Eugene Cernan Interview

Conducted by Katherine Markee on March 5, 2011

The following interview was conducted with Gene Cernan (GC), Captain U.S Navy retired, Purdue class of 1956, and former astronaut, for the Purdue University Oral History Program. It took place on Saturday, March 5, 2011 in Stewart Center. The interviewer is Katherine Markee (KM), the Oral History Librarian.

KM: Welcome Gene Cernan. Thank you very much.

GC: Thank you.

KM: Tell us a little bit about where you were born and your parents and early years.

GC: Well golly, that's a long time ago. Next week it'll be 77 years as a matter of fact. I was born in Chicago, [coughs] in St. Anthony's Hospital in Chicago. We never lived in the city. We lived in the suburbs, which at one time was called the "sticks" in an area called Maywood, Bellwood, Elmhurst, and that area. And I was just a typical young kid, blue-collar family, growing up. Born in 1934, so I was a Depression baby and I grew up during War World II. A lot happened after that; I never would have imagined obviously.

KM: That's right. Tell us a little bit about high school.

GC: Well I went to a big high school, Proviso High School, in the suburban part of Illinois [western suburbs of Chicago]. We had, golly, I think 4,000 kids at that time. Of course, since then it's gotten bigger, it's split into two high schools, like so many other things. Mom and Dad both, both worked. I remember my -- and I had one sister by the way, an older sister. She is about 4 ½ years older than I am, went to the same high school and then she eventually became a, a teacher.

She went to what was at that time Northern Illinois State Teacher's College. I was I suppose a typical kid in grammar school and high school. I played all the sports; athletics and sports played a big part in my life, particularly the big three: baseball, football, basketball. I was… you know, made my varsity letter, played first team on all those, but I never was good enough to play big time at Purdue, not big enough, nor was I good enough. But I was a good student in school. I guess I didn't have to work too hard at it, don't ask me why. My dad never, never had an opportunity to go to college. Going back a little bit, Mom and Dad were second generation. Mom's folks immigrated around the turn of the century from Bohemia in what is now the Czech Republic, and Dad's folks immigrated about the same time from Slovakia, and they obviously came to Chicago at some point in time. And I never really knew my mother's parents, because my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, died before I was born and my paternal - maternal - grandfather died when I was about a year old, so I never really knew them at all. My dad's mother and father eventually had a dairy farm in north central Wisconsin. They lived there the way they did in "the old country." Everything from the outhouse to the kerosene lamps, milking cows by hand. Kids don't understand that today. No electricity, no telephone, you know, no tractors, no hay loaders. Just horses and plows and I think part of my growing up education I got from my granddad and my dad, both, obviously because I spent almost every summer until I got into high school - from the time I was a year old - on that farm. I mean I was pitching hay and, and picking potatoes and as I say, whatever…

KM: …needed to be done.

GC: Whatever needed to be done and we did it "the old-fashioned way." In wintertime, Dad and I would go up there [coughs] on weekends and I can remember sometimes, my granddad would have to take steps [up] from the house into the snow and we'd walk across the snow, down into the barn. A nice place to be in the wintertime, because all the cows were all stacked in there and it was warm.

KM: Sure.

GC: The cows and the horses all stayed in the wintertime inside, because it was just too doggone cold. But my granddad was a fascinating man. He was about four and a half feet tall, but could work like a giant, and I think without knowing it, I

5:00 learned a great deal of my values from him and in turn obviously along the way from my dad. Anyway, as I said earlier, Mom -- we bought a car, a 1941 Chevrolet, just before the war started, which was about the last of the cars that were made until after the war. And I remember Mom went to work to help pay for the car and certain things stick in your mind. You know, dates you went to the moon, and I happen to remember that car - special deluxe Chevrolet - cost us $800 and Mom had to go to work to help pay for it, and work for the next 30 years.

KM: What sort of work did she do?

GC: Well, she…

KM: Worked in an office, or…?

