

ORAL HISTORY 2 TRANSCRIPT

SIGURD A. SJOBERG
INTERVIEWED BY CAROL BUTLER
SEABROOK, TEXAS – 24 AUGUST 1998

BUTLER: This is an interview with Sigurd Sjoberg on August 24, 1998, in Seabrook, Texas. The interview is being conducted as part of the Johnson Space Center Oral History Project. Carol Butler is the interviewer and is assisted by Summer Bergen.

Thank you again for agreeing for this interview with us. We really appreciate it. Your history will become a valuable part of the NASA collection.

I'd like to start back with, in the Mercury program, I believe you were working at Langley Space Center at the time.

SJOBERG: I was, when it started.

BUTLER: Were you then involved with developing mission rules for the flight center?

SJOBERG: No, I was not.

BUTLER: What were you doing at Langley at the time?

SJOBERG: There was a building control branch of the research division. That's where I worked. So I was working on—I can't remember specifically what the job was. It generally was in the field of building control of airplanes.

BUTLER: When did you move into working with the space program? Do you remember what the first mission was that you worked with?

SJOBERG: Well, I started working there [at Langley with NACA] before any missions. I think it was probably in October of 1942, about then. I thought it was '42, I don't know. I may have told you [in the] earlier [interview]. I don't remember that well...

BUTLER: ...Do you remember John Glenn's Mercury flight when—?

SJOBERG: Oh, yes, I remember that.

BUTLER: Were you involved at all with the decision process when he had the problems with his heat shield? Do you remember what some of the discussions were that surrounded that?

SJOBERG: I wasn't a flight controller. No, all that activity took place in the control center, and I think primarily Chris Kraft [Christopher C. Kraft, Jr.] was, primarily.

BERGEN: Tell us about Chris Kraft.

SJOBERG: What do you want to know about Chris Kraft? I've known him for fifty years.

BERGEN: Tell us a little bit about him.

SJOBERG: I think he's an outstanding individual. He's a real good leader, perhaps the best I've ever met in the engineering field. I feel very strongly, highly toward Chris, very confident. He had more to do with developing NASA operations for manned space flight than anybody else. Of course, he was head of the—when the Space Task Group was first formed, I don't remember the exact name, but it had to do with the operations, particularly at the beginning of Project Mercury, and he was really the leader of the whole space flight program of the United States up till now [Kraft retired from NASA in 1982], including the shuttle program now.

BERGEN: Did you work with him directly on anything?

SJOBERG: Well, for years I was his technical assistant, before I was deputy director of the division. So, yes, I worked almost very directly with anything he had to do.

Well, I think very highly of him. I can't say enough good things about him, I don't think.

BUTLER: Wonderful. Were there other individuals that you worked with at NASA that were of the same caliber, perhaps?

SJOBERG: Well, there were a lot of really good people, but I can't rate many people that highly.

BUTLER: Chris Kraft was the tops.

SJOBERG: Yeah...

BERGEN: ...What about Mr. [Robert R.] Gilruth...Robert Gilruth, the director of the Center.

SJOBERG: ...You say Gilruth, I recognize who said immediately. Not as directly as with Chris, because he was somewhat removed from me in a high position. But I have a lot of respect for him, too. He was the first man I went to work for at NASA when I went to work for NASA.

BERGEN: What were you doing there?

SJOBERG: Where?

BERGEN: What were you doing when you worked under Bob Gilruth?

SJOBERG: Well, that was my first job after I got out of school. I went to work in the flight research division, [unclear] branch, and I started to learn something about [unclear] airplanes at that time....

BUTLER: ...When the decision was made to send Apollo 8 around the moon, that was a pretty challenging decision. Do you remember any of the discussions that surrounded that choice? Was it well accepted at the Center?

SJOBERG: Oh, yes.

BUTLER: Were there any special changes that had to be made in the Mission Control Center or Flight Center to make that mission possible, that you remember?

SJOBERG: Well, when we started the lunar flights, of course, the network for Earth orbital flights, relatively near-Earth orbit flights, the network had to change considerably. They had to add stations that were capable of communicating with the spacecraft when it was at the moon. [Unclear] stations were added, I remember, added or complemented, I should say. One at Bermuda, one at Spain, one at Goldstone, California. There was one more. I'm trying to think of it. Australia. So they had to be brought into the network and made sure they're working. It took a lot of checkouts and that kind of thing. That was the main thing that had happened, other than to the spacecraft you had to add those stations and the lunar capability.

BUTLER: That was quite a change, quite a few things to add in there.

SJOBERG: Well, it had all been planned for quite a while, of course, because it took a lot of work to get to that position....

BUTLER: When you were working with Chris Kraft as his deputy directory of the Johnson Space Center, what do you feel was one of your most significant accomplishments in that role?

SJOBERG: I never asked myself that question.

BUTLER: Or even during your whole involvement with NASA, we could say. Or even, what do you think would be one of your most significant accomplishments during your whole career at NASA?

SJOBERG: I suppose if there was an accomplishment, it was just helping run the flight research division at NASA and being able to participate and plan for all those space missions. I think they were well run. I had something to do with that.

BUTLER: Were you involved at all with working on the docking module for the Apollo-Soyuz mission?

SJOBERG: No, I wasn't.

BUTLER: What did you think about that mission at the time and with working with the Soviet Union, who had been enemies so long? Was it easy to work with them?

SJOBERG: Yeah, relatively easy, although I didn't work directly with them. I mean, I didn't have a lot of day-to-day kind of contact working those people. But basically, things seemed to get along okay with them.

