

ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

WILLIAM B. EASTER
INTERVIEWED BY KEVIN M. RUSNAK
WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH, NORTH CAROLINA – 3 MAY 2000

RUSNAK: Today is May 3, 2000. This oral history with Bill Easter is being conducted in his home in Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, for the Johnson Space Center Oral History Project. The interviewer is Kevin Rusnak, and is assisted by Rebecca Wright.

I'd like to thank you for allowing us into your lovely home today, and for agreeing to participate in the project. We appreciate that. If you could, tell us how you got started in this particular business.

EASTER: Well, that's a long story. That goes back a long way. It goes back to World War II. When the war broke out, I was too young to go and I was very upset about it. I was young. You have to youths to fight wars. I was scared to death that the war was going to be over before I could get in it. I had two brothers and two sisters already in the service, and here, the baby of the family, and I couldn't make it. So, being born in '26, when the war started I was just too young. So I said, "Well, I'll go to Canada and I'll join the Canadian Air Force," because that's what I wanted to do; I wanted to fly. Well, your parents are not going to let you do that. So at seventeen, you could go to the service with your parents' consent if you were seventeen and a half.

So that worked well for me. I got out of high school and I had joined the Air Corps Cadets. There was no Air Force at that time; it was under the Army. We had an Army Air Corps. In the First World War, the Signal Corps had it, Army Signal Corps. But anyway, they

had that. So I went down, my buddy and I, and we took all the tests, passed, and went down, and I went by to pick him up and we were going to be sworn in. He'd had a heavy date and said, "I'll go later."

I said, "Okay." I went down and I was sworn in, and the draft picked him up before he got sworn in, and he wound up on every island in the South Pacific. I told him later, he made it, "You never want to be late. You want to get out there and do your duty." But he did his.

Anyway, so when I got in the service, this was '43, and the Air Corps had promised us flight training, either pilot, bombardier, navigator. So we went down to Wichita Falls, Texas, and took every test they had putting square pegs in round holes and all that stuff, and doing all the physical work and so forth. About two months later, three months later, somewhere in there, they said, "We've got all we need of the pilots, bombardiers, and navigators in the pipeline. They just had thousands.

So they said, "Well, we've offered you a commission." This is when everybody's over in a big auditorium sitting there wondering what's going to happen. They said, "We promised you a commission, so all of those who want to go to infantry school at Fort Benning, Georgia, come up here and sign up over here." And a few guys went, not many. Then they offered a commission if you'd go to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in the paratroopers. A few signed up, but not many.

They said, "That's all we've got to offer as commissions. The rest of you," and they started offering things like armor, putting the guns on the airplanes and arm them and that kind of thing, mechanics, gunners." So that appealed to me, so I signed up for gunnery school, and I was either at Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico, or down at Tampa Bay, Florida. I didn't know you had to go through an interview; I thought you just went. Anyway, this major

interviewed all of us one at a time, and he said, "Don't you think your mother would be happier if I sent you to electronics school instead of gunnery school?"

I said, "No, sir. I want to fight."

He said, "Well, okay."

So the next morning I went out in the compound area to see where we were going, and I was on a list to go to electronics school up at Madison, Wisconsin. I don't know this major, but he's a hell of a guy, because I wrote to my friends that went to gunnery school and they just kept fading out. I don't think many of them made it. The loss rate over Germany at that time, hell, it was approaching 40 percent. I mean, there's not much chance of making it if you don't just make a few missions and come back. Some of them did that, but if you stay there for your fifty, the odds on making it are not very good.

Anyway, so I went to electronics school up at Madison, Wisconsin. I didn't know anything about radio or code or all that junk. I mean, we were just kids. I guess I turned eighteen that year, so that's how old I was. They put us in these schools and tried to learn us a little bit. I don't think we learned a hell of a lot, but we learned some.

Then they said, "Well, we're going to send you down to Chanute Field, Illinois, where we're going to give you some better training." So we went down there. It got harder and it got better and we did start learning. So they took the guys that had shown some proficiency. They said, "Well, we're going to send you down to Boca Raton, Florida, to work on some gear that will be flown and you can learn it and you'll probably be flying again."

So that sounded exciting, so we went to Florida, went to Boca Raton. I'm sure where Boca Raton and the air base was is all great, great condos and golf courses now. God, what a

great piece of land. We had a hurricane there and that's the only time I ever got to go to the Boca Raton Hotel. What a marvelous place. Anyway, we did that.

So then we got a message in from the Navy, they said they had a lot of places where the graduates of that school—and I had just graduated—on this particular radar set, if they could borrow us from the Army. Of course, the Army didn't consult us, they said, "Of course."

So the next thing I knew, I was on the train to Boston to get on a civilian tanker operating some radar equipment for the Navy, kind of a strange thing, but that's the way it was. Our boss, of course, was the captain of the ship, a civilian. What it was, we had this rider on there. Had a gun on the back, another light gun up forward, and you're supposed look out for enemy aircraft, submarines, or whatever. I think the enemy would have laughed at that setup. But anyway, nobody shot at us and we didn't shoot back, so that worked out all right.

So what the mission was, was hauling prisoners. We took the prisoners from here, they were all over the country, many of them from right here, Germans right here. In fact, my wife, her father had a dairy farm and he had about fifty Germany prisoners working there. But that's beside the point.

Anyway, I remember there in Boston, the first time here comes, I don't know, twenty-five or thirty MPs [military police] all with machine guns, and Germany prisoners walking over to board the ship. It was 1500 SS out of Wisconsin. So we took them. They thought we were taking them to Germany, but we took them into France. The French police, MPs, picked them up there. You could see the haggard looks on their faces. They didn't want to see that, didn't want to go to France.

So anyway, I did that for some time, back and forth in the Atlantic. We hauled Italians and mostly Germans. Then they sent us down through the canal zone over to Seattle, where we

picked up prisoners, not many, Japanese, and took them back to Japan and brought our guys back from the islands. This time it was getting on. A year and half later, the war was over in '46, so I got out. I made three trips to Japan.

Got out and I went back to Birmingham, Alabama, and I said, "Well, I'll go to school, become president, and have a ball." So I went back there and went to school at a little school that don't even exist anymore. It used to be called Howard University. It conflicted with the black school in Washington, D.C., which is called Howard. After I left, they changed the name of it to Sanford, after some famous guy from there, I guess.

Anyway, I decided that I didn't want to live there anymore, and I went to San Diego, California. [Telephone interruption.]

So I went to San Diego State for a while and it became pretty tough financially to make it. I had no income except what little jobs I could pick up on the outside, plus the 75 dollars we used to get from Uncle Sam back in those days for doing that. So I said, "Oh, to hell with it."

So I just left and went full time, and since I had some experience, I went to work for Convair. Convair is part of General Dynamics, big in San Diego. They were doing the shipboard launched missiles for the Navy, tailless and all of that, air defense-type missiles. They also had the fire control system.

So anyway, I had had some experience with that kind of thing, at least knew about radar and how to fix it. I wasn't an engineer, but the kind of guy that they wanted real bad. So I went through their little school, became a foreman for them, and I stayed there, and I was still just a kid, twenty-three or so. It was great life. I'd work four to twelve, sleep late, and play golf. I got my game in good shape, and I thought I had the world by the tail.

Anyway, they decided to move the plant up to L.A., and I didn't want anything to do with L.A. A guy came through recruiting and he said, "We'll offer you a job at White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico."

I said, "Well, that sounds like a hell of a deal. What do we do there?"

He said, "Well, we're going to fire all these missiles and test them and all this jazz, all that."

I said, "That sounds great, and I don't have anything else to do." I had an old 1926 Dodge convertible, and about 150 bucks in my pocket, and I said, "Let's go."