GC: No, she wound coils with her bare hands. She worked in a little factory and her hands, she would thread coils for transformers. You know, Mom never went to college either, so, and Dad ended up -- Dad could do anything. He could build a garage, he could fix a toilet, he could rewire your house. He could have been, I think, any kind of engineer he wanted to, had he had the opportunity to go to school. The opportunity just didn't exist for him, so we were a working blue-collar family and as I say, I was a typical kid in high school. My first car was a car that my granddad in Wisconsin - a Model A Ford coupe - my granddad had. I think, I think he and grandma drove it up to Wisconsin when they went up there, probably in the '30s. He put it on blocks and never drove it again.

KM: It was in good condition! [laughs]

GC: It was great! Of course, the tires were rotted and everything, but Dad and I put new tires and when I was about 16 years old, I think we drove that car home and that was my, that was my car in college [high school]. But anyway, I ended up getting pretty good grades. Did they mean something to me then? Yes, but probably meant more later. I think I graduated in the upper 2% out of a class of 900. My dream as a kid, and this is a really important part of my life - being sort of a product of War World II - I would watch everything that was going on. Television -- this is going to be hard for kids in the future who review this oral history to realize there was a time when there was no television, much less no iPhones. The kinds of things we take for granted today. We really didn't have television. Finally, somewhere in the late '40s, black and white television came around. But, Dad was too old for World – too young for World War I and too old

for World War II, so we'd go to a movie on weekends and see the movie tone black and white news and what was going on in the world. You know, what was going on in Europe, and France, and Germany and what was going on in the Pacific and somewhere along the way when I saw those unsung, unknown heroes at the time who have since become icons of aviation history. [Those who] fly airplanes, make airplanes, machines do things that they weren't built to do in War World II in the Pacific. I wanted to fly. I wanted to fly airplanes off of aircraft carriers. As a kid, that was my dream.

KM: Great.

GC: Unbeknown to me at the time, my dad had a dream. And his dream was for me to get the education he never had an opportunity to get, and those dreams were not; they didn't counter each other, but when the time came to go to college it was a natural thing -- you know, I was going to go to college. I mean that was in my mind and of course my dad would have had it no other way, and he wanted me to get the best engineering education I could get. And I had applied for and gotten a naval ROTC scholarship, and dad said, "I want you to go to Purdue and you're gonna study Engineering." I thought engineers drove locomotives at that time. [Laughs] I didn't pay much attention to it. And… but when I applied for the naval ROTC here at Purdue, the quota was filled, there was no room. And so they said, "You can have your second choice," [which] was the University of Illinois. There was a lot of scholarship money involved and my dad said, "No
10:00 way." And let me tell you, Mom and Dad had to work to put my sister and I through college. And he said, "No way; you're not going to Illinois. You're going

to Purdue." Well, I could get a lesser scholarship, naval ROTC, but lesser. Much, much lesser, but Dad wanted me to go to Purdue. So I was still able to get into the naval ROTC at Purdue and still head towards naval aviation and towards a degree. And I think the real key is, four years later I graduated in June of 1956 with a diploma in one hand and orders for the naval aviation flight training in Pensacola in the other hand. My dad's dream was fulfilled, and my dream was being fulfilled, and they came together and I cannot tell you how significant and important that education was. Because everything that I did in life, although I never really "practiced as an engineer," I use that education. I use the logic, I use the learning process, I used everything that it took to get that degree in engineering here at Purdue, with everything else that I did. Flying airplanes, I mean flying airplanes, putting in logic from an administrative point of view to the technical point of view. And I tell my grandkids - I tell kids everywhere I see them - it's not so much what you learn in college, it's that you learn how to learn. Because you are going to be learning the rest of your life and the place to learn how to learn is at Purdue. And I don't think -- nothing against any other, any other choices of endeavor of study, but engineering is, it gives you by far the greatest capability to go anywhere you want to go. Once you've got that foundation, once you learn how to learn in that environment, I don't think there's anything you can't do. So Purdue played… the two things that have played, historically and personally, the biggest part of my life and have sort of gone hand in hand - even today, I'm doing some things that tie naval aviation and Purdue together – but, are Purdue and naval aviation. You know, they've been my life. Both of them

have been my life all my life and little did I know at the time, and I don't want to sound over-nostalgic about it, but unbeknown to me, I took my first steps to the moon right here in West Lafayette.

