

NASA JOHNSON SPACE CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT 9

SHANNON W. LUCID
INTERVIEWED BY JENNIFER ROSS-NAZZAL
HOUSTON, TEXAS – AUGUST 19, 2021

ROSS-NAZZAL: Today is August 19th, 2021. This interview with Shannon Lucid is being conducted in Houston, Texas, for the JSC Oral History Project. The interviewer is Jennifer Ross-Nazzal. It's always nice to come and visit and chat. A few weeks ago, Wally [Mary W.] Funk made her first flight into space, finally, and you shared with me that you had a conversation with her. I was wondering if you wanted to talk a little bit about that today.

LUCID: Oh yes. I was so excited when I read that she was going to go up on Blue Origin. I thought that was a super thing for Jeff Bezos to have done. There's lots of comments, but I just think that was just a super, super thing.

I knew Wally Funk from way back. I had not met her before I came to NASA, but I knew of her before I came, because I was very well aware of Jerrie [Geraldyn M.] Cobb and all the women that had been in the Mercury 13. I had read all the *Life* articles; there were big spreads in *Life* magazine. I was also very aware of it because Jerrie Cobb was from Oklahoma so it was played up in the news of Oklahoma.

I was very, very disheartened, disappointed, whatever is the right word, that nothing ever came of it for them, and I just felt it was just another illustration that females have no place in this world no matter how hard you work.

Then after I came to NASA in the group—this is just a little sidebar—it really shocked me one day when we were going somewhere, the '78 class, to visit one of the sites. One of the

six females talked about a twin from California who contacted her and congratulated her because she got in. She said, “Who were these people?” referring back to the Mercury 13, except she didn’t even know that name.

I was just shocked, number one, because of the disdain that I heard and the way the woman was being treated, and the fact that they were so young that they had never heard of the history. It was just another illustration of the generational gulf that was between me and them.

Wally Funk was always very interesting, and she called me up several times to talk. She had wanted to find some way that she could fly in space. She called up several times after I had been to Russia, and then she called me up when I came back, because the commercial outfit, not the Russians, that was sending people up on Soyuz, they were going to have a program where they would bring people to Star City and train them for a couple of weeks. It was some astronomical price; I forgot what it was. Wally wanted to know if that would get her into being an astronaut. We discussed it.

I met her when she was here, and she gave me a Wally Stick. She was passing them out. They were sticks. They’re marked off, and you’d use it when you measured the oil in your airplane. We had a lot of things in common, because she loved to fly and I loved to fly, and we discussed flying.

I hadn’t heard from her for a long time, but then I saw the article that she was going to fly. I was so excited, so I just wanted to tell her how excited I was. I was able to locate an address for her, so I made a card and told her how excited I was. I actually took a picture of the Wally Stick, and I included it in there and said, “Hey, I’ve had this on my desk ever since you gave it to me.”

A few days later she called me and talked to me, and she was so excited that I had remembered. We just had such a wonderful conversation. I watched the launch on TV, and I was just thrilled for her.

But I will mention that at some point when I was working for NASA, I found out Eileen [M.] Collins had invited the women from Mercury to her launch, and I always thought, “Oh, that was a wonderful thing to do, and I wish I had been kind enough to think of something like that.” It never occurred to me. Eileen had some contact with it, so Wally and I discussed Eileen a little bit and how kind she was. Anyway, it was just thrilling to see her launch.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you ever join the Ninety-Nines, Shannon?

LUCID: No, I never joined the Ninety-Nines. The reason why is because it was a female organization, and I guess I always felt like if I’m protesting all these guys having their groups and excluding the females then how can I join a female group that excludes guys? Exclusion goes both ways. Now I think the Ninety-Nines did a wonderful service, because they were started when there was nothing for females whatsoever. But times had changed a little bit.