We went over there, wound up staying eight years. That's where I met all the biggies, [Wernher] von Braun and [H. Kurt] Debus and all of the so-called German supermen. They didn't seem to be any more knowledgeable about the business than our people. I was kind of disappointed in them. I had had a lot of contact with Germans and didn't like what they'd done, and knew that von Braun had done the same thing. Couldn't understand the congressmen and all the high officials wanting his autograph. I never understood that. Even to this day I don't understand it. There were some very famous men that stood right beside where they fawned over these guys and wanted their autographs and thought they were great men. But that's beside the point.

But that was an interesting time. I worked in the control center, where all of the missions were run around the plotting boards. I did that for a couple of years, and then I went into the range control office, the people that ran the entire range. White Sands Missile Range was composed of—the Army owned all the land and really owned the range. The Navy was a tenant there, and they fired all kinds of missions like I had worked on at Convair, air-to-ground.

The Air Force was there with Holloman Air Force Base, and they ran the air-to-air missions, provided support for the Army. The drones that the Army shot at was air-to-ground. They'd use B-17s until they ran them out of the country. Then they'd use F-84s, things that we didn't use anymore. They did that mission.

They had the mission of—I don't know if you've ever heard of a guy named John [P.] Stapp, Colonel Stapp. Air Force had a—it was like a railroad there, tracks that, oh, must have been 10,000 feet. They'd strap Stapp and one of his sergeants one at a time in this thing, put rockets on their back, and they'd fly down this thing. At the end, between the tracks was hollowed out and the ties taken out, it was full of water. There was a scoop on the end and it stopped them just like that. God, I used to see this guy laying there on a piece of canvas, his eyes were literally out of their sockets. I don't why the man ever volunteered for all that. But it made me sick to see the man's eyes out. They had strapped monkeys to it and done all kinds of things.

Anyway, all of this, NASA used all of that data. That was invaluable. But anyway, I worked in the range control, where all of those decisions were made to—there would be maybe ten missions going at one time, so scheduling was very, very tight. Instrumentation was very, very tight. What they did there, the air is clear, sunshine 350 days a year, and they use these big cameras. They'd paint the fins different. You could see the slightest roll and check the stability of the vehicle. If you wanted it to roll, you had a perfect picture of it in that weather.

There would be small missiles. The Army had tanks in there, and they'd take them over there and they had a mission whereby they'd have a missile called a Redeye. It was wire-controlled. I don't think they've—they were very, very effective. I mean, you'd say, how in the hell could you do that? You'd catch on a limb. Well, you couldn't do it in the woods, of course,

but out there on that desert they were deadly. It's 2,000 yards, shooting at the other guy, and it didn't fly in a straight line, it was correcting all the time, a guy there with a short stick. They'd be shooting these things and tearing up the country, and half a dozen other missions going on at the same time. It was a busy, exciting place.

In fact, there's a guy here named Tom [Thomas U.] McElmurry, was a colonel in the Air Force who ran the Air Force Mission Control Center. He was a personal friend, I knew him well. When I came to Houston, I was surprised to see him there. He was selected in the first group of astronauts, and Tom had a hearing—they found a hearing problem and cut him out.

But anyway, I was up at Holloman one time. He was one of the first guys—in fact, they said he was the first guy that did this—landed an F-102 dead stick. Holloman is about 4,500 feet in elevation, which makes it even tougher. But anyway, he walked away from it, and no damage.

Gene [Eugene F.] Kranz was there. That's where I first met Gene. He was a first lieutenant and he was a wild man. They said, "Look at this guy." He was there running a mission. He was like a German general; he wanted his men exactly here, there and everywhere. He was a disciplinarian. He was a piece of work. I used to remind him of that. I saw him on TV the other day. He still talks the same way, just like that. Trying to sell his book.

RUSNAK: That's right, which just came out.

EASTER: I haven't seen it. I talked to Chris [Christopher C.] Kraft [Jr.] about it. He said he'd read it. I don't doubt I'll read it.

Let's see. Where am I? I'm back here at the control center. So anyway, this is drifting on up to about 1960, I guess, '59. No, '59 or '58. Anyway, I was well known around the range, and the Army needed a guy at the Pentagon, a rep there. The one they had didn't want to stay there any longer. So I went to the Pentagon for a while, and became White Sands' representative to the Pentagon. That was fun, meeting with a different breed of cats. I got to be in some meetings with the chief of DoD [Department of Defense] and those kind of people. It's exciting to do that, for a young guy, to see what they do right and what they do wrong. I thought they did a lot of both.

But about this time NASA was being formed, and I knew that when my term was up at the Pentagon that any job I had at White Sands was probably going to be in some administrative capacity, and I didn't want to push paper back there.

So a guy named Ozro [M.] Covington really should be interviewed instead of me for this kind of thing. He was the chief technical officer for the Signal Corps at the White Sands Missile Range. He had put in all of this instrumentation, that all came out of his office. He headed up a group there when I came back, called technical plans, which was going to go on and reorganize the instrumentation, update it, bring it up to date to 1970 standards, you know, advanced, because they knew that NASA was coming and they wanted a piece of this thing somehow. Nobody knew yet what was going to happen.

Anyway, NASA reached out and hired him, because they had to have somebody with his talents. They just kind of took him. So there went my boss, and I was coming back to the Sands, and like I said, I didn't know what I was going to do. Well, fortunately, he called me and offered me a job at Goddard [Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Maryland]. He was at Goddard. I had no idea what Goddard did. I didn't even hesitate. I said, "Of course," and I went there.

That was in 1961. He had no idea what he wanted me to do yet, and I didn't know what he wanted me to do either.

But anyway, I did the tour and sat in his office and talked to him about what I could do for him. Goddard at that time—well, still are—they strictly do the Earth-orbiting satellites. They do the tracking and data acquisition for Earth-orbiting satellites and for the manned flight. Also, they support DoD and their launches with data, and they support JPL [Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, California] if and when they want support.

So I felt that I would like to get involved in something to do with the manned flight. So he said, "Well, we're going to have a job in Houston trying to get sorted out the differences of opinion and how we're going to do the computer work and who's going to do this and who's going to do that and so forth."

I said, "Well, it sounds great. When do I leave?"

I was single at the time, and I took off for Houston, and he had prepared the place for me, written to Walter C. Williams, [Robert R.] Gilruth, and Chris and all of them.

Anyway, I go down there on June 1, 1962. That's when I walk into the office. Chris is still back at Virginia, and [Sigurd A.] Sjoberg is there with Betsy Mason—Betsy Bednarcyk, who you'll see today or tomorrow. And went through with the room with the colonel, and we all got squared away and went to work.

As I said, the people were scattered everywhere. We were there, Gemini was downtown in an office building. Apollo was out in those offices at the—they were right there at the interchange at Gulf Gate. If you go north, it'd be on your right, right at the—they were nice offices at the time. Headquarters was in—you may not have heard of this, the Farnsworth Chambers Building, gorgeous building. If you turned left at the Holiday Inn, where we were,

and then turned right, it was right there. You probably have seen it. Great. I mean, that's the kind of government offices I like.

Walter C. had his throne there—God, what an office—surrounded by all of his people. He ran flight operations, the astronaut office. He brought a guy in named Barry Graves to run an outfit called—what did they call it? TAGIU [Tracking and Ground Instrumentation Unit], I think, and that was to take all of the requirements, the technical requirements for the computer, the ships. We, Goddard, had to supply ships for tracking downrange, so we—let's see if I can find this. It's here somewhere.

