

A charm that has been in space

Carolyn Gooch called to say that she wanted me to stop by her house that she had something to donate to the Y-12 History Center. I knew what it was. She had shown me a charm bracelet the last time I was there and told me the story of its travels. She insisted that I needed to set aside some time to listen to the story again when I came to pick up the bracelet.

Carolyn is one to seek accuracy in the details of all she does, even to the telling of a story about her career. It is fun to listen to her, so I agreed to set a time when I could hear the story of the precious piece of history she had kept all these years. The bracelet has a wonderful story and I want to tell it to you just as close to the way she told it to me as I can.

Pete Conrad, one of the astronauts in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Gemini Program, took this charm on the Gemini II mission. Wow, it has been into space. So how did that happen?

Well, it seems that Conrad was a smoker, one of those who never has a cigarette, but bums a smoke. Carolyn smokes and at the Manned Space Center where she was working, she often took a smoke break outside. Many times Pete Conrad would see her there and ask Carolyn for a cigarette. They got to be smoking buddies.

At the time, the Blood in Gemini project was being worked and planned for the Gemini XI mission. An earlier version had been created for the Gemini III mission. Now the longer mission required additional design considerations for the experiment package. Walker Smith tells in his account of the BIG project that a refrigerated housing was created to ensure the blood remained viable for the full three-day mission.

Carolyn was working with the blood sample project, and during her interactions she was wearing a special BIG project bracelet that held a charm fabricated by expert Y-12 welder Everett Rogers. The charm is a small square box approximately 1/2 inch by 1/2 inch by 3/16th inch thick with a small 1/16th inch stem and "T-handle" with a ring that attaches it to the bracelet.

The charm was made as a scaled down version of the BIG project that Y-12 and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory was doing for NASA and was based on the external shape of the container made to hold blood samples for a trip into space to determine the effects of space flight, if any, on blood. Carolyn was among the Y-12 and ORNL crew members there.

Carolyn said that Pete Conrad noticed the bracelet and knowing that it signified the project she was working on for NASA, he asked her if she wanted him to take it along on the Gemini XI space flight. She said she sure would be pleased if he did that, not really expecting that he could or would do such a thing.

Pete insisted he would, and the arrangements were made for her to give it to him at the final "blood drawing" in preparation for the flight. Passing of the charm went smoothly, and away he went with it.

Carolyn thought there was no way that her bracelet would actually be taken on the flight, so she dismissed the thought and continued her duties. Was she ever surprised later when Pete returned.

Both Pete and Dick Gordon were together when they happened to see Carolyn sometime after the flight and Pete said, "Come on with us and let's get you your bracelet back." Carolyn went with them and was surprised when they took her into the astronaut living quarters. Of course, she did not normally have access to that area, but because she was with the two astronauts, she got in.

Pete went to his desk and took out a "Personal Preference Kit" which was a small zippered bag that was designed to hold small personal items that each astronaut wanted to take on the flight. Her bracelet was not there. Dick Gordon said, "Wait, Pete, I have another kit that has not been opened in my desk."

So, the second kit was opened and sure enough out came the bracelet with two sets of wings, one the Navy Wings and the other Astronaut Wings that were Pete Conrad's personal items. That was the first time that Carolyn really thought her bracelet might just have gone into space. She told Pete she never really expected he would actually take the bracelet with him.

Pete laughed and told her that many people ask the astronauts to take personal things with them on the flights and that they just open their desk drawer, put the items there and lock the drawer. Then when they return from a space flight, they go to the desk, unlock the drawer, remove the items and return them to the people who asked them to do the favor.

However, Carolyn's bracelet was an exception, she is sure, because it was in the "Personal Preference Kit" along with the two special and personal sets of wings that belonged to Pete Conrad. I am proud to display Carolyn's special charm bracelet at the Y-12 History Center. Stop by and see it for yourself.