

**Remarks by the Honorable Sean O’Keefe
NASA Administrator
Ed White Hospital Rededication Ceremony
St. Petersburg, Florida
September 18, 2004**

Thank you Roland (Roland Metivier, President & CEO Ed White Hospital) for your very gracious introduction and good morning ladies and gentlemen.

I am delighted to represent the men and women of NASA in honoring one of our nation's greatest space exploration heroes, Lt. Colonel Ed White. Your new emergency room and lobby celebrating Ed's remarkable life represents a wonderful tribute to his enduring legacy.

I appreciate seeing here tonight my good friend Chairman Bill Young, a great champion in Congress for our Nation's space program, as well as Mayor Rick Baker. Thank you both for participating in this special event.

It is also a privilege to be in the presence of Ed's West Point classmates, including his fellow Gemini and Apollo program astronaut, Mike Collins.

Two months ago at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, Mike and his Apollo 11 crewmates Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin helped us commemorate the 35th anniversary of the first moon landing and recognize the work of a great team of people, many from this part of the country, who made our first great space adventure possible.

That night I mentioned how much we owe to NASA's first generation of space explorers--the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo astronauts.

Throughout one of our nation's most consequential and turbulent decades, the astronauts' daring, courage, and eagerness to explore the unknown never failed to lift our spirits.

Among their exploits, Ed White's dramatic spacewalk on the Gemini 4 mission some 39 years

ago, America's first walk in space, certainly ranks as one of the most defining moments in the annals of exploration.

Indeed, that photo of Ed boldly maneuvering himself in the void of space, with the sun's glare reflected in his visor and the milky blue vastness of the Pacific ocean beneath him, is one of the most iconic photographs of the 20th century.

And because of pioneers like Ed White and Mike Collins, the Moon, planets and stars are humanity's new field of dreams.

Now a long time ago, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow observed, "Lives of great men remind us that we can make our lives sublime, and departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time."

Tonight we celebrate and honor a man who throughout a lifetime of exemplary service to his country, created some rather enormous footprints in time.

Ed White's legacy of service is living on today in the form of this hospital, which provides such great care and compassion to the good people of St. Petersburg. And the dedicated people who helped spearhead the hospital's improvements should be very proud indeed.

Please allow me to now say a few words why it is so important to recognize here at this hospital and in other ways I will mention later, the life lived in full by Lt. Colonel Ed White.

For many reasons this American hero's story is the story of the American Century, and of the influence that aviation and spaceflight progress had in advancing our Nation's rise to global prominence.

He was born 74 years ago in San Antonio, the son of an Air Force Major General, who later became a leading fixture in this community. His father began his military career after attending West Point by flying U.S. Army balloons.

At the age of twelve, when most other boys were flying model airplanes, Ed went up in an old T-6 trainer with his dad, and calmly took over the controls of the plane. He took to flight like a marlin takes to your state's offshore waters.

I know Ed's West Point classmates will eagerly speak to his tremendous leadership abilities. I also hope they will brag with justification about Ed's athletic prowess. Indeed, he held the West Point record in the 400- meter hurdles and barely missed getting a spot on America's 1952 Olympic track team by one-tenth of a second.

Although he didn't make that team, our country had other uniforms in mind for Ed White. Uniforms that put him in the history books.

Each step of the way as his military and NASA career progressed, you can tell from looking at his bright smile in official photographs that Ed White

took tremendous joy in serving his country to the best of his abilities.

Upon graduating from West Point, he joined the Air Force and spent three and a half years in Germany flying F-86's and F-100's, helping to keep the Cold War from turning hot.

Ed then attended the prestigious Air Force Test Pilot School at Edwards Air Force Base, and later became an experimental test pilot at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

Forty-two years ago, Ed was selected to become a member of NASA's second class of astronauts, the "Gemini Nine." Ed was held in such high regard that he became the first member of his class to fly in space, along with Jim McDivitt, on the Gemini 4 mission in 1965.

You can tell a lot about a person's character by the testimony of their peers. In Ed White's case, within the astronaut corps he was celebrated for his

friendliness, zest for life and ability to take on the toughest tasks an astronaut could handle.