Anyway, he and Kraft hated each other's guts. Kraft had been doing that, and Walter brought in this guy, set up an organization, it took some of Kraft's people to man it from engineering and all around. Anyway, here was a group that was between Goddard and him, it was the end user of this data. Now, he had no way, official way, of getting through there except to go through this guy. This guy wanted the tracking and the computers, he wanted all of that for himself, the ships. He was going to build this empire.

Anyway, Kraft and I hit it off very well and we became friends, so, naturally, I took his side, although that was not the official side. Anyway, there was a battle as to where the computer was going to be. Goddard wanted it at Goddard. Both Kraft and [G. Barry] Graves wanted it at JSC [Johnson Space Center]. The argument was at Goddard, "Before we send you the data, we've got to see what we're sending you, if it's good." The argument of the Manned Space Flight Center was, "We don't care whether it's good or bad, there's nothing we can do to correct it. Just send us what's there."

Anyway, many battles were fought, but that's the way it wound up being done. The big computer was put over in Building 30 and Houston and IBM ran it, and that's where it was. We

sent the data, untouched, to Houston. That was a hell of a battle, and it wasn't over as fast as I told him.

But Covington, who was running this thing at Goddard, he really agreed that that's what should be done. At Goddard, Covington wasn't in charge. He didn't have complete charge. There was a guy named Mengel, John [T.] Mengel, who he and Covington were kind of co-pilots of this network.

They were two networks. There was this network that we had for the manned space flight, called the manned space flight network, and the other network was for the unmanned, and it was huge also, in fact, bigger. Different kind of instrumentation, but bigger, but not much of it could be used for manned flight, unfortunately. Some could, especially all the launch instrumentation. To get that resolved was hard, too, but they finally worked it out among themselves. A year or so later, Mengel retired and Covington had the whole thing so that it worked a lot better.

But those were some tough days. We had everybody who had a vote, and some who didn't in it, over at the Chambers Building one time, to decide how many ships we had to have. All of this was done in one day. I couldn't believe it. Here we are sitting around this huge table and everybody trying to talk at once. I couldn't believe that we were going to get this thing resolved in one day. Did it. Settled on five, five ships. I mean, a ship don't cost a couple of bucks. I mean, you're talking about huge expenditures if you cut out one ship or add one ship.

I couldn't believe it. I'd been into areas all my life in government where if you spent 50,000 dollars, man, you were spending a lot of money, and you'd better have a couple of reams of paperwork to back that up. Here we spent probably a billion and a half dollars and nobody seemed to be excited about it at all.

Anyway, so that day the ship contracts were let. All of the design work had already gone into—all it took was just laying the contract and turning the dogs loose, because all this had to be done quickly.

The battle went on between Graves and Chris Kraft. Kraft's got a group of guys over here headed by Tec [Tecwyn] Roberts, who later went to Goddard Space Flight Center and took Ozzie Covington's job, and became one of my personal friends until he died. He was one of the greatest that ever lived. He was from Wales [Great Britain].

Anyway, he and his crew, a guy named John [D.] Hodge, John may still be with NASA, I don't know. The other night on TV, I saw him with Kranz selling the book, but I thought he was still with NASA. Anyway, he worked for Roberts, and Kranz was in there. They designed the center as it became, as it still is, as far as I know, designed the building, the elevators, all of the control consoles. As far as I know, they haven't been changed. All those guys did that, and they did it in about six months. That was there at that place by the Holiday Inn. It's a historic place, I thought.

RUSNAK: It still is.

EASTER: I don't know if it's still there.

RUSNAK: The original one is still there, but it's no longer being used. They built a new one for the Shuttle missions.

EASTER: Oh, no. Oh, yes. Yes. Yes, okay. I understand that. I thought you meant the offices. Yes, the control center, I'm sure they still use it, don't they, for something?

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

RUSNAK: The one that they built at that time is no longer being used.

EASTER: Is that right?

RUSNAK: That's right. About midway through the Shuttle Program they built a new one, but the other one is still there, and now they're refurbishing it to meet the Apollo 11 configuration.

EASTER: It was quite a building. Quite a building. Anyway, let's see. Where are we? We're in the building now. Let's see. They assign me an office over there and I'm in it about a couple of months, and Covington calls me and says he wants me to go to Florida. Goddard ran the control center in Florida and all the data coming in and, at that time, the computer there. Now, this is before we're really operating out of the control center. It's being readied.

So he wants me to go to the Cape. So I go to the Cape, and Kraft is upset because he says Covington is taking away his rep. So I go down there. The contractor that Goddard used was Bendix, all over the network. Still do, as far as I know. But the contractor that was there at the control center was not Bendix. So for a couple of missions, I ran the control center. I used to kid Roberts, I said, "Hell, you know, you've built one, and, hell, I ran one for a couple of

launches. I just ran the old one." And it was a lot of fun. But I swear to God I don't think I got a night's sleep. I've never seen anything as hectic in my life.

Changing the configuration of a control center from one mission to the next came under my office, and they'd send these things down there, almost like a book. They'd say these changes have to be implemented and checked out and signed off on. Well, that was impossible, you know. We'd get down to a mission, you know, two days ahead of a mission, you'd show them the book and they could go with the ones that they least wanted to lose. You ain't gonna get them all, guys. It's impossible. I don't care if you put 150 guys in there, you couldn't do it. So it was chaos.

Then they'd have the news media. That was back in the days when they'd give you—they'd end up giving you 1,000 dollars for a ticket into that control center during a mission. The viewing room had about thirty seats, and even though I ran the control center, I couldn't get in there myself. The VP [Vice President] was usually always there, and two or three congressmen, and at least one senator, those kind of people, and they went up there and sat in the viewing room, a few of the NASA top guys. Even though I ran the control center, I couldn't get near that place.

Doing the mission there, the whole town down at Cocoa Beach was like a—search for the right word—like a circus, people everywhere just come in because it was a happening. *Life* magazine had the contract with the astronauts for their story, which probably was a mistake, and they had a house there called the *Life* house. I swear to God, that was unreal. They stocked it with food and whatever for the astronauts, and that's where they stayed. The news media would be five deep around this place, trying to get any kind of a story. Some of the wild tales I could

tell you would be unreal. It wouldn't sound real. But I don't think history wants to know about all that stuff.

RUSNAK: Which missions were you down at the Cape for at that time?

EASTER: I was down there for several. I was trying to think. It's been so long ago, I can't remember everybody's. [M. Scott] Carpenter was the first mission that I had anything to do with, and as you may or may not know, he did not do well in flight. In fact, he was a screw-up. I happened to be sitting right behind him at the debriefing. I didn't want to sit up front—nobody else did either—and there was the only seat left and I was sitting right behind him.

Chuck [Charles A.] Berry, the doctor—I just talked to him the other day, he's still around—said we had a "leaky astronaut." I mean, he just voided himself on the pad before liftoff, and his heart rate went up and he was in bad shape. He got back, barely. As you know, he almost burned up all of his fuel, didn't have enough to—he barely had enough to get in the right attitude for reentry, so he never flew again.

Anyway, then I came back to Houston and we'd get into the routine of these things. You asked some questions here. I don't know if you want to stick to those or not. What my role was, once a mission got started, all the changes were made on the Goddard side of the house and we had done everything that we were supposed to do, I really didn't have a mission. But as it turned out, I had an office in Building 30 right beside the entry from the outside, right at that entry point.

The reason that that means anything, anytime anybody came from Building 1 now—they used to call it 2—came by there, they came by my office. I had a great secretary, Ida

Marth. So my boss was always there, Covington. The director of Goddard was usually there. Harry [J.] Goett was not really interested in manned space flight; he'd seldom come. We had a guy named [Dr.] John [F.] Clark always came, the director. I'll get into him in a minute.

