

Watching Don Pettit

Don Pettit worked at Los Alamos for a number of years, but had as his goal becoming an astronaut. When we were doing experiments that required some missile launches Don helped us in a number of ways.

I can't quite remember just when our friendship began, but I was impressed by Don for a number of reasons. I liked the way he thought, was fascinated by his approaches to problems, and by his sense of humor. I was not particularly impressed by his ambition.

When Addie Leah and I traveled, it was not uncommon for Don to want to join us. Each time I would agree, and tell him that if he were at a certain place at a certain time, we would "take it from there". Once when we were to launch a missile from Kauai it was necessary to postpone it for several weeks. I decided to spend the time waiting for the launch window to open by going to Kwajalein, Ponape (Pohnpei) and Truk (Chuuk). Kwajalein normally did not allow visitors except under certain conditions, and while we qualified to spend time there, Don was not. He had to arrive on the plane we were taking to leave. But when we got on the plane, there he was, and it was off to Truk.

I had written to a friend on Truk telling him I would like to rent a car there. When we arrived, I discovered there were no cars for rent, for at that time there was only one car available. But to my pleasure, that one car was sitting at the entrance, waiting for us.

We arrived at THE hotel, and checked into rooms discovering that unlike our experience on previous visits the room was not at all desirable. Shortly thereafter we learned that a group of divers were to have arrived on the plane with us, and they were to be on the ship THORFIN where they would dive to the many sunken ships that are in the Truk Lagoon. Don brought this news to us, and so we moved to the ship for our visit, having it to ourselves. Don dived regularly, we did not, but each of us enjoyed the time.

Don remained on the boat after we left for Hawaii, and some days later I had a three minute phone call (no money for more time) saying he was stranded in

Truk, and needed help. But the terminated call left me with no call-back number. I decided to give Don the time he needed to get back to Hawaii, and then send somebody to Truk to trace him down. (There were a number of volunteers.) But he made it back by the required date. There were wonderful stories as to the events after our departure. It might be best to ask him about it.

On another occasion we were planning a trip to Egypt, and as usual, Don wished to go. When we arrived in Cairo, there he was. But now he had with him a young lady, Micki. (She and Don are now the parents of twin boys.) Various members of the family also arrived there for that trip. It was to be a truly great occasion.

We spent six days floating down the Nile in feluccas and what a learning experience that was! Don had a book of sketches made a century previous, and he intended to take pictures from the spot where the artist made his sketch to documents what 100 years of aging might produce. There were not that many changes!

Among our pictures is one giving us a glimpse of Don in a Muslim environment. The reader saw his picture in the previous essay.

Don has now had two trips to space, has spent some wintertime on the Antarctica polar cap, and has traveled to many parts of the world. But I don't think NASA has many pictures of him in a burnoose or Arabic headdress.