In his memoirs, Jim Lovell, of Apollo 8 and 13 fame, a proud Naval Academy graduate, recalls how when he joined the astronaut corps he asked Ed White if by chance he knew the gregarious West Point Cadet who 15 years earlier had cheerfully exchanged cufflinks with him prior to the Army-Navy game. Well Ed White's jaw dropped and he replied, "Yes, I know who that cadet was. It was me!" A better Army-Navy game story I have yet to hear.

Astronaut Frank Borman, who joined Jim Lovell on the first mission to orbit the Moon, Apollo 8, said this about his compatriot: "I don't know of any astronaut who was more genuinely liked and admired than Ed White."

Borman also observed that well before the time when fitness became a national obsession, Ed White's

"devotion to physical conditioning--with daily jogs of three miles followed by two or three hours of handball and squash--drove those with more sedentary habits absolutely bonkers."

Neil Armstrong once commented, after watching Ed go through one of his conditioning regimes, that each person was allotted a finite number of heartbeats in their lifetime, and there was no need to speed up the process." Of course we all know that Neil was more adept at small steps.

Whatever the case, Ed's conditioning sure came in handy on his historic spacewalk, as he pried open the balky Gemini spacecraft hatch, wearing a primitive space suite with thick gloves. "It was like trying to open a can with handcuffs on your wrists," says Frank Borman. "I've often wondered if any of the rest of us could have pulled off what the exceptionally strong White did."

For that spacewalk Ed, a devout Methodist, carried with him three special mementoes that tell us a good deal about his priorities: a St. Christopher's medal, a gold cross, and a Star of David.

As Ed put it, "I had great faith in myself and especially in Jim, and also I think I had a great faith in my God. So the reason I took those three symbols was that I think this was the most important thing I had going for me, and I felt that while I couldn't take one for every religion in the country, I could take the three I was most familiar with."

Following Gemini 4, and his receipt of NASA's Exceptional Service medal, Ed was assigned backup crew duties with his classmate and friend Mike Collins for Gemini 7, and then was selected as Senior Pilot for the first scheduled Apollo flight, whose other crew members were Gus Grissom and Roger Chaffee.

Sadly, and to NASA's everlasting regret, we lost Ed and his crewmates on January 27, 1967, to the fire the occurred in the Apollo One Command Module cockpit.

As Administrator I've designated that we set aside the last Thursday every January as a Day of Remembrance within our NASA family to honor the memory of the Apollo One, Challenger, and Columbia crews, all of whom were lost around that time separated by years of exploration ventures.

Our purpose in doing so is to remind ourselves that an uncompromising commitment to safety is the price of admission for us to mount our space exploration activities.

While we will never eliminate the risk, we must do everything possible to minimize the risks they will face. You can count on that.

And when our Shuttle crews start flying again, perhaps as early as next spring, they will be

following in the footsteps of a great man whose life was defined by great purposes, including the values this hospital ascribes to: Quality, Excellence, and Commitment. I'm certain he would be proud of your efforts to carry his legacy forward.

I would like to mention one other tribute to Ed White. Some seven miles northwest of our Mars Exploration Rover Spirit stands a hill that earlier this year NASA named for this pioneering explorer. Other nearby hills recognize the service of Gus Grissom and Roger Chaffee as well.

As we continue to pursue the long-term exploration objectives President Bush announced earlier this year, I'm confident the day will soon come when an astronaut explorer will stride up Ed White Hill, scan the red-hued horizon, and plant an American flag in honor of a true Air Force, NASA and American hero.

Because you see, the President was right when he said, "Exploration is not an option we choose, it is a desire written in the human heart." And so it was with Ed White.

On the Gemini 4 mission Ed and Jim McDivitt were the first American astronauts to wear the American flag on their spacesuits in flight... Yes, his country did have other uniforms in mind for Edward Higgins White. And he always wore those uniforms with a special grace.

Thank you for all that you are doing to carry forward the memory and legacy of Ed White and for the opportunity to take part in this wonderful tribute.