



---

The Space Congress® Proceedings

1973 (10th) Technology Today and Tomorrow

---

Apr 1st, 8:00 AM

# Writing The History Of Spaceport Kennedy

Barnaby Faherty

*Senior Historian Apollo Project, University of Florida, Kennedy Space Center, Florida 32788*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.erau.edu/space-congress-proceedings>

---

## Scholarly Commons Citation

Barnaby Faherty, "Writing The History Of Spaceport Kennedy" (April 1, 1973). *The Space Congress® Proceedings*. Paper 4.  
<http://commons.erau.edu/space-congress-proceedings/proceedings-1973-10th/session-3/4>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at ERAU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Space Congress® Proceedings by an authorized administrator of ERAU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [commons@erau.edu](mailto:commons@erau.edu).

**EMBRY-RIDDLE**  
Aeronautical University™  
SCHOLARLY COMMONS

## WRITING THE HISTORY OF SPACEPORT KENNEDY

Dr. Wm. Barnaby Faherty, S.J.  
Senior Historian Apollo Project  
University of Florida  
Kennedy Space Center, Florida 32788

### ABSTRACT

Writing the history of Apollo so close to the conclusion of the program has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages lie in the opportunities for interviews with the participants in this tremendous enterprise, the availability of multitudinous documentation, and the opportunity of weighing interview with documentation. The disadvantages are those of all contemporary history: the lack of perspective that only time can give; the inability to see ultimate results; and the necessity of causing hurt to some individuals. Even if the passage of time will force a change of some analysis, still the assembling of the story at this time will preserve factual materials for historians of future generations. But some aspects of the program will never undergo reevaluation--especially the tremendous cooperative effort of government, industry, military and university in sending men to the moon and bringing them back safely.

### BODY

Amid the 7,000 acronyms and abbreviations in the selective list put out by the John F. Kennedy Space Center, none of you will find GROTSOB. Yet a few years ago the pad men on the Cape used this regularly. It meant simply "get rid of the SOB."

While reading through an off-the-record interview an earlier historian had taken with a particular individual on the pad, I found that one spoke of the almost incredible shock he faced in dealing for the first time with a particular astronaut. The man's language was so grotesque, his reaction so out of control, that this expert ground crew man with years of experience at White Sands Proving Ground behind him couldn't sleep that night. The next day he replayed the tape to see if he had been imagining things. He had not. His comment in this interview was: "I certainly hope that they burned that tape." The pad man was speaking about one of the great heroes of the nation.

I asked another man who had worked on the pad if they had difficulties with any of the astronauts. He spoke highly of certain individuals and particular teams. He stressed the fact that astronauts

like all human beings had their various human characteristics: some were democratic and easy of access, some a little bit more aristocratic or of old line military bearing, some professorial, some scientific. He concluded: "But one of them was an SOB. In fact," the pad man stated, "that astronaut provoked a new term that we used on the pad: GROTSOB." It was the same astronaut that the first pad man had denounced.

What did the other astronauts think of him? One heard about the conduct of his fellow astronaut and called together the entire ground crew to apologize; then he came back at 12:05 AM to apologize to the night crew. Another of the astronauts, a crew man of the one in question, said to a pad man: "Just think: I have to spend two weeks in space with that SOB!"

I do not intend to take away from the honor and bravery of this man--I will never mention his name--nor cast aspersions on any of this tremendous group of men who went off into space. Fortunately, the evaluation of specific flights and astronauts lies in the province of other NASA historians. We're writing on the launch facilities and operations at Kennedy Space Center.

I mention the story of GROTSOB because it points up two important considerations in writing the history of Apollo: first, we historian-writers have to translate the involved jargon of the space industry into the language of the American taxpayer; secondly, we have to deal with contemporaries, men who succeeded and men who failed; men who combine brilliance and pettiness; and some of these men are looking over our shoulders as we write.

Before I proceed farther, let me answer a question many ask, and one that might come to your mind: what is a clergyman doing writing the history of Apollo? Let me state clearly that it was not as a priest, but as an historian that the University of Florida invited me, a Professor of History at Saint Louis University, to participate in writing the History of Apollo, in particular the launch operations and facilities at the Kennedy Space Center. It was not because Canon Copernicus was a priest but because he was a scientist that we remember that he told his 16th Century contemporaries that

the earth revolved around the sun. Not as a priest, but as a priest-astronomer, my fellow Jesuit Giovanni Riccioli gave the names of the "Sea of Tranquility" and "Sea of Storms" to various sections of the moon in the year 1651. Other areas, incidentally, he named after prominent Jesuits of the time. I'm sure he named one after his superior so that the reverend gentleman would not put him into some remote Italian parish when he wanted to continue his astronomical studies. "Crater Hell" took its name not from the infernal region but from a German priest-astronomer Father Maximilian Hell.