So anyway, Kraft hung out there and Sjoberg and a guy named John Stevenson was always there during the missions, and so it got bigger and bigger. Our guy had to almost have an extra pot. Then the writers started hanging out there. I really didn't have anything to do after the mission, I didn't sit at a console or anything. If it turned out to be that kind of a thing. They sat there, and I think I got more of the inside of the mission from the people who came to visit than I did before or after the mission. But I was lucky enough to have a lot of important people come through, even had some of the Russians. Everybody wanted to come to my house.

I met a tremendous amount of people in the viewing room, as I say, in the office. I met the Russian, Anatoly Dobrynin, had a chat with him. He was there as a guest of which mission I can't remember. I made a mistake, I never kept a diary, because you never think anything like this will ever come up. Very few people ever do, and I didn't. Anything I did I'd have to do from memory.

Let's see. About this time, Kraft became head of JSC, and he wanted me to come over and be in his suite there, so I moved over. I don't know who's in there now, but it's a little office directly on the left when you go into George [W. S.] Abbey's suite. Is the carpet still blue?
[Laughter]

RUSNAK: Yes, it is. It's still NASA blue.

EASTER: Chris put that in. He wanted the blue. Anyway, so I went over there, and about this point in time the Shuttle was hot and heavy. The Air Force decided they wanted to use the Shuttle. They had a launch pad out at Vandenberg [Air Force Base, California] that the old Dyna-Soar mission had used, and they decided to revamp that and use the Shuttle. Well, that was a big undertaking, with lots of money being thrown at it. Anyway, they did that, and Bob [Robert F.] Thompson, who was also a good friend, he decided that if he was going to help them, he wanted somebody out there, wanted an office out there. So I said, "Well, Bob, I don't work for JSC, but am I eligible to bid on that job?"

He said, "Of course." So he gave it to me.

I went to California. I thought this was going to be a great thing to do, but I go out there and we have people who are already out there who are under the opinion that they're already doing the job that I was sent out there to do. KSC [Kennedy Space Center, Florida] had a large contingent there, and they were advising the Air Force on the launch pad, what—how to build it and so forth. So we were not getting our inputs in. They wanted to advise the Air Force on all the things that we did, too. So, anyway, it was a turf battle there for six or seven, eight months.

Anyway, we finally got organized, and we got the thing going, and I went down to Los Angeles to the Air Force headquarters and had an office, and had another office at Vandenberg with several guys. They were spending money hand over fist. The general called me in his office one day, General Henry, and he expressed the view that they probably would drop it. He felt that that was what was going to happen, but that was not efficient.

RUSNAK: Do you remember what time period that was?

EASTER: That was about 1981, maybe '80. That was a very unofficial thing. I could see that they were going to do that. I felt it. They weren't enthusiastic about it. The things that they wanted to do probably shouldn't be done by Shuttle. It didn't do the kind of things they wanted it to do. I know they didn't drop it until much later, but I just wanted the record to know that they were thinking of it before that.

RUSNAK: Yes, it's interesting since they didn't drop it until really officially after the Challenger accident.

EASTER: That's right. But the opinion, the enthusiasm wasn't there for it. I felt that I'd probably done all I could do out there, and I don't know how much that was. So that's when I retired, after I come back.

RUSNAK: Why did you pick that time to retire?

EASTER: Myself and two other guys had a company in Houston. We were building apartment houses. We had over a thousand apartments, a whole line at that time. Houston was going pretty good. You weren't there, but you were. In about 1981, '82, Houston kind of collapsed, collapsed badly and people left there in droves. We were left with, oh, god, occupancy rates went down to 35, 40 percent. So we had to get out of it, and that wasn't easy.

My wife had a large real estate office there, just outside the back gate. I don't know whether that building is still there or not. Anyway, she had about thirty people. So she's from

here, and when the company ran into trouble, we sold it off in bits and pieces, she thought that would be a good time to go back here.

So we came back here and bought this lot and sold our house there in Nassau Bay and came back here. That was kind of tough on me, because I needed something to do. I'd been busy for a long time. So I came back here and I started building again. It was good here.

I went up to Duke [University] and I found a piece of land between the east and west campuses at Duke, and I built a bunch of townhouses and sold them. Probably should have built some more, but I got tired of the commute. I came back here and started buying up land and building, and I built that duplex across the street there. This restaurant next door here, I had all that land and then sold it back to them. But I've just managed to stay busy and play a lot of golf, and do a little of this and do a little of that. Now I'm trying to write a book, but not about the space program. It's a piece of fiction. I wouldn't bore people with my experiences in the space program.

RUSNAK: It seems like you've been keeping busy in the nearly twenty years now, I guess, since you left NASA, fifteen, twenty years.

EASTER: '81. That's a long time.

RUSNAK: Yes. If I could, I'd like to backtrack a little bit and ask you a few questions.

EASTER: Sure.

RUSNAK: I had a few points here and there. You spent most of your time with NASA as an employee of Goddard, but working at the Manned Spacecraft Center, the Johnson Space Center. Did that create any problems, or were there any issues with that, and how often did you spend actually back at Goddard, if any time at all?

EASTER: Oh, yes, I'd go back there every couple of months and spend a week, talk to the guys and get up to speed on anything new that was happening, and show the flag, you know, show my face, that I still worked there. If you don't, people kind of forget, they forget to call you, and you can't have that. You've got to know everything that's going on.

Like I mentioned, I was going to tell you about this guy Clark. He called one day, and I don't know whether he'd ever talked to Covington about this or not, and he said, "I want you to talk to Kraft and see if they will take the network."

God, I almost fell out of my chair. I said, "Are you sure that's what you want?"

He said, "Yes." He said, "Call me back as soon as you can."

So Chris and I usually had lunch three or four times a week, and so I asked he and Sig. They didn't want it then. They did ten years earlier, but at that point in time they didn't want it. I don't know if anybody ever knew that that happened. I don't think so. I never told any of the guys. They would have really been upset. The Goddard guys, that is. I never told them anything. I never told any of the JSC guys, outside of Chris and Sig.

RUSNAK: Why were they looking to divest themselves of it?

EASTER: He was a strange guy. I don't know. He didn't explain much, he just said he didn't feel that that role fit the Goddard image anymore, because that was kind of a truck-driver job, and he wanted it to be a highly technical. But it didn't happen. It never will happen now, I guess. Goddard still runs the TDRS [Tracking and Data Relay Satellites] and that would be something that JSC could do if they wanted to, but it would make no sense, the TDRS is used by so many people now, other agencies of the government. So if JSC took it, they'd be in the role of the truck driver, so there's no point in it. The people there, they live there and that's where they work. Why disrupt it?

The thing that I tried to get moved to Houston, and General Henry and I became fairly close, his people could not afford to live in L.A. He'd bring buses in there and bring them all the way out into the desert. They'd ride for an hour and a half, two hours at night. I said, "Why don't we, as a country, move all that to Houston? We've got the land, and you're going to be working with these people very closely." He thought it was a great idea, but as soon as he mentioned it to some congressman, boy, they killed that. But I thought it was sad, those people would get on those buses and there'd be about six buses a night going out to the desert where the people could afford to live. Anyway, I saw something about it in the paper the other day. They're going to try to give them a raise. Hell, that ain't gonna do it. They need to furnish them housing.

Henry's retired, too. He was a good man. But Clark was a strange one. We had some strange ones there at Goddard, but they didn't last as long as they did here. The interest wasn't as great on orbital flight as it is when you've got a man in there.

Then there was the JPL thing. You haven't mentioned that. There was another piece of friction that was huge. JPL felt that they should be doing it all. They were a contractor, NASA

shouldn't do things, they should just monitor contracts. "Give me the contract and I'll go away and do it." When it got into the Apollo flights, we had to have the JPL support. Goddard only had the thirty-foot dishes. That's as big as we had. They had eighty-fives, big monsters, and we had to have those for the deep space.