KM: Good point.

GC: And in 1956, Sputnik hadn't even flown. I mean space flight didn't exist. If I would have told somebody I was gonna go to the moon, they would have put me in a straitjacket. You talk about my dream... I have five-year, I've always had five-year goals, and I committed to five years in the Navy, and boy I was going to fly off aircraft carriers. That's where I was headed, and you never know when opportunities are going to come by and you're going to have to make some decisions in your life and fortunately, I ended up making the right one. Thinking back to those days, it ended up to be almost ten years to the day because I graduated in June '56 and in June '66 I was circling this world in space on my first space flight. I was the second American ever to get out of a spacecraft. I was walking around the world in space, ten years after I graduated. And you know, when you're at that age, ten years is a lifetime. When you are where I am today and you look back, ten years is about that long [gestures a couple of inches length with his fingers]. It just, it just… I don't know. And what happened to me after that and I got to consider myself the luckiest human being in the world. But I got to give the majority of that credit to Purdue, because that's, that's where it all started. And you know we all have heroes in the world, and sometimes we don't realize until it's too late who our real heroes are. I think back to as why I did what I did and the opportunities I had and quite frankly, you know, my dad was my real

15:00 hero. He's a guy who pointed me in the right direction and saw to it. I'll tell you something else though. I graduated from Purdue, or from high school; you know, math, sciences were all relatively easy for me. I got to Purdue and I realized, "Hey wait a minute. Maybe you're not as smart as you think you are." Because you really have to find out who you are and you really have to buckle down.

KM: It's a different, it's a transition, right?

GC: The difficulty and you know, if you slack off -- I'd never gotten a C, maybe a B or two along the way, [but] I'd never gotten a C, and all the sudden I found my urge one day in a class that, "Man, if I don't perform here pretty quick, I might get a D!" And all the sudden, I said, a bell rang in my head; I said, "Wait a minute." And so, you know there's a lot of ways to get educated in college. You find out a lot of things about yourself as well as your ability to learn.

KM: Right. Let me ask you a question. Your father, had he, he for some reason was really interested in engineering, but he knew of Purdue?

GC: He… Yeah, my dad was --

KM: -- Because you're saying he recommended it.

GC: -- Without a formal education, he was a very well rounded individual. He knew a lot about a lot of things and I, and I say, he was one of those people who could do anything mechanically, electrically, mechanically, physically.

KM: Right he just had that knack to be able to do it.

GC: He just was born with that. I don't know where it came from, but he… I will tell you this. He always felt MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] might be the epitome of engineering schools and I remember that. But MIT was out of our financial reach. It just, you know, it was just an idea. Purdue was within reach and when I worked with that Navy ROTC scholarship it became a very viable alternative and as far as he was concerned Purdue if not, was at least as good as MIT in terms of engineering. Somehow, he didn't think Illinois - not a rap on University of Illinois - but he just didn't think University of Illinois compared to Purdue, in what it could offer young people like me, or the education that he wanted me to get.

KM: Right. And he felt that Purdue met that need. A couple things on the astronaut. On the selection process - I'm thinking of this for the researchers - do you apply, or how do you get into the astronaut program? You might make a comment on that.

GC: Well, it's very strange. I was in the third -- let me go back a little bit. Historically, Sputnik flew in…

KM: '57.

