

## Notes from the President

### *Reflecting on the Space Shuttle's Final Flight - #5*

07/08/2011

It's 7:00 pm on Friday, Launch Day.

I am headed home from what was a spectacular event and one very special to me and thousands of others. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to attend the last launch of the Shuttle program and it causes me to think back.

It was in 1981 when I worked for NASA at the Johnson Space Center and people were talking about the possibility of building a Space Station and using the shuttle to make over 100 missions into space to do so. Many said it could not be done, but there were those at NASA that knew otherwise. In spite of the setbacks and those who perished, it is now nearly complete. The launch of the 135th mission of the Space Shuttle fleet brings to close an era of space travel that many thought impossible.

As we celebrate the end of the Shuttle era, it is appropriate that we both look back at the accomplishments and also look ahead at the possibilities for the future. This spring marked the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's special address before Congress on the importance of the space program – “Why do we go to the Moon? Not because it is easy, but because it is hard.”

While the U.S. felt good about itself and had taken pride in being the most technologically advanced nation, it was the Soviet Union that first sent a satellite into Earth's orbit, (I remember laying in my neighbor's back yard on the hammock looking for Sputnik as it passed overhead). Four years later they sent the first human into space.

In response, on May 25, 1961, President Kennedy challenged our country to, “within the decade, land a man on the moon and return him safely to earth.” What ensued was a collaborative effort between scientists and engineers engaging government, industry and education to bring that dream to reality. And on July 21, 1969, many of us remember sitting or standing in front of our television sets with 500 million people worldwide and watching Neil Armstrong take that first step on the moon's surface, pronouncing “That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

That accomplishment became symbolic of the power of American ingenuity. The saying became “If we can land a man on the moon . . . fill in the blank.” I believe that this “can do attitude” is as true today as it was 50 years ago. In 1961 I don't think the “average” citizen could even imagine a ship that would shuttle people back and forth to various locations in space or an international space station - that was all science fiction (remember we were all watching black and white TV's). But the NASA organization does not have “average” people -- and, as a matter of fact, great institutions like Georgia Tech do not have “average” people. They have people of vision, who know how to collaborate and combine engineering and innovation, with that vision to make things that once were considered science fiction a reality. Then, they work to pass that vision on to the next generation.

The past few days have helped me to better understand the role Georgia Tech has played in the space program and to realize the pride that so many of us here at Georgia Tech have in our accomplishments and the role and impact that our faculty, staff, students and alumni have had on the Space Shuttle program. From the first launch of Challenger in 1981 that was commanded by

Tech Alum John Young, AE 52, to this last mission of Atlantis with Sandra Magnus, MSE 96, as a member of the Shuttle crew, Georgia Tech has been there!

As important as all this is, it is also important to remember that it doesn't end here. There are many frontiers ahead of us, some that seem as insurmountable as building a Space Station and a fleet of spacecraft that could travel into low earth orbit more than 100 times.

The task before all of us here at Georgia Tech now is to continue to educate and inspire the next generation of leaders, engineers and scientists to ensure that our nation's space program continues to lead the way in space exploration and that we prepare our graduates to "go where no man has gone before" both in space and here on Earth.

This is America. Through innovation and by working together, we can do anything. This is after all – Georgia Tech!!

Signing off!

*G. P. "Bud" Peterson*  
President, Georgia Tech