. And if they were right, then he'd modify his position or understanding. Or he would debate w/ them. And he didnt always try to resolve any disagreement. 'Okay, you think that way, I think the other way. There's probably some reason why. It's somewhere in th middle. One of these days we'll figure it out,' and he'd just leave it there.

(Pg 2)

FW -- And one of the key things my minister was interested in was the top of "Science & Religion." And he was absolutely mesmerized at Wernher's willingness and veracity in talking about that subject and saying, in fact, there is no problem between science & religion, that they are so compatible and that science is so mutually supportive of religion. Wernher, to sum it up in one sentence, said, "God opens doors for us every now and then in the science domain. When it's time for us to do it, and it has a purpose, He opens doors. Sometimes the door leads to weaponry, but it also lets other things do good for humanity. And now He's opening up Space and we'll learn more about God's power and wisdom and Creation. We're really just at the threshold, and He's using science to better let us know what He, in fact, has created.

Williams
Leaving Hsv,
Wash. Years, "Leaving 1"

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2nd INSERT

"Religion"

guy, with real conviction

and more

Frank Williams

in August and stayed 9 months.

Q: Some have suggested that George Low was one of those Jewish folks who was biased against von Braun for the reasons of the third reich. He was one of those who got out the knife for von Braun. Can you contribute anything to that?

FW: I knew George pretty well. I went to work for NACA at Langley. I had met him there. He was a couple of committees that I was on. I was very involved with him in the AIAA. I have never heard of that situation about George Low. I have been with both Tom and George when they have been with von Braun and I have seen nothing but the greatest mutual respect and admiration and in fact, real kinmanship. In fact, von Braun was more comfortable talking with George than he was a lot of other people.

Von Braun was very much a family man. He spent a lot of time away from the family but he was first and foremost a family man. He loved his family and did spend a lot of time, every minute that he could be away from the office, he was with his family. Weekends and he would take vacations with them. He was a very compassionate and kind and gentle man. He was a scientist and engineer and one of the most creative guys. You could put him in a room with ten people and he could pull creativity out of the other nine. He injected himself into making everyone feel like they contributed. He had a gift. He talked to everybody, regardless of their station, from the janitor, whatever, to the president of the company to the president of the country. And, he commanded respect from everybody. He enjoyed really relating to people and understanding their viewpoints. I am talking primarily of people involved with him and his organization. He could remember people, he could walk through and remember their names and what they talked about last time, the suggestions he made or they made. He knew how to draw people into the conversation. He was a good listener and he was a great morale builder. I have never seen him vindictive about anything. In fact, he did not deny anybody the right to disagree with him. In fact, if they were right, he would modify his position. He respected people. He would always say, well you think that and I think this and we will meet somewhere in the middle and figure it out.

Family Summary, Morale Builder

2nd INSERT

guy, with real conviction.

He was a very God-fearing person. He was a deeply religious individual. As far as his personal involvement in the church, I don't know that he went to church very often if at all. I never saw him going to church. I did witness several occasions and once I even set up something where he had detailed discussion and dialogue with what I would call learned theologians. One of them happened to be the minister of the Methodist church there in Houston. He was the minister to the astronauts there, Neil Armstrong, and he was writing a book, "Minister to the Astronauts"

Religion

get 3rd INSERT

ADD to Pg. 3 INSERTS -- Frank Williams interview

Officer Han asked if police could be of any service.

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"Philos." / "Manager"

FW -- He believes he can learn something from everybody. Really. He truly listens to everybody ~~he~~ he talks to, and he is one of the few people I've ever known that, when he engages somebody in a discussion, that person has his total attn. And he talks to everybody at their level. There are few people I know that can do that. And he is in fact a team thinker and motivator when he's ~~xxx~~ talking to people. He wants to know what they think, how they feel, and he tries to draw them out to think broader, think deeper, think bigger -- and think ~~we~~ think "us." It's not "I did this, I did "team," that," it's "We did this, we did that," and "we can do this." He had a unique talent in that regard, and that was 1 of his key strengths. I never remem him saying "I did so-and-so." It was always "When we did so-and-so..."

Philos.

