



Homage to Guenter Wendt

Interview 2004, by J Paul Douglas [1]

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Guenter Wendt, the original Pad Leader for NASA's manned space program, coaxes a smile out of astronaut John Glenn after the MA-6 mission was scrubbed. [NASA Image Gallery \(image link\)](#)

Guenter Wendt's legendary role as Pad-Leader started when Wendt supervised spacecraft launch pad preparations at Cape Canaveral as a McDonnell engineer during the Mercury and Gemini manned space programs beginning with the flight of Ham the chimpanzee in 1961.

In January 1967, Wendt, still with McDonnell (soon to become McDonnell Douglas), was supervising the test range in Titusville, Florida. As NASA changed contractors for the Apollo program to North American Aviation (soon to become North American Rockwell), he was not involved with the Apollo 1 spacecraft, in which a cabin fire caused the deaths of Gus Grissom, Ed White, and Roger Chaffee. After the accident, several people expressed to him the wish that he had been there, as if he might have caught the fatal problem in time to prevent the tragedy. But Wendt himself did not presume to believe this.

Grissom's backup and replacement on the Apollo 7 flight, Mercury and Gemini veteran Wally Schirra, insisted on having Wendt back in charge of the pad crew for his flight, and convinced chief astronaut Deke Slayton to get North American to hire him. Schirra personally convinced North American's vice-president and general manager for launch operations, Bastian "Buz" Hello, to change Wendt's shift from midnight to daytime so he could be pad leader for Apollo 7.

Crew members of the other Apollo missions shared an equally high regard for Wendt, and he stayed on with the Pad Leader title through the Skylab and ASTP missions.

He continued to work at KSC into the early Space Shuttle flights until retiring in 1989. [2]

Born as true "Berliner" in 1923 he studied mechanical engineering and served serving as a flight engineer aboard Luftwaffe night fighters. He also completed a one-year apprenticeship during the war learning aircraft design and construction.

After the war, there were few job opportunities for engineers in Germany so Wendt decided to try his luck in America. In 1949 he joined his divorced father in St. Louis, Missouri. Defense contractor McDonnell Aircraft was interested in employing Wendt as an engineer, but could not hire a German citizen since the company was working on U.S. Navy contracts. Wendt found a job as a truck mechanic (though he had never worked on trucks) and within one year became shop supervisor, after a stint with Ozark airlines as ground instructor and obtained his U.S. citizenship in 1955 and shortly thereafter was hired by McDonnell. [2]

You may recall a certain scene in the movie Apollo 13 in which Jim Lovell (played by Tom Hanks) notes the disappearance of one of the launch pad workers who'd only moments before been visible through the capsule window. He quips, "I vonder vere Guenter vent" in a distinctive German accent, making a clever play on words with the man's name. He was talking about Guenter Wendt.

The following interview was conducted by J. Paul Douglas during Guenter's eighty-eighth birthday in 2004. Sadly Guenter Wendt passed away on 28th August 2010 and it's worth taking the time to remember him and what he gave to his adopted country.

First, he came to the US with so much to offer. Rather than arriving with his hand out and demanding free government assistance, he offered us his tremendous experience in flight and engineering, which he put to good use beginning with McDonnell Aircraft Corporation.

Beyond that, he offered passion and dedication to every job he took, glamorous or otherwise.

I [J.P. Douglas] was privileged to talk with him in 2004 about the fascinating times in his life in aerospace and was rewarded with a candid dialog I hadn't expected. Upon arriving in the US, his search for a job was relentless. After 140 applications he came to a concrete mixing company in need of a truck mechanic. The foreman pointed out, *"but you don't have any references"*. Not one to be dissuaded by challenges, he countered, *"I'll make you a deal – It was a Wednesday – I'll get my tools and work for you until Friday. If I cut the mustard, you pay me and hire me. If not, just tell me goodbye, and you don't owe me a thing."* The guy said, *"That's not a bad deal. Ok. Come on, and bring your tools."* He got the job, and that was that. If only more folks these days had the same attitude towards finding employment. Here was a man who had been a successful flight test engineer on (at that time) new high performance aircraft who was negotiating for the position of truck mechanic. Rather than regarding it as beneath him, he applied his typical dedication to remain gainfully employed until he could find something closer to his passion. That's what we call character. And it paid off. He did find his way back to a career in flight. First with McDonnell where he applied his knowledge and experience in designing missile systems to defend the US. It was here in 1958 where he was first bitten by the manned space flight bug.