BUTLER: Would you ever have imagined that we'd been working with them again on a space station project?

SJOBERG: Sure, I did.

BUTLER: Yeah? Do you think that international cooperation in space is a good idea, then?

SJOBERG: Well, I don't have any special knowledge what's going on, but if they can meet their commitments, fine. But as you know, once in a while they seem to be short of money and unable to get some things done, so that makes one question that. I think the man who caused it to happen, who was [Daniel] Goldin, probably didn't have much choice. He was having trouble making the U.S. spend money, too.

BUTLER: Space flight is certainly an expensive thing to do.

SJOBERG: Yes, it is.

BERGEN: Do you have any special memories from your career working in the space program?

BUTLER: Any favorite stories?

SJOBERG: None that I can tell. [Laughter]

BUTLER: Did you ever imagine that when you first started working with NASA that you would see people walking on the moon?

SJOBERG: No, ma'am. It didn't occur to me we'd be doing that. When I started with NASA in 1942, that wasn't even talked about. That happened later.

BUTLER: Were you in the control room when Apollo 11 landed on the moon and they walked on the moon the first time?

SJOBERG: Yes, I was, right down the street here.

BUTLER: What was the feeling like for everyone at the time?

SJOBERG: Great exuberance and feeling good, personally feeling good, too, because they had all had a part in making that happen, and it was quite an accomplishment.

BUTLER: Was there ever any question that maybe the Russians would beat us to the moon?

SJOBERG: Yes, there was at one time, and then they seemed to be having a lot of trouble with the launch vehicles blowing up and so on that kind of solved that problem.

BUTLER: Were you watching in the control room when the last Apollo mission landed on the moon for the last time?

SJOBERG: Yes, I was in there.

BUTLER: What was the feeling like at that time as compared to with Apollo 11?

SJOBERG: Well, we hadn't done it so often that it was routine or anything like that. It was still this relief all had gone well and so on.

BUTLER: Did you think we would reach the end of this century and not have gone back yet?

SJOBERG: I didn't think it would be necessarily to the moon, but I thought we probably would go somewhere else, but it hasn't happened yet.

BUTLER: Somewhere else such as on to Mars?

SJOBERG: Possibly that or some other likely place like that.

BUTLER: Do you think that will be a big part of the future of the space program?

SJOBERG: Yes, I think it will. I can't estimate when, but it will happen.

BUTLER: You left NASA in 1979, shortly before the space shuttle launched, and then you went to work for OAO Corporation.

SJOBERG: Yes.

BUTLER: What were your primary job responsibilities with them?

SJOBERG: My primary job responsibility was to try to get them some work with Johnson Space Center, which didn't happen.

BUTLER: They worked with telescopes?

SJOBERG: What did OAO do?

BUTLER: Did they work with telescopes that were like the precursor to the Hubble Space Telescope?

SJOBERG: Not to my knowledge. They were doing everything. It was a very small company, but they had some NASA contracts. For one thing, they worked on the Orbiting Astronomical Observatory—you've probably heard of that—which was the spacecraft which

was developed for astronomical—it was a telescope. It was a general contract for operations of that. And some other things they were working on. They [unclear]. As far as I know, they're still in business.

BUTLER: I think so.

SJOBERG: Up at Goddard Space Flight Center.

BUTLER: Since you left NASA, some things have changed. For example, the space shuttle is now being run under contract with United Space Alliance, or USA. Do you think that's a good move? Do you think other things are going to be contracted out like that?

SJOBERG: I don't know if it's a good move or not, but it was a necessary move in terms of getting more done for the buck. That was the hope, anyway. That was the only reason for doing that in the first place. I don't know if that's working out or not.

BUTLER: So far it seems to be okay.

SJOBERG: Pardon?

BUTLER: So far they haven't had any accidents.

SJOBERG: No, no, they're a good company. Boeing's a very capable company, and I expect a lot of people who worked for North American, for example, are now working for Boeing, etc., so I'm not sure it's changed that much.

BUTLER: What do you think in the future NASA should probably focus most on? Should it be the space station or a flight to Mars or back to the moon, or something else altogether?

SJOBERG: Well, I think that in the near future they're going to have to spend their money on the space station, so much they've got into it already. Some further exploration to planets and so on will have to come later. I don't know when. They obviously have to work on the space station first, get something out of that.

BUTLER: The space station's been planned for a long time, and we had our first space station with Skylab back in the seventies. Did you work with that particular program?

SJOBERG: Yes.

BUTLER: Do you remember what your involvement was with the Skylab?

SJOBERG: Flight operations. It was the same with all of them—Mercury, Gemini, Apollo, Skylab.

BUTLER: When you worked in flight operations, were you responsible then for hiring the flight controllers and training them?

SJOBERG: I was not responsible for hiring them. I think individual responsibility was, of course, the personnel office. No, I was not directly responsible for that. What was the second part of your question?

BUTLER: Were you involved with training the flight controllers?

SJOBERG: Not directly, again. I'm sure indirectly....

BUTLER: ...Summer, do you have any other questions?

[Addressing Mr. Sjoberg] Is there anything in particular that you can think of that you'd like to share with us, a story or just a general thought on the space program?

SJOBERG: I don't think there's anything else I want to say.

BUTLER: No? Okay. Well, we appreciate this very much.

SJOBERG: I'm afraid I didn't tell you very much.

BUTLER: Oh, you gave us a little overview of some of your thoughts on the program, so we appreciate that. It's been very interesting.

SJOBERG: You're very welcome, of course.

BUTLER: Thank you....

[End of Interview]