FW -- He literally thought abt "new frontiers," in his own life and in everything he touched. He was always looking for unique things to do in space, but he also sought new books to read, new frontiers ~~xxxxxxx~~ to explore, himself -- he loved to travel. He loved to be doing different things. The only real things I couldnt get him involved in were tennis and golf. I tried to get him into both of those, but he said they both take ~~xxx~~ too long to do. But we went scuba diving together, we ~~xxxxxxx~~ flew, we soared, we sailed. He'd go skeet shooting, take hikes

FW -- (recalled time when he & v.B were on trip to West Coast in '58 or so, w/ NACA committee business. v.B's pic had been on cover of Newsweek or Time or some magazine just few days before. They had a late afternoon and all evening to kill in San Francisco before catching 1 a.m. "redeye" flight back east. Frank came up w/ plan to go to Mark Hopkins Hotel & hav couple of drinks at Top of the Mark lounge, then have din in Chinatown. In "Top" lounge, couple of men recognized v.B & invited them over to their table for drinks. Then more ~~xxxxxx~~ recog him, and joined group. Were abt 10 before long. Kept having drinks. v.B gave Frank a look, & Frank left table, arranged for maitre 'd to page him, then bring phone to table for fake call, in which Frank pretended to agree to an immed. meeting elsewhere for v.B. So they escaped, went to din. in Chinatown. Still had couple of hours to kill, so went to popular jazz nightspot, the Purple Onion. Enjoyed couple of hours there, then left to have parking valet bring car around. v.B got in passenger side, Frank walked around to driver's side to leave for airport, when policeman stopped him and ~~xxxxxx~~ him over to make sure he hadnt had too much to drink. Frank asked, "Anything I can do for you, officer?" Officer said, "Is that

"Fame"

ADD to Pg. 3 INSERTS -- Frank Williams interview

officer then asked if police could be of any service.

officer joined other policemen in their patrol car.

Wernher von Braun, the rocket scientist, who just got in the car?" Frank said, "Well, yes, it is. We were just on our way to the airport." Frank declined, said thanks, said we hav plenty of time, know the way. They parted, Frank got in car, v.B asked, "What was that all about?" Frank told him the police officer had recognized him & asked if there was anything he could do for us. Frank ~~xxxxxxx~~ said he had told officer, "Why, yes, we'd like a siren escort to the airport." Von Braun reacted, "Oh, no!!" Police pulled off, then Frank drove away. "On the way to th airport, he said, 'You know, Frank, every now and then it's kinda nice to be recognized. It makes you feel good. But it sure has its drawbacks. If I ever wanted to go to a house of ill repute, some so-and-so would recognize me and it would get right back home."

GET LONG INSERTS

FW: It was indeed sincere. And he talked to everyone at their level. He was a team thinker and

Sorry. I can't get this.

He thought about new frontiers. He loved to travel

(SIDE B of TAPE)

(during FLETCHER era of v.B's stay in Wash.):

* Wash

von Braun is much better known, much better liked and has a much broader clientele and contacts and friends, and I think there was a lot of jealousy. He didn't know what to tell von Braun to do.

we were just about to lose our ~~spirit~~ thrust (to push space program further).

There was a window of opportunity there and if Jim had let VB go to do his thing, I think we could have aroused enough interest and enthusiasm to put pressure on the white house to let us do more than we wound up getting to do. They were not bitter enemies, they kind of went their own way. They were ~~antagonistic~~ cordial to one another, VB kind of did his thing and Fletcher ~~was~~ never impolite.

asked him

* Wash

I told you about flight where they were in the air plane and sat across from one another and the stewardess asked if they would like something to drink and VB ordered Bourbon and Fletcher ordered a glass of milk. The Stewardess brought the drinks and VB tipped his glass up and said cheers and Fletcher tipped his glass and VB said, it's a shame your religion does not let you have a glass of bourbon, and Fletcher smiled and said, its a pity religion will only let you have one wife too. VB said Touche and they tipped their glasses together and had their respective drinks. They were very cordial. They joked a lot. Had a cordial relationship. Wernher just bided his time for a while and then cashed out.

* Sailing Trip

The sailing trip, did I tell you anything about that? What happened, VB's 60th birthday was coming up. He had basically decided to retire but had not announced it. And, for his birthday, Maria did not like the social affairs so they were having dinner together one night and I think the restaurant topic came up and she said, why don't you and Frank go off and do something, get out of town so you won't have to put up with any of that stuff. So, we talked about it and we started calling his birthday was in April or late March. We were in inner state NY and the

on Capital Hill
Wernher
for abt a year & a half.
Then Wernher retired from NASA, & that just dissolved the office. (Frank went over to work for Chuck Matthews)

(3) & set up a series of programs in "Applications"

Frank Williams

At this point, the volume is so low that I can not hear what Mr. Williams is saying. It was been low the entire tape but now is entirely too low to hear.

I can get bits and pieces.