Then the other thing is I really didn’t know any other female pilots. As a matter of fact, I think I’d been a pilot for over ten years before I ever flew with another female pilot. All the pilots I knew were males, so when I went flying with another pilot for whatever reason it was a male. It was over ten years before I flew with somebody that was a female and a pilot.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Who was that, do you remember?

LUCID: Yes, it was Holly Barnes. She worked at NASA. It was after I came here to work at NASA. We were in the same flying club, so we would go fly. She'd be the safety pilot while I flew instruments, and I'd be the safety pilot while she flew instruments. We flew a lot together for that reason.

I know, and maybe I'm wrong. I don't know. But when NASA would require you to go to all these PRs [public relations events] I just thought it was a little bizarre to send a female out to a Rotary Club which, at that time, did not allow females in their organization. They wanted somebody to speak, and to the best of my ability I tried to avoid going to any organization that discriminated one way or the other. The same way with the Girl Scouts and the Boy Scouts; I was never a member of either.

It was the same way with all these educational things that they just wanted females to show up. I believe in inspiring females; don't get me wrong. But I had two girls and one boy, and they all deserved equal inspiration. I know that everybody has their own ideas, and it's fine; I just felt strongly that I should participate in things where everybody was welcome. I know people have a lot of things one way or the other against that. I really tried very vigilantly to do PRs where everybody was welcome. If it was for a student thing, it was all students welcome, not just a certain gender.

Part of it maybe was because growing up, anything that a girl was allowed to do was no good. Boys got to do all the good things. Maybe that was part of what formed my ideas. Who knows? I even felt a little funny in the Astronaut Office. Sometimes they would just want to get the females together. I don't know, that just bothered me a little bit, because it would have really bothered me if the guys got together and no females were there. I would have felt very excluded.

Now I don't think any guys ever felt excluded from a female group but still turnaround was fair play. Once again, I was a little different. But that's the way it was.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You said there were efforts to get the females together. What sort of activities are you referring to? Meetings with Carolyn [L. Huntoon]? Or just social activities?

LUCID: Oh, no, just after work or something. Just social things.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You wouldn't participate in those?

LUCID: Sometimes I did, but I always felt funny about it. Why did we just invite the females to meet over here after work today, but that didn't happen very often. I understand. But after Sally [K.] Ride died, then her family came to JSC. They had all the females get together over at—

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh yes, Villa Capri. I think I've seen the picture.

LUCID: Yes, Villa Capri. Even there I felt, why is it just females? I went for a short time. I couldn't go long because I couldn't leave Mike long. It rubbed me just a little wrong because it wasn't a female thing. It should have been inclusive to anybody in the Astronaut Office that wanted to come. But anyway, I'm strange.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You were head of the astronaut appearances for a time. When you were in charge, were you trying to implement the same thing that you're talking about here for all the astronauts? Or would you accept a Rotary invitation but only send a guy?

LUCID: Oh, no, it was just a personal thing on me. I wasn't trying to force my ideas on anyone. Now what I did try to do was implement the rules. There were Astronaut Office rules as to how long you could be gone and the type of things that you could go to. As head of the appearances in the Astronaut Office you approved the appearances, and the office had certain rules.

I can remember it was so funny because you could only be gone so many times a month. I kept track, and sometimes there was a little dissension because some people would hoard all the really good PRs for themselves. I thought that things should be distributed equally.

I remember one time particularly because in February, Black History Month, there was always a huge influx of requests for the Black astronauts, and there weren't very many astros to fill the requests. It was hard. You couldn't fill them all. I remember one time this person kept calling me up because they wanted Fred [Frederick D.] Gregory to come to something, and I said, "Fred has already done the limit of what we can do, so he can't go any more in February. This is it."

She got very irate, and she said, "Well, who is your boss?" So I gave her a list. She said, "Who is head of NASA?"

I said, "Dick [Richard H.] Truly."

She said, "I'm going to call him up."

