

How I First Met one of NASA's Distinguished Scientist

By
Jim Johnson

In the early 70's I was working in Unmanned Launch Operations at KSC. John Neilon was the Director and I served as a Payload Repetitive, for the Pioneer 10 mission to Jupiter. Today this position is known as an LSSM Launch Site Support Manager, a term I help develop while in the Shuttle Program Office, but that is another story. Pioneer 10, was the first Spacecraft to take close up pictures of Jupiter. The Project was managed by NASA Ames Research Center and the Project manager was Charles Wilson. Charlie decided that before he approved the shipping of the spacecraft to the cape he wanted a pre-ship review of all organizations associated with the Pioneer 10 Project. Late in 1971 the pre-ship review was held at the TRW Plant in Los Angles. It was schedule to last two and one half days. Participants in the meeting included:

- The Ames Project Team,
- The experimenters (11) and their assistants,
- The TRW management and their system managers,
- Due to the distance to Jupiter solar cells were not a viable option for the mission therefore RTG's (Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generators) for the first time used a deep space mission and provided by the Atomic Energy Commission,
- The launch vehicle to be used was an Atlas Centaur with a Delta third stage added as a final stage. The Atlas Centaur Project was managed by Lewis Research Center and their contractor General Dynamics, the Delta third Stage was managed my Goddard Space Flight Center and their contractor was McDonnell Douglas,

- JPL Deep Space net was responsible for tracking, (Note two way communication with the space craft was 92 minutes)
- The participants from KSC were Director Unmanned Launch Operations John Neilon and my self as KSC Payload Representative (Jim Johnson).

As I stated, the meeting was two and one half days long. The first two days were broken up into splinter meetings to ID any open paper or actions to be accomplish before shipping the Spacecraft. During the last half-day all participants were to meet and go over the open actions that needed to be completed. Johns Nielon and I were staying at a motel near the TRW Plant. We decided the night before we would meet at the car the next morning at 7:00am and get breakfast at the plant before the 8:30am meeting. We had plane reservations home at 2:00pm.

I met John at the car and we put our luggage in the trunk and I said I had to checkout of he Motel. Johns said he had already done that. As I went into the lobby I noticed and older gentleman standing in the lobby smoking a pipe. He look familiar and we nodded to each other. I played my bill and was leaving when he stopped me and said, “didn’t I see you at the pre ship review yesterday?” I said, “Yes sir”. He asked me I was going over the TRW now, and I said yes. He said he had been waiting for taxi for 45 Minutes and could catch ride with me I said sure come on.

As we approached the car, John stepped forward and extended his hand and said “ Dr. Van Allen, I’m John Neilon”. I knew he looked familiar. That is how I first met Dr. James A. Van Allen. Fortunately I had the opportunity work with him on several other programs later and I never forget his name. We lost Dr. Van Allen in August 2003.

Pioneer 10 was launched on March 2, 1972. The spacecraft passed within 81,000 miles of Jupiter's cloud tops Dec 3, 1973. Tracking of the spacecraft continued for 25 years but cost cuts caused discontinuation of tracking.

Dr. Van Allen, principal investigator for the Charge Particles experiment received the NASA Exceptional Scientific Achievement Medal.