In short, over the centuries priests have engaged in the advance of knowledge in a variety of fields well beyond the basic religious areas. Modern scientists should not forget that even though the Commission of Cardinals repudiated the theory of Galileo, it was still the Pope, and not any one of the secular rulers of Europe, who patronized and financed Galileo's studies even after the condemnation of his theory. Galileo, further, did not convince his contemporary scientists any more than he did the theologians and scripture buffs--Protestant or Catholic.

In our history, my colleague and I frequently discuss the introduction of a distinct layer of operatives to handle a situation NASA could presumably have handled itself with its own talented manpower. Why then did the Kennedy Space Center contract with the University of Florida to handle this history? Up to a point the local team of historians that has been at the Kennedy Space Center for years could do a far better job than we. But they would face four great problems: as members of the Space Center team they have long since lost contact with the layman's viewpoint and would most likely tend to write an in-house history for people in the house; they would not enjoy the freedom of action that outsiders can command; removed as they have been from the mainstream of American historical development, they would tend to write of Apollo in a vacuum, as if it did not occur during the days of the burning cities, the campus riots, the most unpopular war in America's history; and lastly and of the greatest importance, the scholarly world beyond the space community would hardly accept it as an objective study but presume it to be NASA self-promotion.

The qualifications that NASA put down for the senior historian, that he be not just an historian but a writer who had published before, adds great validity, as it did when NASA asked the team of Constance McLaughlin Green, a Pulitzer prize winner, and Milton Lomask, a teacher of creative writing at the Georgetown Writers' Conference, to undertake the Vanguard history. A writer visualizes his readers. He enters into their minds and their hearts with a sympathetic understanding. In other words, he comes to realize what they already know and what they want to learn.

But why should we write the history now, rather than let time put the facts in perspective? We can see current evaluations of presidents like Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman that differ

greatly from the opinions men held when each left office. In another 50 years the view will modify even more. So will it be with the story of Apollo.

But at the same time certain views only contemporaries can give. If we do not get the story from the immediate reflections and the written memos of these contemporaries, that may well disappear over the years, can we see the story as it appeared at the time? This is a most valuable exercise. So often we have faced history from hindsight. We're all great Monday-morning quarterbacks. The story at Yalta is a prime example of that. We forget what information our American officials had when they went to Yalta. We forget that the Conference took place only seven weeks after the near disaster of the Bulge; that our scientists had not yet succeeded with the atomic bomb; that our military leaders wanted Russia in the war with Japan; that Russia had borne the brunt of war and had been successful in two long steady years of advance from the day of Stalingrad to that time. We forget, in short, what men at Kennedy Space Center call "the state of the art": the facts as men knew them at the time of major decisions.

The letters of the Civil War soldiers to their folks at home, for instance, differ remarkably from the reminiscences of these same men when years later they looked back upon the only exciting experiences of their lives. Yet the first picture was the true one, not these memories that grew more interesting as the years went on.

The contemporary historian, further, serves a great purpose to future historians in that from the surfeit of documentation he selects what he judges is of value--what men should retain, what they may well discard. He divides his time between interview and documentation and he soon finds out that, no matter what the man's reputation for memory is, in one or other instance, his memory will fail. Two men with a reputation for extremely acute memories have given us information that simply was not correct--but only in matters of time sequence in both instances. These men anticipated the date of decision or the date of an agreement.

The other problem that an historian of contemporary affairs faces is the telling of events that might offend individuals. We may hurt some people in our book; but we will not hurt them for the sake of hurting them. If the event or personal quality does not really pertain to the essence of the story, like the name of the obnoxious astronaut, we will omit it. But if it pertains to the essence of the story and this truth hurts, then we and the one hurt will have to live with it. That is the only way that history can serve future generations. We have to balance interview against interview, and interview against document, and document against document.

Rare is the man who admits that he did not see the issue as it would turn out. Rare is the man who is not the hero, in some small way at least, of the entire operation. I can recall the book review by an American Air Force General, of the memoirs of

the most prominent English General in World War II. This English General had said that he was to advance to a certain point in Normandy and dig in. The American Air Officer distinctly remembered that the High Command had ordered the British General to close the gap. To be sure of his facts, the American General got out the documentation of the staff meeting, and found a clear order that the British Officer was to close the Falaise Gap and cut off the escape route of the German Seventh Army. The Seventh Army escaped. The British General never admitted that he had failed. But what can we expect of a man who said on American TV that Robert E. Lee lacked courage?

If we write a history book that everyone likes, it will not be good history, because not everyone succeeded in every endeavor he set out to do any more than that British General did; not every man had the most brilliant idea but reluctantly went on with it when somebody below him pushed for that idea. Or more likely it was the reverse: maybe the top man said: "Do it or else"; and in order to retain his job the man went along with a program that he disapproved.

