

Behind the Scenes... by Ike Rigell

Space history, like most other history, is usually recorded on the macro level. To get to that level on a space event such as rollout or Flight Readiness Review, there are hundreds of micro-level events that have to be dealt with. Here is one example of such an event.

George Faenza, Manager of the McDonnell Douglas S-IVB team during the Apollo Program, called me one day and said, "We have a problem." I said, "What is the problem George," and he answered, "I don't want to talk about it over the phone. I want to come over and talk with you." I could sense by that comment, this was something out of the ordinary, as George and I frequently talked about all kinds of problems over the phone. In fact, I usually knew about S-IVB problems as soon as George, as we had NASA systems engineers imbedded in all contractor operations. I had not been informed of any problems in the S-IVB area. George came over immediately and showed me a picture of the mirror in the S-IVB mens' room in the VAB Low Bay. Written on the mirror were these words: "I have fixed the rocket; it will never fly. Ha-Ha-Ha." The next S-IVB to fly was in the Low Bay undergoing pre-stacking checkout. George's preliminary investigation had revealed nothing. Was this real, or was it a cruel hoax? We had no choice; we had to treat it as real. I knew this had to go up the chain of command immediately, so we met with Dr. Gruene and on to Rocco Petrone. We called in NASA security; George already had his Corporate Security involved.

There was no other S-IVB readily available for a switch-out, and we had to stack in a few days or face a serious launch delay. After much soul-searching, the following plan was developed. First, keep this as low key as possible (fortunately, the media never got into this). Second, continue an intense effort to identify the author of that message, add new tests, repeat some tests, and perform a very detailed inspection of all flight hardware. Then proceed to stacking as scheduled. This was on our minds daily, and we were desperately hoping each day for a breakthrough.

We had been several days in the High Bay checkout and had not found anything related to this issue. Soon we would face a decision on roll-out to the pad. Then I got another call from George, "I need to come over and talk to you." George came over and had the best news I had heard in a long time. The guy that had written the message on the mirror came in and confessed to George that he was the one, and he only intended it as a big joke.

It turned out this guy was considered one of their best employees. On that day, he and a couple of design engineers from the home plant were down here, had gone to lunch and apparently had a two+ martini lunch, and came back to the VAB. To have a little fun, he wrote this message on the mirror. His thinking was: "This will get a little attention and then I will say it is all a joke, and that's the end of it." But when he learned how it had gotten out of control and how serious his management had taken it - and now that NASA was involved - he got scared and could see being fired, so he clammed up. The security people had narrowed the search down to a small number of people who would have been in that area at that time, and this guy was on that list. Feeling the pressure, he made the decision to confess.

A load had been lifted; this would have been a very difficult issue to deal with at the Launch Readiness Review. The message is this: That in all launches - manned or unmanned - there are hundreds of people daily doing myriad tasks behind the scenes to accomplish a mission. The work of everyone on the team is needed, and we were fortunate to work with the best of the best. Lessons like this continue to be used for every future program.