I was asked to go out and interface with them. We had an office there, too, but they were very cold. It took a lot of doing to get an agreement with JPL. You almost had to mandate it back at Headquarters, and there are not many people willing to, I don't know about today, but in those days not many people willing to stand up and mandate things to JPL. Strong congressional backing, lots of money. They didn't make mistakes. They'll tell you that right off. But anyway, that's the atmosphere it was in those days.

But Goddard had to support JPL also at the launch and some of their other work, so they had to reach out to us occasionally, too, but that was a sore spot.

Let's see. What else did you have here?

RUSNAK: I guess there were a few other things. Early on, you talked about the arguments over where the computers should be located. Then you've spoken a little bit about the tracking network and you mentioned the TDRS system. I was wondering if you could take us through the changes in the space flight network and the advances in technology that may have changed your job in the way the tracking system and the data reduction, these kinds of things, were done.

EASTER: When they got to the TDRS, I really didn't have a job after that. The changes that you make in the network, back in the old days, all of these stations were sent change orders from

JSC out to the sites, and they made these changes. After the TDRS came into being, hell, you'd program it differently. Back at Goddard, you didn't need me to do something like that.

But it's kind of funny, when I left, I mentioned this guy, a good friend of mine, who was a good friend of Chris', too, Tec Roberts. He designed the control center almost single-handedly, then went to Goddard, took Covington's job. When I quit, he and I were real close. He said, "I want your job." He quit that job with running the network, a powerful job, and he came to Houston and took my job. He was a—you'd have loved him—character. He spoke well. Only Welshman I've ever, Welsh I've heard language. He used to get interviewed by a Welsh newspaper or TV from my office on the phone and he'd describe the mission as it was progressing, to the TV station. It was just great.

Anyway, that's what he did until he retired, and then he went back to Maryland where he lived and died. He didn't move down here; he just commuted. But I thought that was—I said, "Everybody wants my job," which doesn't exist anymore, as far as I'm concerned. But a great guy.

RUSNAK: You spoke about Apollo a little bit, and I was wondering about Skylab, where you have the vehicle up there around the clock. What was your involvement with that program?

EASTER: Once all the changes to the network got done, we'd send guys down for a mission. Up in the control center there was these flight support rooms with consoles in there. We had guys in there in contact with all the stations. They'd come down and they were under me while they were there. Once I got them in place, I really didn't have any involvement. Unless something went badly wrong, the job—I guess, the most important thing in that job I ever did was keep the

peace between Goddard and JSC, and that was hard to do there for a while. If it hadn't been for Kraft and I becoming very good friends, I don't know what would have happened.

Sjoberg and I became very good friends. Poor guy died two weeks ago. His wife is coming up to stay with us a while. I told her a walk on the beach with a couple of scotches would make her feel a little better, so she's going to do that.

But anyway, everybody in those days were building their turf, and there were turf wars everywhere. The big battle was between Huntsville, Alabama, the Cape, and JSC. Now, there was a battle royale to see who would do what. It was so big that the Goddard thing got kind of pushed over to the side, because they knew they could lick that one. Everybody did. But this other one was difficult. That was back when von Braun was still living. The Congress seemed to support him instead of our boys.

I used to be a radical on that. God. I just thought we played that wrong. I thought we played it wrong in putting the Germans in charge of the launch. Kurt Debus ran that thing like a prison camp. He made terrible mistakes in putting them there, but maybe that's my opinion. The Congress didn't seem to think so.

RUSNAK: If we can take a short break here to change our tape.

EASTER: Sure.

RUSNAK: I've got just a few questions when we come back. Before we stopped, you were talking about your job being to keep the peace. I was really wondering what some of the more difficult times to be able to do that were. You had mentioned the computer controversy, who

should get it, JSC or should Goddard send them the data after looking at it. So I was wondering what maybe some of the other key areas were in keeping the peace.

EASTER: Well, there was never any problem at the top. At the top there was Sjoberg and Kraft. That was always the top for me, the top with the technical people. Like I mentioned this guy Barry Graves. He only stayed there about a year and a half, and he failed in doing what he wanted, and so he just left. But he wanted the computers, he wanted the network, about half of the network, the support of JSC, and he wanted all of that interfaced. He wanted to be it.

Walter Williams was above him, and Walter—I don't know Walter wanted. You'd talk to him and he'd say one thing one day and one the next. I don't know if you ever heard of him much or not, but Walter, I knew him well. All these guys were drinking buddies. You know, that's another element of the thing that people don't understand. Walter Williams could put away more martinis than anybody I've ever seen in my life. All of these guys were in the bars after the deal. Walter had a DC-3 that he flew around in all the time. You'd get on that plane with him going between the Houston and the Cape, or Houston and Washington, and, Jesus, it was unreal. But he wanted all of this, he, Walter, wanted all of this and he didn't interface with Gilruth very much on that. He was independent, and he wanted to make real-time decisions. He was just something else.

I don't know, did you interview Paul [P.] Haney?

RUSNAK: No, we have not yet.

EASTER: Is he on your list? Paul was PR [public relations] for JSC. I wouldn't tell any of his tales. He'll have a thousand tales to tell for you. He'd be super to interview.

RUSNAK: Okay.

EASTER: You might have him here, I don't know. Another guy would be this guy Covington. I don't know if he's still living or not. Ozzie's at least ten years older than me. He's probably dead. I'm getting old myself.

The big disagreements were pretty much settled in the first year or so here at Houston. Once we got the network thing squared away, the computer thing squared away, it calmed down drastically. The DoD and Goddard had problems between them. That doesn't impinge upon JSC, but there was battles between Goddard and DoD, and I was in all of those. But they had turf problems, too. If we had something going on that required one of their stations, boy, that made us walk the chalk line. They were hard to deal with. They wanted you to fall into a regimen and report to some captain, and he'd run the program for you. It was just bureaucracy with the DoD. Tough.

This colonel that I gave the room to came up here, he and I became good friends and that helped. In fact, we even wrote a letter of understanding that we both signed and our bosses signed, how we would conduct ourselves to keep from getting cross. They furnished things to JSC, too, that were similar to what we furnished. They had tracking and data acquisition down at [Grand] Turk [Island, British West Indies] and down in the island chain, the Bahamas. They had a lot of the same stuff we did, and we wanted to use that, and they wanted to go straight to JSC. We can't do that. We've got to put it in a package that we can give that to JSC.

Anyway, we finally, over not one martini, but 35,000, worked that out somehow, I don't know. But people wanted a piece of this new NASA pie. Everybody wanted a piece, and that was the reason for all this shenanigans. It was an important piece of America and they wanted to be a part of it. White Sands, I never got to be a part of it. They finally got one landing there, and they finally got a piece—I guess the White Sands lab is still there, I guess. I hope I helped talk Chris into doing that. He almost shut it down a couple of times. There was no reason for it to be there. It's there, and they could do it just as well as JSC.

Let's see. What else we got?

RUSNAK: White Sands does things like the propulsion testing for rocket motors and such.

EASTER: Yes, they do a little of that. It's not big. It's something that you could do at Lewis [Research Center, Cleveland, Ohio]. It's something you could have somebody else like Lewis do. You could have JPL do it. You could close it down, but I hope they don't. It's interesting. We've supported it all these years. No reason to support it, not now, I guess.

RUSNAK: It still seems to be running okay, doing a variety of things.

EASTER: Yes. Alan [B.] Shepard [Jr.]. You asked the question, where was I then. I was in the lobby of the Pentagon when that went on. I thought, God almighty, we're finally getting one man off the ground. I was there at the end when John [H.] Glenn [Jr.] went up, then the next flight, I was with NASA.