GC: '57. The first seven astronauts - John Glenn [John Herschel Glenn Jr.], Alan Shephard [Alan Bartlett Shepard Jr.] and that group - were selected in '58, the Mercury astronauts. Then a second group, which included Neil Armstrong [Neil Alden Armstrong], a second group of nine were selected in '62 I think came to work to NASA in '63. I was in a group of 14 selected in '63, went to Houston in

January ’64. We ended up to be the nucleus of the Gemini and Apollo program. The Mercury astronauts flew the first Mercury series of spacecraft. When Alan Shephard flew in May of 1961, I had just come off of my second cruise off of aircraft carriers in the western Pacific, back into San Diego. And I remember watching Alan Shephard’s flight and I was going to get married the next day. And my wife at the time said, when we watched Alan go up, “How would you like to do that?” “Man I’d love to do it. Man, just turn me loose.” But I was sitting behind the defense of a television screen because I knew I was not qualified, I didn’t have enough jet time that NASA required, I had not yet been in the Navy long enough to go to test pilot school. I had been in the Navy five years -- that was my five-year ambition. Where do I go now? What do I do now? Do I go find a job? Do I go to work somewhere? Because what I was doing, and they were paying me for, was not a job. It was just a challenge, exciting, the best flying in the world. The Navy said, “No, we don’t want you to get out.” I was about ready to get out. The Navy said, “We don’t want you to get out. How about -- we’ll send you to postgraduate school in Monterrey, California and you can get a master’s in,

20:00 master’s there.” And so I said, “I just got married.” Monterrey, Carmel, you know, God’s country and I get an education and I could still fly because the Navy still had airplanes there, we could fly. Not off of carriers, but we were flying. So I said, “Okay.” And it was a two year program to get a master’s, because they sort of overdid it, and I was working on my master’s in aeronautical engineering and I was going to go for a third year and I was accepted to Princeton. And the Navy -- you know, you never get something for nothing. You had to give them two years

back for every year of college they gave you, so now with three years I was committed to six more, so, you know, that gave me another nine years in the Navy. And that sort of well I can look down the line, maybe I'll stay in the Navy. And in between my second and third year, between the time I was finishing up in the summer and then planning to go to Princeton, I got a call from the Navy department saying - now mind you, I didn't volunteer for the space program – saying, "We want to recommend you to NASA for further evaluation." And I was startled and, like a dummy I said, "For what?" And this lieutenant commander that I was talking to sounded irritated and said, "It's for the Apollo program," and it blew me away. And I said, "Well, not only yes but hell yes." And he said, "That's not good enough." This was a Friday. He said, "We got to know in writing by Monday morning at 9:00." Typical. So I sent him a telegram and then… and I was working during a summer internship at Aerojet-General in Sacramento. I went back to Monterrey, told my wife, said, "Guess what I did? I just volunteered for the space program." They still had probably a thousand civilians on their list and I don't know how many military - probably four or five hundred military – and so I didn't know what I was in for, didn't know what my chances were so that started several weeks, couple months of sending you reams of paper questions, essay responses. I never saw a soul, sent it back in, you know and then you get another letter back with another round of paperwork so I guess I was still in, and all the time they were eliminating, slowly eliminating people. Then I got an invitation to go down to Houston, Texas.

KM: That's where the headquarters were, even in those days? In Houston?

GC: Pardon?

KM: Is that where the headquarters was, in Houston in those days?

GC: Eventually. That's where the space, Johnson Space Center was. And I got an invitation to go to Houston, Texas and went down to the old Rice Hotel and walked in a ballroom with 400 - I'm not kidding - 400 of the most qualified aviators in the entire country. They've broken every speed record, every altitude record, there were combat pilots there - don't forget this is 1963 - and me. And I still… I was still there, and I - don't forget! - I hadn't had enough jet time, I hadn't been to test pilot school and I thought, "Well, you know, now that I'm here, maybe I'll get a chance to meet an astronaut." And we went -- we were there for a week, and we went through all kinds of you know, testing and questions and interviews and they'd ask you questions about orbital mechanics, things I knew nothing about. And I think in retrospect, they were trying to, not, really didn't care whether you knew the answers, but cared for how you approached the answer. And so when you left after that, they said, "Don't call me; we'll call you." And my chances of getting in the space program at that time were slim to none, quite frankly. I did meet a couple astronauts because they had a little reception for us and I met Wally Schirra [Walter Marty Schirra Jr.] and Alan Shephard and a couple others, and that was a big deal. And another couple weeks or three weeks went by, and I get an invitation to go down to San Antonio Lackland Air Force Base to the hospital for a physical. When I went down there, I realized that that 400 of the can't miss guys, there was only 36 left. And I thought, "Golly, maybe I really do have a chance." We didn't know whether they were going to