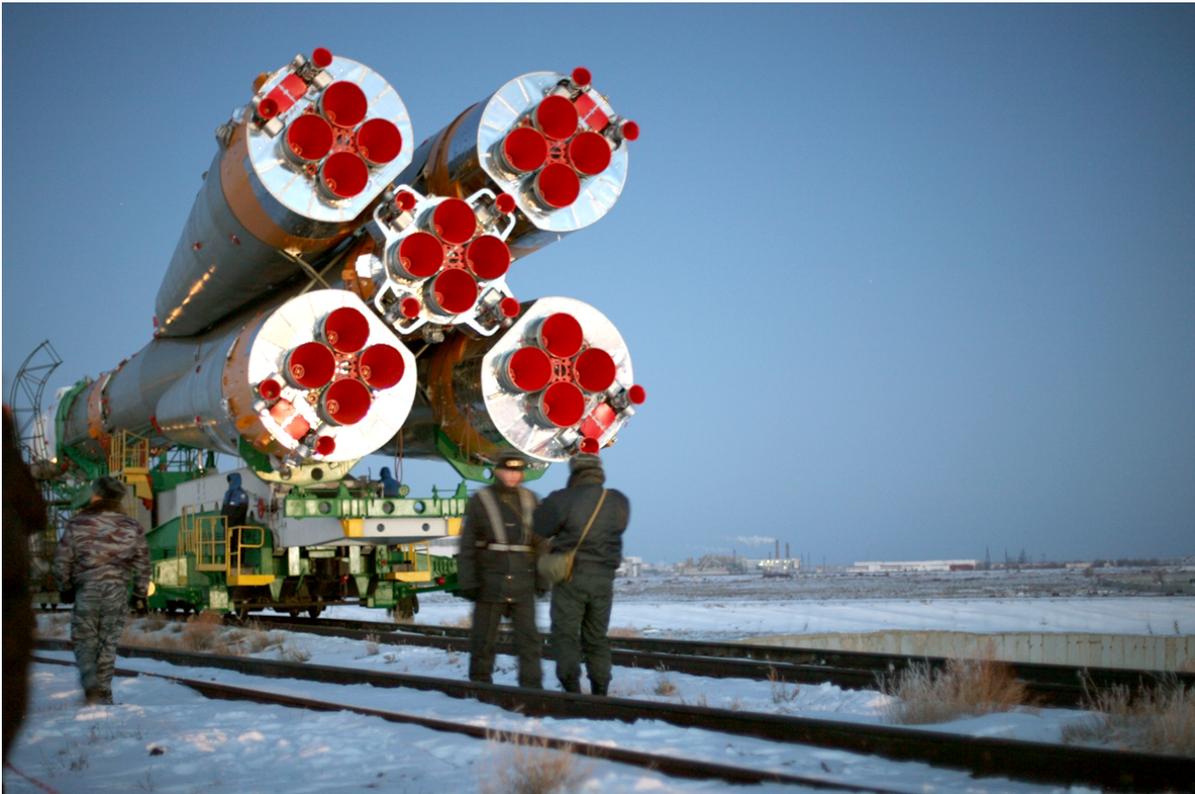


His two launches were worth our visit. NASA repeatedly tells those present for the launch that it is the most exciting event in the world. For my first launch, I waited for the rapid heartbeat; it never came. The second one brought on the same effect. I believe the cause was my faith that the launch would not be made unless everything was OK, and that I trusted them to make the right decisions. However, the real difference was my deep knowledge that for pure excitement a nuclear explosion dwarfed all other events. A missile launch, even with people in it, just does not compete.

It became possible to check the conclusions I made in the preceding paragraph in December, 2011. I was once again invited to see Don launched toward the International Space Station, but this time he was to be launched by the Russians in Kazakhstan. Now I am not so sure that all will be well with the launch, for the Russians have a history with successes and failures mixed up pretty well. Each launch could be a heart pounder.

With my son Chipper accompanying me, we arrived in Baikonur, Kazakhstan on December 18. We were two of twelve guests of Don, the only Americans present other than officials of NASA .

The Soyuz TMA-03M was moved to its launch pad on the morning of December 20, 2011, and was an action we were allowed to accompany.



The Soyuz on its way to its launch pad in Baikonur, Kazakhstan
(photo by Chris Underwood, one of Don's guests)

Despite a temperature of about twenty degrees below zero, Fahrenheit, observing this event was a very warming experience.

A close up look at the capsule in which the travelers reside on their way to the International Space Station is truly an educational experience.



The Capsule of the Soyuz about to be erected at the launch site

We were able to watch the missile erection at the launch site, and found the process quite different from similar activities at Cape Canaveral in Florida.



The erection of the Soyuz on December 20, 2011

On the morning of the 21st we saw astronauts Don Pettit and Andre Kuipers (he is Dutch), and Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko walk to their bus taking them to the launch site. We were able to be quite close to them, and found it enormously impressive to see them unable to stand upright, having already been strapped in ways that appeared to be quite uncomfortable.



Three space travelers (Don the nearest) on their way to the launcher

Because I was (probably) the oldest person at the launch, at launch time I was assigned a Russian nurse. Her English was so good I could not pretend that I could not understand her, so I was very dutiful. To my great surprise I was the only launch observer to be assigned a chair, but more than that the nurse bound me tightly in a beautiful woolen blanket. That below-zero cold and my inability to use my hands meant that my glasses frosted over. Thus I was barely able to see the event.



Russian Nurse and Robert Brownlee