You ask a question back here, where was I when they launched Sputnik in '57. I was at White Sands. I couldn't believe they did that. [Dwight D.] Eisenhower was president, and he was an Army man, and he bent over backwards not to show favoritism to the Army. So if you recall—you're probably too young to remember—but in 1948, '49, '50, in there, there was a big battle as to what to give the Air Force and what to give the Army on missiles. The Army wanted the ballistic missiles, the Air Force wanted them, the new Air Force, because they said if they didn't get, then they wouldn't have anything to do.

So Eisenhower gave the Army 150 miles' radius, I mean, distance on their missiles. Gave the Air Force the long-range ballistic. So when it came to try to put something into space, instead of giving the job to Redstone arsenal in Huntsville, they were very successful with their missiles at that time, but they gave it to the Navy.

This guy Mengel, who later came to Goddard, he was the guy that had the instrumentation on it. So they learned all their failures from him. They just didn't have the talent to do it, and they failed. They just kept failing. Finally, DoD gave it to the Army and they got it in space. We were livid out there at the Sands. I was at the Sands when the vaunted Germans launched a V-2, and they had the gyros 180 out, and the thing went into Juarez [Mexico].

RUSNAK: I've heard that story.

EASTER: True story. The commander of the base, Colonel—God, what is his name—took money, took cash money, and went to Juarez and just paid everybody off. It got very, very little publicity. But I didn't think that much of their work.

When we got Shepard up, I thought, well, maybe we're on the right track. Maybe we can do it. When Glenn's flight went, I thought that was really great. The Russians never really surpassed that.

You've got a question here about working with the Russians. Were they came here, I met them, but I never had any interaction with them. This Betsy Bednarcyk, she went over to Moscow and was Gene Kranz's secretary over there while they were doing this interface with them. You'll get some reaction from her on how she liked it. They hated it.

RUSNAK: I'll have to ask her about that.

EASTER: Oh, yes.

RUSNAK: While we're talking about events, do you remember some of the later ones, such as the landing and first EVA [extravehicular activity] on Apollo 11?

EASTER: Yes. I was in the viewing room. Have you been in that viewing room, the old viewing room?

RUSNAK: Yes.

EASTER: You're facing—there's a little telephone booth-like place over on the right. I was leaning up against that, sitting on the floor, and Kenny [Kenneth S.] Kleinknecht was behind me. He was asleep. When they finally started landing, I woke him up, and the place was

packed. You could have heard a pin drop. The room was designed for probably 60 people, and it probably had 150 in there. Late at night, everybody was dead. But that, to me, probably was the most exciting time I've ever had at NASA, when they started landing. There was no other feeling like that. It was like watching a man, some snake trainer, put his hand on a cobra, anything can happen any minute and probably will, but it didn't, thank God.

RUSNAK: If you look back on your career as a whole, both with NASA and before you joined the space program, what do you regard as your greatest accomplishment?

EASTER: That's hard to say. You know, I didn't invent anything. I didn't fly any airplanes. The only thing that I ever did that was meaningful to the space program was try to get everything, help everything coordinated and going in one direction. I didn't have a lot of people working for me, just a few. All I ever tried to do was keep the wheels turning. I guess I did that to some degree. There's nothing that stands out that—

RUSNAK: That itself is an accomplishment, given the difficulties of that at the time, particularly early on.

EASTER: I'm not even sure they have anybody there doing that now. In fact, I would doubt they do. I don't know what he would do. All these people, I got to be friends with them and know them well. [Neil A.] Armstrong became a friend. When he was announced, his group was announced, we were all at the Colony Seven Motel. That's where they did it, at Cocoa Beach [Florida]. I don't think it's there anymore. It was about noon and we were in the bar area. There

was some reporters all around. He was there, and I got to talk to him. I said, "You're coming in at the perfect time." I said, "You've got a great chance to be the first man on the Moon."

[Laughter]

RUSNAK: That's remarkably prescient.

EASTER: He mentioned that to me a couple of times. He didn't think so. I knew [Edwin E. "Buzz"] Aldrin. Aldrin was very upset that he was not the first man on the Moon, very, very upset. His father was even more upset. His father was a general, I think, in the Army. But I don't know if that story ever was discussed by anyone or not.

RUSNAK: In one of Buzz Aldrin's books, I think he talks about that a little bit.

EASTER: Yes. He'd talk about it more with a drink in his hand.

RUSNAK: Well, that's usually the case with a lot of people, I think.

EASTER: He felt that Kraft and those guys shafted him, but they, as far as I was concerned, they didn't shaft him, he was campaigning for it so hard, everybody's wondered "What's the deal here? Why does he want—" He wanted his name to be first. His father campaigned with— there was heavy pressure from the congressmen to do that, but they didn't do it.

After the flight, he lived in Nassau Bay there, and I was at a cocktail party at his house, his wife really upset. She was bending my ear because she said nobody would offer a Buzz a

job. I didn't know anything about that. I said, "He probably wants to be president of the company. I'm sure he wouldn't take a job as an engineer. He'd want something big." But as far as I know, Buzz never did go to work for anybody in a big job. Really, neither did Armstrong.

RUSNAK: He's remained a pretty private person since then.

EASTER: Very, very private. We've talked about that a lot in the past, he could have been a millionaire, done anything he wanted to do. As far as I know, he never wrote a book. Is he on your list to interview?

RUSNAK: He is. We hope to interview him sometime in the near future.

EASTER: I think it'd be great if he wrote a book, but he's not going to do it. He's just that kind of a guy. I remember he never had any money. My wife sold his house down in Seabrook and he needed the money out of it. I thought, jeez, here's a guy that landed on the Moon, somebody should be giving him some money. It didn't work that way.

What else can we talk about?

RUSNAK: I think that's most of the questions that I had, but I would like to give Rebecca a chance to ask any questions, if she's come up with any.

WRIGHT: I have a couple. You mentioned going down to the Cape and being in the control room, or being in control of the control center in some of the missions.

EASTER: Yes.

WRIGHT: Could you elaborate a little bit more about what those duties were, how many people were there? What's your whole perception of having that responsibility?

EASTER: Let's see, contractor-wise, it was probably 150. Then we had people that worked in the control center on various things that were special to that mission. There'd be a dozen or so of those.

Then I had the security problem, too. That was the biggest headache, people wanting in, wanting in that control center during that mission, not just into the viewing room, but just getting into the control center, because everything was on the loudspeaker. You could go into some of the rooms and pick up headphones. Just to get in there, people would do anything.

If a mission, for example, was going to lift off at six o'clock or something, God, I'd be there all night getting ready. I wouldn't go to bed that night. I'd be there making sure all the changes were in, checked out, signed off, as you could, and then came the security problem, the guards checking badges to get in there. People started coming in there at midnight and trying to get in. If their name wasn't on the list, "Why isn't my name on the list? I'm supposed to do this." From the media, they were out there, you could have gotten \$1,000 from each one of those to get in. But to answer your question, I don't know, 150 or 60, somewhere in there.

WRIGHT: Did your responsibility stop once the rocket lifted off?

EASTER: No, it didn't stop until the mission ended and they left, all those people left. You were still responsible for the security, that everything worked in and out of there. If the data stopped, I mean, nobody came running to me and saying, "Get me some data. I don't have any anymore." But your people had to fix that. Somebody had to fix it.

Back in Mercury days, you had separate voice. It never worked good, to the astronauts. It was always spotty. Then once you got into using the FPS-16s and using the voice on that, it became quite good. But just controlled chaos was what the mission control center was. It was almost that when we got over here. Everybody wanted into the mission control center. Security became a problem again, but at least it was much better organized. I wonder if they tore that thing down, the one at the Cape.