25:00 pick two or 22, had no idea, and I was still there. We lost… they were looking at that point in time as reasons to not accept you. You know, they had 36 guys they thought were pretty well qualified, and they were looking for reasons to cut you out. We lost four guys in the physicals for very minor little things, and that left 32 of us. And another couple weeks went by and I got a phone call from a man who became my boss, one of the original seven, Deke Slayton [Donald Kent "Deke" Slayton] and he said, “You want to… you still want to come to work? I got a job for you.” So they chose 14 of us, and now I’m walking the halls with likes of Alan Shephard and John Glenn and Neil Armstrong. Neil and I became office mates, shared an office together at that point in time. Neither one of us had flown. And I had a chance to fly. I was to be -- the competition was really keen. Friendly, but keen, keen competition. And out of the 14 of us, we, five of us flew in Gemini and I was slated to be the fifth one to fly in Gemini. Not that, not that I didn’t feel [that] there were more, guys more qualified than me, but I was slated to be the fifth. I was backing up the crew of Gemini 9. They had a horrible accident and killed themselves in St. Louis, crashed their airplane, and Tom Stafford [Thomas P. Stafford] and I became the prime crew of Gemini 9. So now I was the second of our group of 14 to fly and when I flew in June of 1966, I became the youngest American ever to fly in space. Yuri Gagarin [Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin] was younger, but I was the youngest American ever to fly in space, and that’s when we were, circled the Earth, did a lot of rendezvous for three days, and walked in space, when we knew nothing about what we were doing. And I call that… the

chapter in my book's "Spacewalk from Hell," because only by the grace of God I'm here today to talk about it. It was very interesting to say the least.

KM: I can imagine. Very good. Would you like to make any comments overall on the flights that you were involved in? Any comments you would like to make on any of the flights? The key ones you were on.

GC: Oh yeah, I could talk a lifetime about all of them, about all of them. You know very quickly after Gemini 9, I backed up Gemini 12, and then we were the backup crew for Apollo 1, which is the crew that we lost on a fire on a pad, back in 1967. Then we backed up, eventually backed up, Apollo 7, which became the first flight of the Apollo spacecraft. Then I had a chance to fly Apollo X as a lunar module pilot spacecraft for Snoopy and Charlie Brown and everybody remembers those names. We at one time were destined to be the first attempt at landing, and then a number of things happened that changed all that. So we took the lunar module – first lunar module ever to go, second lunar module to fly, first to go to the moon - and went down to about 50,000 [47,000] feet and did everything but land, and left that final 50,000 [47,000] feet; duplicated Neil Armstrong's mission, which was going to be two months later, except to 50,000 [47,000] feet. And so we came close, but not quite close enough. And subsequently I backed up Alan Shephard, of all people, the man who many years earlier was simply an unknown hero to me. And here I was… What's interesting about that, [was] ten years earlier I was like everybody else watching in amazement, as he was the first American in space, and now I'm standing next to him as his equal, because I was his backup commander. I had to be his equal. I had to be able to do everything

on a flight that he had to do, and yet I stood there having flown twice, been to the moon, and he only had sixteen minutes of space flight experience. I learned more from him about working on that flight and the evening before he left to the moon, when we just sat there, traditionally and looked at that big old, old rocket that was going to take him there, I learned more about the meaning of commitment from him, than I ever thought possible. So that was my "other" flight I never flew on [Apollo XIV], and then, was backup, was commander of Apollo

30:00 XVII. I ended up to be the last man on the moon. We were there for 75 hours, drove a lunar car around the moon. Putting that all in one big box, you couldn't have written a script any better. You know coming back here to Purdue, with the orders in my hand to go to Navy flight plan, my dream. If someone would have told me that would have been happened, you could not have written a book [with that ending]. And that's why I look back and say, "Somehow, I'm just the luckiest human being in the world." It just… I don't know how it worked out that way. And sometimes it almost seems like that happened in my "other" life.