Q: So it was very sincere?

FW: It was indeed sincere. And he talked to everyone at their level. He was a team thinker and

(Sorry. I can't get this.)

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GET LONG INSERTS

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to do very little. We wrote cordial to never impolite. reports, made surveys, did all kinds of stuff, for abt a year & a half.

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Frank Willems

(Hans Mark was Ames center director)

* SAILING TRIP

?

Politician Hunting

TRAVEL

weather there is not warm. That is not the best time of the year to do things, so we decided on sailing in the Carribean. Hans Mark could sail so VB called him and talked with him about it, picked a date and all that and decided that he would go too. This was all set so about 10 days before we were to go, Hans called VB and VB was in Alaska bear hunting with some congressman and Hans asked for me. So, I talked with him and he told me that he had to put 50 odd pink slips in the mail, we are going to lay off production and he said, the date is already picked and I can not have 50 odd pink slips hit the personnel and then be out of town. So he canceled. We couldn't change the date, we had already picked a boat and place to go. We had already made a down payment. So I chased around and couldn't find anybody else to go with us. I couldn't find VB so I talked to some of my sailing buddies, some that I knew were good sailors and a couple of them thought about going but said no, they couldn't.

I asked what is a good book on sailing, the best book in the world, and they said Chapman's book. So I got the book, checked it out of the library, took it home that night, read it, studied it. It came in two parts, one how to sail a boat and another on how to navigate. Navigation was no problem. We were both pilots. We had already gotten the charts. We had everything ready to go so it was really just learning how to sail the boat.

We mapped out our course and had everything ready to go. The biggest thing I had to do was learn how to handle a 14 or 16 foot boat. So, von Braun got home, and I gave him the book and said, take it home and read it. I wrote down what my feelings were, put them in an envelope and sealed them. I said tomorrow morning we will come back and open them and I want to hear yours. So he went home and read it and came back, stayed up most of the night, he was really not a night person but he read that thing and studied it and he came in the next morning about an hour late and he came in and said, well, I think we can do it. So I opened my envelope and said I have come to the conclusion that sailing is nothing more than soaring in slow motion in two dimension. I was a glider pilot. We decided to find two more people to go with us; so another guy that I had hired in to the shop there in Washington and his wife who was a nurse and a good cook went with us. They were not sailors, either. He was a crew person on a rowing team.

Werner had sailed something a little bigger but he wasn't an open ocean sailor, either.

I broke the bad news to him,

They were bear hunting in Alaska's mountains. He and I went deer hunting and turkey hunting and such down in Texas with Tiger. I know one of the congressmen, it could have been a senator, went hunting in Alaska. I think another one or two went with them. He and Frank Boylan from Baldwin County, or Mobile, were close buddies. He used to go with him a lot. In fact, I think Boylan visited his home.

You know Werner loved to travel. He went to the Arctic as well as Antarctica, in the south pole. In fact, he ran around the south pole, start naked. That was one of the "madness" you would go all the way down there and it doesn't take you that long to go around the pole. He may have had an snow shoes, I don't know. He professed that he did it and I am sure that if he said he did it, he did it. He traveled all over Europe too. And India.

Q: What about Dr. von Braun's love of fine music and his own studies with the Cello and Piano? How about art?

Frank Williams

So the four of us went and we sailed for ten days from Grenada all the way to St. Vincent's and back and did not have any real problems at all. We had a ball.

Q: There was no horrible weather I trust? When was that?

-Ruthie" was woman aboard.

FW: That was in the spring of '72. We kept a log and took pictures. He wrote about an 8 or 10 page log from day to day. Wernher was the Captain. There were no scary incidences. We went through a couple of squalls, we did some open ocean sailing on several days. Most of the sailing, we were within sight of land, going from one island to the next. Normally you could see the next island before you lost sight of the one you were leaving. That kind of sailing was not our concern. Our concern was the reefs and sand bars and coral. We didn't have any scares. One night in Admiralty Bay, the wind picked up and we started pulling the anchor and we drifted about 500 yards. I got up to relieve myself and thought something moved the boat. I looked around and no boats were around us on either side.

(Volume of tape sort of goes up and down and I missed some here)

We had several rules. One was no more than one beer for lunch. We had the anchor planted before the sun went down. We never sailed at night. If ever in doubt, break down the sails and turn on the engine. Don't get in tight quarters ^{ourselves} ^{(where we} ^{ed} ^{proficiency.} over extend our position. Nobody disagreed with those rules.