WRIGHT: I think they saved part of it, because I know it used to be on the tours that you could go through it. I think they did move it to the new Apollo Center, didn't they, part to that?

RUSNAK: I believe so.

WRIGHT: I think they still have managed to keep part of it.

Did you encounter any resentment from anybody down there coming—because you were from Goddard and you were in Houston, but yet you were going down to the Cape to run the control center during those missions?

EASTER: I encountered resentment from Chris. He thought I should not be there, that I should be back in Houston. But that was not a problem. No, not really. I guess people felt if you were there and acted like you were in charge, then you must be in charge.

NASA was different then. Everybody did what they wanted to do. For example, when you had an area of responsibility which entailed going to a lot of different places and checking on it, you've got a stack of airline tickets. Nobody said you can't go to Akron or you can't go to JSC or you can't go to Huntsville or wherever. You just went and did it. You couldn't get away with that now. God, they'd put you in jail if you did all that now.

In my briefcase I'd have a stack of the little green travel requests that you could get a ticket with. They'd give you a stack of those once a month. If you ran out, you could go back and get some more, and it was first-class. I mean, that blew my mind. I mean, when I worked at the Sands, we didn't fly first-class; we flew in the back of the coach. Here I am now in NASA, I got a stack of chips and I can go anywhere I need to go and I'm going up front. Of course, they cut that out after a short while, and things become just another government agency.

But there for a while, the first couple of years, it was incredible. I don't think anybody had any more power than a guy like Walt Williams. I mean, he just built this thing just on the spur of the moment, like off the back of an envelope. Unreal. I think Walt is dead. He'd be great to interview. God, again, the guy had a belly twice as big as mine. I've never seen a man eat or drink more. Oh, God.

WRIGHT: He left quite a legacy.

EASTER: What a legacy. Piece of work. There are not many of those kind of guys left. I don't know of any. But there was some pieces of work out there.

WRIGHT: While you're speaking of people, you've mentioned many names. Did you have any dealings with Bob Gilruth?

EASTER: No, not an awful lot. Gilruth stayed away from the tracking and data. He just left that with Chris altogether. He didn't seem to be interested. I knew him and talked to him, but he never wanted to talk about it. Never. He'd just say, "You guys, you and Chris got it going all right?"

"Yes, doing fine."

And that's all he wanted to know. Never got involved in any of the technical workings. Didn't seem to interest him.

WRIGHT: Did your travels take you to any of the sites?

EASTER: Yes. Yes, I went to quite a few of the sites. At one time—let's see, I think there's an astronaut there now. I was going to Australia to be the NASA rep out of Headquarters, and I got a little resistance on the home front. Joyce didn't really want to go. I didn't want to go without her. I vacillated a while there. I can't remember the astronaut's name that they sent. Hell, I'm not even sure I'd know it if I heard it. By that time lots of them were coming in.

I probably left too quick. If I hadn't had that company, I probably would have stayed another couple of years. I don't know what I would have done, but I might have taken the job in Australia then.

WRIGHT: What were some of the other sites that you had a chance to—

EASTER: I went to South America, down the chain there. We had a station at Lima, Peru, and Santiago, Chile. Then the ships, a couple of the ships were down there, and I went out on the ships. That was something. Down the Florida chain, the stations.

WRIGHT: Can you describe some of the facilities or some of the conditions that those guys were in?

EASTER: The stations were all immaculate. What we normally had was a station with a thirty-foot dish. We needed a dish thirty feet in diameter, and a little low one-story building maybe 8,000 square feet, about, I'd say, an office building two or 3,000 square feet, and a perimeter fence around it, and a road going into it, and that's it. Now, that would manned—in South America we used some technical companies that were—like in Santiago we used a—can't remember the name of it. Why can I not remember that? They had technical expertise, and we hired them to do the running of that station, so we brought them back to America and we taught them in school how to do it. At schools down there, if we taught them anything new, we had to send people down and teach them how to do it.

You had to be very careful. Like one time we had, in Santiago, we had problems and we asked the guy from back at Goddard what was wrong, and he said, "It's broke." They don't understand the gravity of the situation. We're not looking for somebody to tell us it's broke. We know that. We want to know how you're going to fix it. It was hilarious. [Laughter] They didn't have the same work disciplines either. You had to make sure they got there to work.

But when we left, we gave them all of that equipment. We gave that all that to the university there at Santiago. I don't know what they were going to do with it. A friend of mine lives here in North Carolina, and they deactivated it. He stayed down there a couple years.

All those South American stations were something. I went to Santiago while the coup was going on. That was kind of an interesting deal. I was there when—I guess it was probably the week after the coup, and we went into the ambassador's office, which I thought was a crummy place. Santiago is a square, a big square, like most South American cities, monuments out in the middle. Over here was a building, IBM was in it, two or three other offices, some retail stores on the first floor. On the second floor over here was the U.S. ambassador's office. We went in there and talked to him. He was some guy that had been appointed, and I can't remember his name. Worst furniture I'd ever seen. It looked like something out of a second-hand store.

Anyway, they had the Marines there. Here's the palace on the other side of the plaza, a big ornate plaza, big ornate palace. It's about three stories high, gray. Everything in Santiago was gray. The guys running the coup, an airplane, a fighter, came over the top of this building here with the flaps down and they strafed the palace, then they set tanks up in there.

I met one of the tank commanders at a cocktail party and he was telling me how they did all this. That was the most interesting story I've ever had. I'll finish it if you want me to.

Anyway, they took the palace, killed what's his name, and so when we went into the ambassador's office, God, there were bullet holes everywhere. I talked to the Marine guards and they gave us a story. I said, "What did you guys do?"

He said, "I don't know what everyone else did, but what I did was crawl under a desk." [Laughter] But it was hilarious. Well, not hilarious. They had a curfew on. If you were out after eleven o'clock at night—we were staying at the Hilton Hotel, which was on the other corner across from the palace, and you could hear all this shooting at night. I don't know that anybody was getting shot, but the police were running everybody off the streets. It was wild down there at that time. But they continued to operate the station and never missed a day. They went to work the next day. The coup was over.

WRIGHT: Some years after that, you mentioned that you were sent to California to the Vandenberg area, because you were going to have a new job. When you got out there, you realized some people thought that they were going to do your job. Could you share some of the duties that you had been told that you were going to do and how that worked out for your new position?

EASTER: What we did, NASA Headquarters had divided up the jobs on the Shuttle as far as responsibility was concerned. Johnson had full responsibility for the overall thing, for the whole thing, bringing it together. The other centers were—I'm using a word they don't like—subservient to them, and had to report to Johnson for their effort. They called them levels—level one, level two and level three. Well, level three was Johnson, that's the top, and the work that Kennedy did was another level below them, and Huntsville the same way.

Now, the responsibility that I went to Vandenberg with for Bob Thompson and Chris was level three. The guys who were already ensconced there, the guy from KSC was a guy named Murphy. He must have had, hell, I don't know, fifty guys. He had a big organization there. They advised the Air Force on everything that they could on launch facilities, how to build a launch facility and how to integrate it into the system. Then you had Huntsville over here, they had a few people out there, not many, and they were more advisors in how to integrate the payloads in. That's the kind of thing they more interested in.

Anyway, but the overall thing was the responsibility of Johnson. So when I got out there, the Murphy guy, all the meetings on level-three business, he was there and answering for us. Well, now we're in a turf war because I'm out there by myself at the time, and also I'm spending time there and the other time down at Los Angeles at the Air Force. So he's got an advantage on me; he's up there all the time, I'm up there part of the time. I'm driving back and forth and wearing out U.S. 101.