From our studies of Apollo so far, what do we see? We see obviously what can be accomplished when men set a goal for themselves and put a time limit on that goal. We can accomplish tremendous things. At the time of Yuri Gagarin's flight, President Kennedy said: "By concentrating all its efforts on one single goal any totalitarian power can achieve that goal." The President wanted a corresponding effort. He would have preferred something equally dramatic but of much greater practical value to the world at the time, like desalting the ocean. Those were his own words according to his scientific advisor. The moonshot was the most likely alternative. President Kennedy gave us a challenge to show what we as a nation could do.

The decision of the President to do everything out in the open with the entire nation watching on TV put a tremendous pressure on the men of NASA and their contractors; but it called forth from them an extra effort necessary to avoid the embarrassment of public failure. Three American astronauts died on a training session in a spacecraft; the American public knew about it that very evening. Three Russian astronauts died returning from outer space. We do not yet know if they were the three who manned the Russian Sky-Lab; though the presumption of a Russian space film seemed to suggest that.

In calling for the moonshot, President Kennedy chose the race course and named our entry. Some skeptics predicted that we would reach the moon and find the Soviet flag there. We reached the moon--but found no red flag.

Apollo drew upon a far wider spectrum of talents than any other peacetime effort in history. It gradually broke down the petty jealousies, the inter-service rivalries, the previous priorities, the friction between firms, and sometimes within branches of the same firm. It climaxed an existing

NASA effort to bring together various military and civilian teams, such as the Army Ballistic Missile Team under General Medaris and Dr. von Braun; and the Navy's Vanguard team that sent up, within its specified time, one of the most intricately instrumented satellites--men estimate it will be in orbit for two centuries; Caltech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory; Langley's Space Task Group; a host of newly organized industrial teams; and a wide variety of civilian and military leaders, such as Albert Siefert, James Webb, Brainerd Holmes, George Mueller, Lt. General Samuel Phillips, and Rear Admiral Roderick Middleton.

At the same time Apollo demonstrated what happens when we let a means become a goal. The moon landing became not the first of our ventures in space but the culmination. When we got to the moon we had won the race. And we are suffering for that now. It was a public relations flap--to use the space jargon--that, try as they would, NASA's public relations experts could not forestall.

And so part of our historical effort must be to put our space program back on the main flight pattern. To do this we need only tell the full, magnificent story of Apollo and the entire space program as it occurred. It needs no apology nor false promotion.

"The real importance of the Apollo program," Congressman Joseph E. Karth of Minnesota stated in an address before the National Space Club over a year before Armstrong and Aldrin landed, "is not just the physical act of getting to the moon. Rather, the significance lies in developing the technology to do it. The accompanying advances in our economy, in production of new products, in new factories and new jobs--these are what really matter. Money for space is spent on earth, not in space. The flow of these funds into the economy, and the benefit of increasing knowledge will return many fold the cost to the taxpayers today."<sup>(1)</sup>

In an adjacent vein, Associate Editor Tom Alexander wrote in the July 1969 issue of FORTUNE magazine: "The really significant fallout from the strains, traumas, and endless experimentation of Project Apollo has been of a sociological rather than a technological nature; techniques for directing the massed endeavors of scores of thousands of minds in a closeknit, mutually enhancing combination of government, university and private industry. This is potentially the most powerful tool in man's history."<sup>(2)</sup> Haynes Johnson wrote shortly after in THE WASHINGTON POST: "Some intimately associated with America's space effort see its greatest achievement as a state of mind . . . The space program is the cleared proof that a nation can set a difficult goal and carry it out. If it has done nothing else, it has demonstrated how America can, when it wants to, marshal its talent, commit its treasure, gain public support and achieve its task."<sup>(3)</sup>

We must remind people of the constant gains from space technology. To select a few, we can point to