I said, “Fine, whatever Dick Truly wants to do is fine. But my instructions are to make sure that you only do so many a month, so I can’t approve it.” I never heard anything more. But that’s the kind of thing that would happen.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What would be a good PR in your mind?

LUCID: Everybody has different idea — a good PR in my mind was foreign travel.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Go somewhere exotic.

LUCID: Yes. Now there’s pluses and minuses to everything. The good thing is I was able to go to a lot of places that I certainly never could have afforded to go to and see. The bad thing is when you went on foreign travel, and it’s not universally true, but generally you were worked to death. But everything in life has a cost.

I had the opportunity to see many many things and go many many places that I would not have. The other thing I really enjoyed about foreign PRs is meeting people in different countries and seeing the world through their eyes. I just thoroughly enjoyed that. I really enjoyed the foreign PRs that were instigated by some organization in that country and it wasn’t an American thing. It was very interesting to work with people in many different countries.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Can you give an example of some of those PRs that stand out in your mind?

LUCID: There are so many.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, I can imagine.

LUCID: I really did get to do a lot of PRs. Now I realize that. At the time I thought, “How come everybody else is getting more foreign trips than I am?” but I did have my fair share. I have nothing to complain about. But no, I enjoyed them all.

ROSS-NAZZAL: We talked about Wally Funk. Did you have any relationships with any of the other Mercury 13?

LUCID: No.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was curious about that.

LUCID: My impression is that Wally was the most outspoken. Not outspoken but wanting to do things. But what I did think was interesting—remember when John [H.] Glenn was going to fly on the Space Shuttle? NASA was touting, “Oh, it’s to prove that old people can go into space, and we’re going to get all this data.”

At that time in history—and it’s funny how people forget—there was this big push in the national research organizations because most medical research on health issues had been done with males, not with females. Males are an easier group because females have a lot more variation. When you studied drugs, when you did this, it was generally with a male study group

and didn't include females. There was a protest, rightfully so, saying, "Look, we need to include females in all this."

When NASA goes touting old people in space—and I wasn't the only one—there were several people that said, "Look. If you're doing a male you've got to do a female at the same time. If it's important to get all this old age information on John Glenn, it's important to get it on a female. So there's Jerrie Cobb, an old female, who has always wanted to fly in space, let her fly on a Space Shuttle mission. If it's good for the male; it's good for the female."

Jerrie Cobb was very reclusive in her later life, so she didn't have much contact with media. But I actually saw her on a couple of interviews. She was saying that she would be very happy to fly on the Shuttle and do a mission like John Glenn. There were several people, the females in the Astronaut Office, that also supported this. Of course it went nowhere, and it's not like anybody thought it would. But I would have liked to have seen that. That would have been a very nice thing.

Another thing, at the very same time there was a lot of discussion in the media, it was about the way that the government had interned the Japanese during World War II, and a lot of people had not known about that for a long time. It really wasn't covered in the history books, but then it was getting some play in the media.

Some people were saying, "Well, how can we make this right with their descendants or with them, the ones that are still alive?" The government took their property. It was not one of the stellar moments of the U.S. government. As they were talking about well, how can we make this right, then it occurred to some of us well, look at how females were treated for all these years. How can we make it right. We can make it right by letting Jerrie Cobb fly on the Shuttle, as a way of saying we're sorry for the way that women were treated all these years.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you remember approaching anybody from [NASA] Headquarters [Washington, DC]?

LUCID: Oh, no. Just talking. Oh, no. Why would you? You knew what the answer was. Everybody knew John Glenn was flying because he was John Glenn; it wasn't because they were collecting any data. That was just a pretty flimsy cover story, but it is what it is.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Sometimes you just can't fight the system. You can try.

LUCID: No, you can just talk.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I thought we would talk a little bit today about Shuttle-Mir. We don't have too much time. I wanted to get your take on things as they were evolving in the 1990s when NASA started with Russia, about flying in space and letting astronauts live on board Mir. What was the general consensus in the Astronaut Office about doing that, going up on Mir and spending time in Russia and doing training? What was your sense of that?