So I hired a couple more guys from JSC and brought them out there so they'd have somebody there during that time. So anyway, Murphy didn't buy this. He wanted me out of there and he wanted me out of there bad.

So I went back to Houston and sat down with Chris and Bob, and we wrote a letter to KSC. Hell, I can't remember who was chief at the time. I can see him. I knew him real well. It doesn't matter. I told him how it had to be, and he didn't like that either. He wanted to have Murphy do all that for Chris and Bob. So it developed into a long-term war of attrition, and I guess I just finally wore him down.

I'd be there at the meetings and speak for JSC, and since he didn't work at JSC, he couldn't say anything. So it finally worked itself out and he backed off, but it was a bad situation. I hated to go to work every day. There were a lot of those turf wars at NASA.

WRIGHT: It sounds like you came in handy on trying to settle some of those.

EASTER: It wouldn't be me. Somebody would have done it anyway. I enjoyed that kind of work. When I look back on my career, that's all I ever did. I never really did anything as far as building an engineering group or working on this piece of equipment and designing something new, or running an organization that was operations or whatever. I never did that. All I ever did was deal with people. That's about it.

WRIGHT: I have one last duty and role question to ask you. You said Tec Roberts took your job when you left. Could you tell us what you were doing at that time that he moved over from the network job to come to Houston?

EASTER: You know, I'm still officially at Vandenberg, but knowing what I told you a while ago, I knew that that was going to be a dead dodo soon. I got out, but I was officially still at Vandenberg. Chris and Tec were very, very close, so he had no compunction about offering a seat in his suite there to Tec, and Goddard had no compunction about offering him the job, since he wanted it. It was funny, though. We did that kind of round-robin thing there over the years. Might be interesting to check when you get back to see if they have a Goddard rep. I doubt if they do.

WRIGHT: I'll have to look into that for you and get back with you.

EASTER: It'd be in the phone book.

WRIGHT: I guess looking back, the decision not to go to the gunnery division was a good one.

EASTER: It was made for me. I didn't get a chance to make it.

WRIGHT: But it resulted in good for you.

EASTER: Yes. I wouldn't be here, I don't think. No way. Those were bad days.

RUSNAK: I'd like to give you an opportunity to fill in anything else we may not have covered, or if there's any other stories you want to tell or people you might want to mention that you didn't think of at the time.

EASTER: If you could find him, if he's still alive, Ozro M. Covington, that would be a great guy to interview. He lives in Texas if he's alive, I think up around Nacogdoches, somewhere in that area, on a lake. Ozzie would be, oh, God, he'd be eighty-four or five. I don't know. I doubt if he's alive. Do you run across any of these people on your list that are dead? I can see some of them are dead here.

WRIGHT: The list that we provided for you are the ones that we've already talked to. Those are actual participants in the project.

EASTER: Oh, good. Good. Yes, it's like everything else, I read an article in the paper the other day that said something like 10,000 people a month from World War II are dying out. There won't be many of them left shortly. It's hard to believe. It seems like yesterday. But I didn't think I'd live to be seventy-four. If I'd known I was going to live that long, I'd have taken better care of myself.

RUSNAK: I'd like to thank you for participating today.

EASTER: My pleasure. I know this is not a very exciting one, and I don't think you're going to get many people that want to listen to it, but—

WRIGHT: Oh, we've learned lots of details that we haven't had before.

EASTER: Is that right?

RUSNAK: That is.

WRIGHT: That's what the project hopes to accomplish each time we talk to someone is to get one more piece that hasn't been recorded before, and I believe you've been able to fill in some of

those spots. When you get your transcript back, if you feel like you can add a little bit more, than please do so. We'd be glad to have as much as you'll offer.

EASTER: Sure, be glad to. Yes, sometimes I think of a gem.

WRIGHT: If it's one you can share, we'd like to have it. [Laughter]

EASTER: Okay. [Laughter] It has to be clean, huh?

WRIGHT: Well, it has to be something you want to share.

EASTER: Yes. You know, I guess the most interesting is I got to meet everybody, like [Robert L.] Crippen, he and I are very close. I was amazed when he became administrator. How in the hell was this guy that I go out drinking with, how could he be administrator? He don't know enough. He's a Texas boy. His mother ran a beer joint up in the county beyond Harris County, the next one up north.

WRIGHT: Waller or Montgomery?

EASTER: I'd say Montgomery. She had a beer joint that had no name, and she served beer and sandwiches. I went in up there one time with him. Unreal. But he was a character. I don't mean in a bad way. All these people were their own men.

I got to know Shepard real well. I played golf, and all the golfers stuck together. When I first went there, I started playing golf. They needed a foursome with Sjoberg and Kraft and Bob Thompson, and I was on a foursome with them for ten or twelve years.

Then Chris and I joined another club, Golf Crest, which is out at Pearland and we joined it. I joined it when it was still up there in South Houston. I can't remember what street it was on. They sold it and built a new one, opened in 1970. He and I joined up there, well, it was '65. So I knew all these guys by playing golf with them. They're more close knit. They go on outings together and stick together. Dick [Richard S.] Johnston. I don't know if you interviewed Dick or not.

RUSNAK: We did.

EASTER: Dick has suffered some ill health. I don't know how he is.

RUSNAK: I haven't heard recently.

EASTER: He's not doing well. Dick was part of our group out there and Sjoberg. Sjoberg finally quite playing, though. But anyway, Chris and I used to be partners in tournaments and we'd go all over the country down through there playing in golf tournaments. So anyway, you get close to people when you do all that.

WRIGHT: Was that a time for relaxation, or did you talk shop while you all were on the golf course?

EASTER: Oh, sometimes if we needed something, we'd talk. Plenty of time going there and back and on the course. He'd get invited, as a famous guy, he'd get invited to a lot of places, and invite me along to go with him, even though I didn't work for the center. He always said he needed somebody that he didn't control to bounce ideas off. I didn't work for him, so I didn't have to listen to what he said. I could argue with him about things, where if I worked for him, I couldn't do that.

In fact, the secretary that he had, the last one, he had a couple of other girls that really wanted that job bad, and he asked me to head up a group of three people to select him a new secretary. We selected this girl and he told everybody that I did it so that they didn't have any argument about it, because it was a very coveted job. This girl was great. Betty Sue Fedderson. There'd be one to interview. She was Chris' secretary for many years. She lives there in Nassau Bay.

WRIGHT: Was that quite an adjustment for you to move to Houston?

EASTER: Yes, it was. I was single now, so it was fairly easy from that standpoint. The only thing, I had a '56 Lincoln Continental coupe. It was the only thing I had in the world that was worth twenty cents. All the clothes I had I put in the trunk of that car and drove from D.C. to Houston, and it was that simple. No family, no wife. So when I pulled in there that hot summer night, that was it. I was there.

There was a bunch of apartments, they were brand new, just opened, called the Villa Paris. They were down south of the Gulf Freeway there near the airport. A whole bunch of us

moved in there. Chris Critzos and Betty Bednarczyk, Betty Mason then. A whole ton of us moved in there. Had a pool, they were new, and everything was furnished and super. So I lived there for a long time.

Then when we moved down to the site, I got a place in [Clear] Lake City there. Then I got a place—used to live in Kemah. Then when I got married, I moved back in those places at Lake City. They were great. Then into Nassau Bay. Rented those townhouses there on the lake, right across from the center.

WRIGHT: It seems like you have located yourself near the water once again, until you moved to the mountains.

EASTER: Yes. I might have made a mistake here. We didn't many hurricanes for a long time, then BAM! But I've never suffered any damage. A shingle here and there, but that's about it.

WRIGHT: We wish you the best wherever you move to.

EASTER: Thank you. We're going up near—we bought a condo up there, and it's about 1,200 feet.

[End of recording]