KM: Nicely said. That's good. Talk about family. Where did you meet your wife? At Purdue?

GC: No, my, I met my wife in California. She was a airline, a flight attendant; I guess we called them hostesses at that point in time.

KM: Right. They wore a hat and all that.

GC: A little hat. A little red beanie, and a hat. Flew for Continental Airlines, which was the young up and coming airline, and she was flying out of, from California to

Chicago to Kansas City to Denver, when Continental just got the big 707s. They were just getting into that. Prior to that, she was flying the old propjet Viscounts in New Mexico and so forth, and I met her by accident. I was in San Diego headed home for Christmas, going home commercially, went up to the airport in Los Angeles and she was in her uniform, standing in line to get a ticket. She had a couple of days off to go see some friends somewhere, and she just attracted my attention and I caught her name and wrote it down and about three or four weeks later I came back off leave and tried to chase her down with Continental Airlines and they would never give me her name. I thought, “I’d like to meet this lady.” So a friend, a lady, a wife of a friend of mine was able to say she was a lost, lost sister and they gave her the name. And I called her up one day and I told her who I was, which was nothing at the time, and asked her for a date and she took me up on it and we ended up getting married and one daughter and three lovely grandchildren by my daughter. Unfortunately, that marriage lasted about… well, fortunately, it lasted twenty years, but unfortunately, we became divorced. You know, I’ll tell you the good news and bad news about the space program is: you know, the good news speaks for itself, but we were gone, seven, eight days a week; we were tunnel-visioned; we were focused on the moon. We knew we were coming back, but our wives didn’t. And so, we got so involved in what we were doing, we tended, all of us, tended to some degree, take our families for granted. We’d be gone, be in the simulators all night long, somewhere in one coast or the other and come home and want a home cooked meal and your wife’s been taking the garbage out, and you know, fixing your kid’s skinned knee

and doing all the things mothers and wives have to do while you're gone, and, and I put this in my book: I think we were very unfair to our families and very unfair to our wives. And you know, in a case of one or two of the wives that got tired of being Mrs. Astronaut; they wanted to be who they were and you know I think there is something like 60% of those first three groups of astronauts ended up being divorced, and I'm not proud of that and I just happened to be one of them, and I never thought that would happen in my life, but it happened. And then… But she got married again and I got married again, and my wife has two daughters and between them, they got six [children], so I got nine great-grandkids, here another twenty years later into my life.

KM: [Laughs] Sounds good to me. Let's talk, just make a couple; let's talk a little bit about giving back to Purdue. One of the things I think is nice is you were in Cary Quad the first year and they put a plaque on the door. Wasn't there something in the Northwest Cary Quad?

GC: Say, what?

KM: The northwest plaque in December of 19 - you were there in '72 - they put some little mark on the door in Cary Quad because you were there, you lived in there, your first year.

GC: I did. I lived in Cary, in Cary Hall my whole first year in college.

KM: Right.

GC: You're telling me something I don't know. They put a plaque on the door of the

35:00 room I lived in?

KM: You lived in Cary Quad freshman year. Some kind of a ceremony took place in December of '72.

GC: I wasn't here for it. I guess I didn't [get that one].

KM: I'll have to check my newspaper article and send you that. [Laughs]

GC: You're telling me something I don't know. Well that's interesting. Maybe I'll go back there and take a look.

KM: [Laughs] And then of course you got the honorary doctorate.

GC: I did.

KM: Tell us about that.

GC: Well you know I got that and that was special. And I don't know that I deserved it. I don't know what the criteria for getting an honorary doctorate at Purdue is. Outstanding alumni got a lot of awards here from Purdue.