their enjoyment of winter games at Sapporo, Japan, and of the golf tournaments in Hawaii on TV through the use of space satellites; the transoceanic phone communications through the International Telecommunications Satellite Consortium; the weather forecasting that, for instance, kept track of Camille and sent out warnings that saved countless lives, even though the force of the hurricane was as destructive as the one that killed 5,000 near Galveston back at the turn of the century; the use of titanium alloys in oil refineries; the electromagnetic hammer, developed for use on the Saturn V at Marshall and now interesting aircraft, ship and automobile manufacturers; the "o-ring shock absorber," developed by NASA, and now employed by many states in their highway barrier system; the transmission of electro-cardiograms by radio and telephone from the scene of accidents to hospitals, to mention just one medical help from space research; the marshalling of management techniques to insure an orderly flow of components; a motorized wheel chair, activated by a sight switch that will give more than 100,000 paraplegics greater mobility--the result of a device to permit astronauts to operate space controls when strong gravitational forces prevented movement of their arms; the Kansas City Airport Control Room on the 8th floor of the downtown City Hall that resembles the Launch Control Center at Kennedy; and fabrics for clothes and blankets that are light in weight and highly insulated. The Earth Resources Technological Satellite (and the Sky-Lab) will provide information on crop growth, the use of grazing lands, the ecological effects of the meandering of the Gulf Stream off the east coast of the U. S.; the formation and location of icebergs; the precise area where herring are feeding at a given time; the location of major ore deposits; storm and tidal erosion on our coasts; the inventory of timber resources; the extent of snow cover in the high sierras; pollution of lakes; infestation of crops; land use in the clustered cities of the country. The vast extent of uses of space-gained knowledge dazzles the imagination. We must let it out to the general public in understandable but decidedly steady dribbles ... coming ... coming ...

Further, we must be frank. I would advise a frank statement by NASA, the American scientific community and the people in the space industry of what we would like to do in the next 25 years, or rather 37 years. Where would we like to be by the year 2000? State it clearly to the American people. State it in a blood, sweat, toil, and tears atmosphere. Tell clearly what it would mean and how much it would cost, not simply in round numbers, but in dramatic contrast to the huge amount of money we spend on pets--as much as we spent annually on space ventures--on alcohol, automobiles, or aircraft carriers.

To the constantly repeated complaint that effort in space works against efforts on earth, I suggest a frontal attack in either one of two ways. Dr. Glenn T. Seaborg, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, hit it head-on: "Space exploration," he insisted in a public statement of July 24, 1970, "rather than being in opposition to meeting needs

on Earth, is in fact part of the search for knowledge that is indispensable for meeting those needs . . ." (4) Congressman Olin E. Teague, a tiger in his support of space activities, remarked in the House of Representatives in May 1968, "Some people ask, 'Why should we spend this money to explore space when there is so much to be done here on earth?' Well, there was plenty to be done in Europe when Columbus left it. And there is still plenty to be done there. If Columbus had waited until Europe had no more internal problems, he would still be waiting, but the opening up of the new world did more to revive the European culture and economy than any internal actions could possible have done." (5)

While I like the idea of a civilian agency like NASA and the idea that it was a civilian who first stepped on the moon, at the same time I think it highly imperative that we give to our military people some chance to achievement other than in war. I would rather have a future General George Patton land on Mars than in Moscow.

These then are some of the issues that I would like to present to you today. There is too much defeatism in the entire space industry. We need firmness of purpose. We need clear cut decisions. We need frankness in dealing with the American people and the people of the world, telling them what we have accomplished and what we would like to accomplish. We need to pursue international cooperation. One of the men who is speaking in this Consortium represents a Franco-German combination in a space venture. Recall that 30 years ago Frenchmen and Germans thought they had to hate each other forever. Ever since the Communist Revolution of 1917 we have been justly suspicious of Soviet Russia. We admire the tremendous sacrifice the little people of Russia made to repel Hitler's invasion. But we also recognize the Cold War, the rape of Hungary, the Berlin Wall, the Cuban missile crisis--the last two events that occurred since we began our moon program. We can't scrap our defense; but likewise we can't go on living forever with rockets pointed at Moscow and Leningrad. We welcome the cooperation in space that will be represented by the joint effort of Soyuz and our spacecraft. We must work together to enrich this fragile planet. We must go off beyond the moon to other areas.

When I first expressed the idea that perhaps it was the destiny of our's and the next generation to bring the message of the Sermon on the Mount to intelligent beings on other planets, as Columbus brought this message to the people of the new world, I thought it was an original idea. But I read since that Werhner von Braun had said the same thing some years before. This may well be our destiny. Let us face up to the challenge of history.

I thank you.

REFERENCES

- (1) Karth, Congressman Joseph E., "Address" before the National Space Club on May 17, 1968, quoted in U.S. House of Representatives, FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL MANKIND: A SURVEY OF THE PRACTICAL RETURNS FROM SPACE INVESTMENT, Report No. 92-748, 92nd Cong., 1st Sess., Dec. 14, 1971, p. 5.
- (2) Alexander, Tom, "The Unexpected Payoff Project Apollo," FORTUNE, July 1969, p. 114.
- (3) THE WASHINGTON POST, April 9, 1970.
- (4) Seaborg, Dr. Glenn T., "Public Statement," July 24, 1970, quoted in U.S. House of Representatives, FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL MANKIND, p. 4.
- (5) Teague, Congressman Olin E., "Remarks," May 1968, quoted in U.S. House of Representatives, FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL MANKIND, pp. 4-5.