LUCID: My sense was that no one wanted to do it. I was so excited. I thought this would be great. As soon as I heard about it, I told everybody that had any kind of authority in the Astronaut Office that I wanted to do that; I would be very happy to do that. I just thought it was a great thing to do. Actually, there were a few of us. Travis [R.] Brice at that time—and I might get this a little confused—but I think he was the interface between the international PSs [payload

specialists] that NASA had and a lot of the PSs that were flying, so he was working in that interface. He was starting to work the interface with the Russians the first little bit.

He had this great idea, well, shoot, we're going to work for the Russians, let us learn a little Russian. There was a small group of us that would meet seven o'clock in the morning, come in early and learn a little Russian. Then over at the University of Houston they had some courses in the evening, not for credit courses. I took a little course in Russian. I just thought it was a wonderful idea, but a lot of people didn't for many reasons.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Talk about that phone call that you received from Hoot [Robert L. Gibson]. He wanted you to go learn Russian, but he wasn't offering you a spot on Mir. Would you talk about that a little more?

LUCID: Norm [Norman E. Thagard] went over to Russia and flew on the Soyuz up to Mir, so when it started Norm was going to be the only one. It was a one-time deal. As Norm started his training, the Russians—however it works at high levels, you never know—they were talking about, “Well, maybe we can extend the program and get more flights.” When they first started talking about it, Norm wanted to go fly, and I told him I'd love to fly on Mir. Norm was a logical choice because he was a medical doctor, and Norm was very good with languages. Norm was there. There was this feeling that the program was going to be extended, there were going to be a few more exchanges, the Shuttle was going to dock with Mir, and we were going to exchange crew members. But there wasn't anything formalized.

One afternoon Hoot called me up and said, “Shannon, you still want to go over to Russia and fly on Mir?”

I said, "Oh, I'd love to do that."

He said, "Well, I tell you what, you can go out to the Defense Language Institute [DLI] in California and learn a little Russian. Because if this actually comes to pass, we really need to have some people that are a little familiar with Russian. Can you go out there Monday?" This was Friday afternoon.

I said, "Well, actually, Hoot, my daughter is getting married next weekend. Could I wait a week and go out the Monday after she gets married?"

Hoot said, "Oh, we've waited this long, what's a week going to make any difference? Now this is not a flight assignment; you're not getting a flight assignment. All this is is just a tour out there at the Defense Language Institute to learn a little Russian."

John [E.] Blaha got a similar call. According to my understanding, we were the only two that ever expressed any interest that were willing to go. John and I went out to California, to Monterey, and we took Russian together for I don't know, three or four months, however long it was. I was never actually told by anybody in the office that we were going to be assigned to the flight.

We went out there, and John was talking, "Well, are we going to be assigned? Are we not? What is going to happen?" John likes to talk. We talked about this. Then John said, "If we're going to go to Russia, I need to have some winter clothes." He was going to go buy a coat and one weekend he said, "Do you want to go over the sports store?"

I said, "I'm not spending any money until I know where I'm actually going to go or whatever is going to happen."

One afternoon I got back. It was toward the end of our time at DLI, when I thought we were supposed to leave Monterey, and I got back into my little room and the phone rang. It was

from somebody from JSC in the Travel Office. They were asking for some information. I said, “Why do you need this information?”

They said, “We’re updating your passport.”

I said, “What for?”

They said, “You’re going to Russia in January, and we have to get this ready.”

I said, “Oh, I am? Oh, thanks for letting me know.”

The next day I told John, and I said, “Hey, I guess I’m ready to go buy a coat.” Then I ordered a very heavy winter jacket.

ROSS-NAZZAL: About how long did you have between the time that you found out about these changes and when you were going to go?