At that point, NASA was still known as NACA, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, and Project Mercury – the first manned space program – was yet to be born. Manned space flight at that time rested exclusively with the Air Force's Dyna-Soar program, and the range that would become Kennedy Space Center was still undeveloped and snake-infested beaches and swamp.

That was not the situation for long. Months later NASA was born and the US entered into a race to space with Project Mercury, the first in a three-tier effort to reach the moon that would be followed by Gemini then Apollo. Guenter was right there in the thick of it. He and four others were the vanguard from McDonnell to go to Cocoa Beach. From Mercury through Gemini, he was helping to pave the way for humans on the grandest adventure of all time. By the time of Apollo, McDonnell had lost the contract to North American. Deke Slayton, who was chosen as one of the original Mercury 7 astronauts and later went on to become NASA's Chief Astronaut, went to Guenter and asked him to change over to North American.

The company was initially unwilling to allow him what he needed to do the job. He said, *"I talked to them and told them the way I operate. The authority I need. Complete personnel control." They couldn't agree to let me have that." They said a new hire can't have that authority. I said, "Fine. I can't help you."*

And so he stayed with McDonnell. But then came the Apollo 1 fire in which Gus Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chaffee lost their lives while conducting a ground test inside the capsule. An ignition source and flammable materials combined in a cabin pressurized with highly flammable pure oxygen to start the fire. The situation was further exacerbated by a poorly designed hatch and woefully inadequate emergency preparedness that failed even to recognize the operation as hazardous.

"Shortly thereafter," Guenter went on to say, *"I got a call from Slayton. He said, 'We'd like you to run our pad operations.' I said I can't do that unless I have the authority I need. He said, 'I have a guy here who says you can have whatever you need. "Ok. Put him on the phone.' The guy introduced himself*

as Mr. Bergen – I didn't know who the hell "Bergen" was – He said that Slayton had explained how I do business – on more of a dictatorial basis – and they were pleased to provide whatever I needed. So I said OK. Here is the way I operate. Here is what I need. Here is the way I will do things. If you agree to that, I'll come over and work for you. They explained again that they had been instructed to hire me." I said, 'By the way. Who the hell is that guy, Bergen?' They said, 'You see that organizational chart over there? The guy at the top of the pyramid is Bergen, President of North American Aviation.' We'll never know how things would have gone had Guenter been in charge of pad operations that fateful day, but I'd bet my reputation as an aerospace engineer that the operation would have been seen as hazardous and plans made to emergency egress those astronauts. One of the things that set him apart was to "pre-act" in what he called the "what if" game. It bothered him that people too often simply reacted to problems rather than anticipate and plan for them. He was not willing to leave things to chance. Here again, his character shines through, and we would all do well to head the lessons of his life.

No one ever answered Lovell's question, but I think I know where Guenter went. He's slipped the surly bonds of Earth to join Gus Grissom, Christa McAuliffe and all the other heroes who dedicated themselves to space flight. And how lucky we are that he found his way to our shores, fortunate to have had his guidance and how blessed by his friendship.

Guenter. We'll not forget you.

Guenter was for all the astronauts taking off from "his" launch pad a good luck charm and the last face they saw through the cabin window after it has been closed and sealed and Guenter giving them "thumbs-up" for their ride and waving goodbye.

He used to say:

"The next one looking into your window better be a frogman or you are in trouble!" [2]

Successful launch of a space shuttle (STS-98) at sunset with an impressive shadow
(courtesy of Jesco von Puttkammer, NASA-HQ, 2001)



References

- [1] J. Paul Douglas, Aerospace Engineer and Founding Editor of the "Journal of Space Operations & Communicator" <http://opsjournal.org>
- [2] Wikipedia Guenter Wendt, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%BCnter_Wendt
- [3] NASA History https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twOswud9m_E