KM: That's nice. And you're a DEA. You got a, the Distinguished Engineering Alumnus.

GC: Huh?

KM: A Distinguished Engineering Alumnus.

GC: Yeah I did that. And as I say, I don't know whether I deserve any of those, but it's quite an honor to be and you get -- you know because of what we did, and the visibility we had in the space program, you receive a lot of those kinds of things. And I've gotten some doctorate degrees from a few other universities and colleges. Maybe I've talked at a graduation or whatever, but when it comes from your "own" – okay? – when it comes from your own, Purdue is "my own," those things have a lot more meaning. To get a distinguished alumni award, to get an honorary doctorate degree or distinguished engineering award from, from where you grew up, from "your hometown," Purdue is my hometown, during the really important years of my life. That makes it special, that makes it important.

KM: Very nice. Nicely said.

GC: And to receive a -- the Navy is the other big thing, and I was honored here a few years ago. Oh it's one thing to get a Distinguished Service Cross -- those are all important things. But I was honored with some pretty special people whose name you'd recognize in the, in Pensacola and in the Navy Museum Foundation Hall of Honor, with people like Halsey [William F. Halsey] and Nimitz [Chester William Nimitz] and you go on and on in naval aviation history. Like Purdue, that is special, that's unique. To get a, to be in the Hall of Fame of some museum in far off Long Island is fine, but it doesn't have the meaning these other things have.

KM: Good point.

GC: It really doesn't, and not that you're not appreciative, but…

KM: It's much more personal.

GC: But honors and recognition from your own are so much more important.

KM: Right. And the President's Council Distinguished Service Award you also received that. From the President's Council. Distinguished Service Award?

GC: Yeah, yeah.

KM: That's nice.

GC: I don't try and advertise all those awards too much.

KM: The Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections, you've given some of your materials which is really great.

KM: Well I'm in the process - Neil and I – that's a real honor, that the university would like to archive Neil's and my papers and that truly was a special honor when I was told about that. So we are proceeding to give them some of the stuff that I call "stuff," and "junk," and some of it is very sentimental and important. Some of it, "stuff," has different labels. Some are significant artifacts you may have flown in space, some are things that have to do with your period of life here at Purdue, some maybe letters from presidents or people like Bob Hope*, who I got to know very well over the years, where it's a personal letter, which I think someday somebody, some young man or woman would like to understand. When I get a letter that's signed Ron and up here it says "President of the United States," and it's from Ronald Regan, I'm proud of that, but I think Purdue ought to have those kinds of things and that's what I'm doing. And what I sometimes, what I call "stuff," or "junk," the folks here in the library, at the archives say, "Wait a minute,

don't throw it away. Send it to us. We'll worry about whether it's junk or not," [KM
40:00 laughs]. So I'm proud of that. That is something that I'm extremely proud that they wanted that and I'm trying to work very closely and I think it's important because, this just happened in the last week that a good friend of mine, at a request I made of him - Barron Hilton [William Barron Hilton] and the Conrad Hilton foundation, just gave a $2 million grant to the Purdue libraries to endow an archivist to put together all of Neil Armstrong's and my "stuff." I am so proud of that and Barron has been a friend for a long time and the whole world knows who Barron Hilton is, but for him to do that and think that much of Neil and myself and to think that much of what Purdue can do, and will do, with that information is special, is special.

KM: Right. What's the next best thing in the space program? As for example, they discuss in the media, the U.S. economy. Just a couple comments on that.

GC: What's the next…?

KM: The next big thing in the space program. They are all talking about the next big thing in the economy these days.