LUCID: We came back. I think we came back around Thanksgiving. We were back before Christmas. We showed back up, and we were in the office. We were sent over to Russia in January. It was very confusing. I mentioned Travis Brice, and he was such a help trying to get things worked out, because of how they were shipping us over there. It was very, very confusing how we were going to get paid, or how things were going to work. It was just really funny. Or how we were going to be reimbursed.

My husband Mike was very much into liking to keep track of financial things. Drove me crazy. He liked to know how much you spent down to the penny. When I finally went over to Russia, he would be looking at pay stubs and what money was being transferred. He thought that we were short \$10,000.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Wow!

LUCID: I don't know about that. He spent a lot of time talking with some person at JSC, and they worked things out. They got a lot of it worked out. But that was his final analysis, that's what he came up with.

When we were in Russia, when we went over there, John Blaha and I went. Brenda, John's wife, also went there. Brenda was such a big help, because John and I were in the training, in our classes, all the time, so we never could get anything done. We couldn't even go over to NASA. NASA had a little office there, and we couldn't even go talk to the DOR [Director of Operations-Russia], which was the NASA person there that was supposed to be working with the Russians, to find out how things were going.

It was difficult to get a little bit of money, Russian money, because you needed a little bit of money to spend, like when I went to buy groceries. Brenda was such a big help because she would go every few weeks into the American embassy, and they would cash a check for me. I'd write a check for \$100, and she'd cash it and bring me the money. Then I would go into Moscow and exchange it for Russian money.

One week she was doing that, and she just happened to see the papers that they had there. She said, "Huh." She asked the lady. She said, "This is very interesting. Why is John here as a GS [general schedule]-15 and Shannon is here only as a GS-5?" So she came back and told me. I told Mike. Obviously, a number had been dropped when the transfer was made.

ROSS-NAZZAL: A big number.

LUCID: That explained why there was a discrepancy in some of the pay stubs. That's part of what Mike was working out. It was a learning experience for everybody involved, and things worked out better for the follow-on folks I think.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned being reimbursed, so you were technically on TDY [temporary duty], so you had a per diem per day when you were in Russia?

LUCID: Oh, no. No, no. We had nothing. I'd have to go back and check, but I want to say we had permanent change of station. We had nothing as far as per diem or anything like that. We had access to one phone call that was reimbursed when we got there. We could call to say that we got there safely. Just after I got my apartment I called. This is in the days before heavy Internet use and before cell phones. This was just the beginning of all this.

I called up Mike at home. We decided well, we'll call once a week, but we would have to pay for international rates. NASA wasn't paying for it. I tried calling a couple times, and the connections were so bad. When you have a really bad international connection, you try to say something and somebody tries to say something and you end up just being cross at each other because you don't know what's going on. That just didn't work out.

I knew I had to figure out some way of having contact, regular contact. I was going into church in Moscow on Sundays, and it was in a movie theater. There were some people from the American embassy that were working there, so one of them was talking to me. I was expressing my frustration at not having a way that I could contact my family. Now they could write letters, but the letters went to the American embassy; you couldn't write them out to Star City because the Russian mail system didn't work. People had to go in and pick them up.

I was talking to her, and she said, “Well, CompuServe is working really well.” That was e-mail service. So, I contacted my daughter who had majored in computer science in Baylor [University, Waco, Texas], and her husband also was a computer science major. I said, “Look, we’ve got to get this set up. You need to send instructions over to me so that I can understand them.” So, she wrote out some momproof instructions and paid for me to be on CompuServe. One of the NASA people traveling back and forth—that’s how you got a lot of communication accomplished, because of all the NASA people going back and forth—they brought me this message from her, and they carried it over on the airplane. I had a computer, a NASA laptop that I had brought over that I was using. I set up CompuServe on that, and I worked through it and got it all set up.