To provision the boats,

It was a fun trip. We did a lot of snorkeling, no fishing, a lot of drinking, met a lot of neat people. ~~One time~~ we ordered a case of rum. We didn't know that they would check to make sure we knew how to sail. We thought they would just give us the key and turn us loose. So, we really rehearsed. This was in Grenada. St. George. We passed muster. We convinced them that we were seasoned sailors. We used the case of rum as a signal. (Tells how they used the rum as a signal) We chartered the boat out of St. George Grenada and sailed around all the islands and then back to Grenada and turned the boat in. (offered copy of log & itinerary!)

- 12 bottles of rum. We were to be gone 10 days.

* SAILING TRIP

Q: can you tell me about von Braun's relationship with Congressman Tiger Teague?

FW: They went bear hunting in Alaska together. He and Tiger went deer hunting and turkey hunting and such down in Texas with Tiger. I know one of the congressman, it could have been a senator, went hunting in Alaska. I think another one or two went with them. He and Frank Boykin from Baldwin County, or Mobile, were bosom buddies. He used to go with him a lot. In fact, I think Boykin visited his home.

You know Wernher loved to travel. He went to the Arctic as well as Antarctica, to the south pole. In fact, he ran around the south pole stark naked. That was one of the "traditions" You would go all the way down there and it doesn't take you that long to go around the pole. He may have had on snow shoes, I don't know. He professed that he did it and I am sure that if he said he did it, he did it. He traveled all over Europe too. And India.

Q: What about Dr. von Braun's love of fine music and his own abilities with the Cello and Piano? How about art?

POLITICIAN & Hunting

TRAVEL

Frank Williams

"Music"

FW: I know he enjoyed art. Nothing specific that I can think of. He enjoyed particularly the classics. He did like music. His taste was more to the classical side. They had a great collection of classical music. He had a good time at the purple onion listening to jazz.

(Talks about going to topless bar)

FW: He had a great sense of humor.

LEAVING NASA

Q: Did he discuss with you his reasons for leaving NASA?

FW: Yes. He was being wasted. It was just eating him alive. It really was. He shared it with quite a few people. He talked with Eberhard about it. He didn't run to a bar and talk or go to any therapist to talk but he did discuss it with some of us. He said, I love doing things, I want to be active, I want to be contributing to something but the system won't let me contribute. You've seen it. He said, you've worked your butt off. He said, I go hunting and play with the congressmen and I run around the country but you stay here with your nose to the grindstone, think it is unfortunate that nobody will let you print, publish and distribute

"I'm just wasting my time."

I said, "I definitely understand ^{an} what he was saying. I told him that I would miss the association with him personally. But he had a concern for us leaving us. "I will miss you, personally, but I've got a lot more things I can go do."

and can get away w/ that. But you can't do that.

Q: Did he anticipate when he left NASA a dismantling of the German team?

FAIRCHILD

Uhl,

FW: Whether Werhner knew anything like that, I don't remember or know. He moved to Fairchild with Ed ~~and~~ an old friend. (The positive aspect of going to Fairchild) ~~was that~~ He could stay right where he was living and Maria liked living in Washington. She really did. She could go to concerts and plays and symphonies. She would meld right in and nobody "knew her" which she liked. In fact, for years after I left Washington, I would go back up and I would call Maria and she and I have been out to dinner several times. She was comfortable with that and in fact, Jean would go with me and we would call Maria and go by and have a drink with her, go out to dinner, go back and have coffee. She wanted Jean to sell her house and Jean said, Maria, I really consider that a compliment but I want to get you the very best person for that job. She did, she got her the leading salesman for the job and told the salesman to give her a break on your commission. She got top dollar on that house. We exchange Christmas cards still.

Writing these good reports that nobody will let you print & publish & distribute! We said, "You understand!"

MARIA & WASH.

(Talking about the book on Milton Cummings now)

Q: Any specific instances involving Maria come to mind?

MARIA & FAMILY

FW: She loved kids. She loved her kids, ^{and} she loved kids in general. In fact, she used to baby sit quite a few of the neighbors kids in Washington and she love doing that. She in fact fixed her kitchen in a Rube Goldberg fashion so the kids could not get into any of the cabinets. The way she had it done was clever but it was her little invention. She had toys and things for the kids and looked forward to keeping the kids. It wasn't that she made money, it was just having and helping. She was a good story teller.....

Sound fades here.....

MARIA
FAMILY

FW: Von Braun was a very social person. He liked all kinds of people. He didn't push Maria to be more outgoing. He accepted it and that was that.

END OF TAPE

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