That worked out very very well, because every night I could send a message home and then the next day in the morning, because of the time difference, I would receive a message from home. That way Mike and I were communicating every day. It sounds nice, but the downside was that it was so so hard to get an Internet connection out from Star City to anywhere. I would sit there, and I’d be trying to learn what I was supposed to be learning. It was cold in the apartment in the winter, so I’d be in a blanket sitting there, and every two or three minutes I’d just hit the connection and try to get an Internet connection. Sometimes I would get it. Generally, every night at least if I worked long enough, I’d get a connection.

It would connect, and then I’d have about two minutes. So, I had my e-mail all ready, and I had two minutes. The same way then to pick up. You just had to keep refreshing over and over and over to get it. It wasn’t much money, I want to say it was like \$15 a month I was paying, so I asked NASA if they would pay for it. I said, “Hey, I’m communicating with my family, will you pay?” There’s no way. They wouldn’t pay for that.

It was interesting because I would be telling John things that happened because Mike would keep me informed as to what was going on, and I could see he was getting a little jealous. Why did I know all this, and I had to tell him? Why couldn't he know? I said, "John, you need to be on CompuServe. I can help you. We can do this."

He said, "Well, is NASA paying for it?"

I said, "No, you just have to pay. You have enough money. You can pay for it." He refused to do it. He thought NASA should pay for it, but Brenda wanted communication with their kids.

ROSS-NAZZAL: So, she set it up?

LUCID: Brenda talked him into it. I set him up on his computer on CompuServe like I'd set mine up. Brenda was very happy, and then John was happy that he got it. People didn't really understand how difficult communication was. I never heard anything from anybody at NASA. John and I were just on our own. People just don't understand that.

One morning I got an e-mail from Mike and he said, "Don't worry, your brother Joe is okay." And I thought what, why would he think I was worried about Joe?

I sent an e-mail back and I said, "Why should I be worried about Joe?" This is every 24 hours.

Mike wrote back, "Well, because the federal building blew up in Oklahoma City."

I said, "What?" So, then he sent me some more information.

He said, "And Joe went into work late that morning so he's fine." Over two or three days I got the story of the federal building in Oklahoma City blowing up.

We were really cut off from news of the world. Now NASA did try. They subscribed to the *Houston Chronicle* Sunday edition for us, but it went to the American embassy and then somebody had to go pick it up. I did get a few of the Sunday editions that John and I shared, but then they petered out and we never saw anymore. John and I had the theory that someone in the embassy was just using it.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh, taking them?

LUCID: And forgot to put it back in our mailbox. Because NASA was paying for it but then they just quit showing up. It was hard to get news, so we were fairly insulated.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's interesting about providing the *Houston Chronicle* but not providing a satphone or something that you could communicate with.

LUCID: Now that you mention a phone, there was some kind of a satellite phone, but this is very interesting, it was in Bonnie [J.] Dunbar's apartment. Now Bonnie was extremely extremely kind. She offered. She said, "Shannon, you may come over and connect to the Internet." Many many nights, I would slide over on the ice to the building Bonnie was living in and then I would connect. I could get connected to the Internet that way. I didn't have permission to use any voice or anything, but I could connect on the Internet. Now I also tried to connect at the NASA office, and evening after evening I would spend long time sliding on the ice to get over there and try to connect. It never connected, and then I'd have to slide back. In retrospect it seems like I spent an awful lot of time trying to connect.

But then there was a rumor—John and I heard this rumor—that when Bonnie was to go back to the States the dish for the satellite communication was going to be taken from Bonnie’s apartment and given to one of us. We just needed to decide whose apartment it should be in. John and I discussed the pros and cons of where it was to be located, and I think we decided that it should be in his because Brenda was home all day so she would have more time to try to connect to the Internet.

We had come to this decision, and then when Bonnie went back to the States, there was no more word about the satellite phone or anything. There was nothing. It was just interesting.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I hate to stop here because I think that there’s more good stories to share. But I have to go to a meeting, so we’ll stop for now, and we’ll pick it up next Thursday.

[End of interview]