GC: The next big thing in the space program, if it goes the way the present administration wants it to go, will be a 'mission to nowhere.' Neil Armstrong, Jim Lovell [James Arthur Lovell Jr.], and I have been fighting this administration's proposal for space for over a year now. Anything that seems to - and I don't want to sound too political - but anything that seems to exude American excellence, and space is certainly one of them; we've led the world for fifty years. Since the

day JFK said we're gonna, we're gonna go to the moon and do the other things, and the present administration wants to dismantle that. And there's many of us who are determined not to let that happen. And fortunately, space has always been a bipartisan, had bipartisan support for the last half century. I think there's wiser and smarter heads in Washington who won't allow that to happen. Now, the whole country is in a financial bind, so, but it's not money, it's -- and the space program, unbelievably, a lot of people don't know it, takes less than one penny out of every one of our tax dollars. Just less than one penny. But I think there's wiser heads in Congress that are going to take the money we have and make sure it's directed properly to keep America out in front. Now, what is going to happen? The good news is we have a major space station, international space station, which is functioning well, which will be up there for another ten or fifteen years. The bad news after the last shuttle flights flies, about the middle of this year, the United States of America will have given up any access to that space station. We will have no access, we will no rocket, no capability for the next five or six, or more years, dependent upon the commitment we make here in the next six months, to get to that space station. The other piece of bad news is that we will not have the capability for another generation to go back to the moon, or onto Mars. People can talk about it, but unless we make a commitment as a nation, unless we have a goal, unless we accept a challenge, like we did back in '61 when Kennedy asked us to do what I think most people felt was impossible, we're never going to get there from here. And so one of the things we're fighting is to make sure that those generations who follow in our footsteps have an

opportunity that we had. And you know, I… Maybe I'm the eternal optimist. I'm a realist, but I know that there's a young boy and a young girl out there with the desire and the will, who will take us back out there, where we belong. We, our generation and the generation who follows us, has to give them the opportunity

45:00 to allow their dreams to come true. I dreamed about flying airplanes off of aircraft carriers, and when I was a kid we couldn't afford to put me, get me in an airplane ride. I never was in an airplane, you know, until I was probably 20 years old, but I was given the opportunity to make my dream come true. And little did I know, that dream would allow me to call the moon my home. So where are we headed in space today? Right now, it's indeterminable but I can promise you that we're not gonna… this 'mission to nowhere' that is being planned by the present administration, which truly is, takes us nowhere, is not in the cards. We are gonna… This country will remain the number one country in the world in space exploration and technology. Look how many astronauts have gone through this University. Does that say something for our capability? The technology, what this University teaches, and the inspiration, and that's the key. We've got to reinspire kids to dream and the greatest legacy from the Wright brothers is not the fact that we can fly higher and faster and further than we ever been able to fly before. It's the fact that they inspired all of us who followed in their footsteps, and I hope we can do the same to those who follow in our footsteps. To dream and to go on and make their dreams come true. I tell kids, dream the impossible, then go make it happen. I went to moon -- tell me what you can't do. And I think that's what the future is all about. It's very uncertain right now, but what we don't do, another

nation will do. China, Russia, India today will pick up where we left off and we'll be somewhere down in a mediocre world if we're not careful.

KM: Okay. Anything that I forgot to ask or anything that you would like to say in closing?

GC: Oh, we could go on and answer questions, "What's it like? What's it feel like?" We could get into the philosophical aspects of going to the moon. You know, we could do, we could talk here for hours about those kind of things.

KM: Good. We'll put that on the agenda.

GC: Pardon?

KM: We'll put that on the future agenda.

GC: And I think that's a, that's a subject that, I don't know… I talked to a couple of young men yesterday who -- I'm going to talk to a whole group of young FIJIs here tonight, undergraduates, and as a prelude they saw a couple of movies. One was "In the Shadow of the Moon," which is a documentary that came out, which just put eight or ten of us in a chair like this over a period of time, and let us talk about those kinds of things: "Were you afraid you wouldn't get home? Were you scared? Did you feel any closer to God? What did the Earth look like? What were you thinking when you stepped on the moon? How did you feel when you took that final step that you knew was going to be it?" You know we just talked and talked about things today that we would never talk to each other about 30 and 40 years ago. We were too macho, you know. We debriefed the flights,

we said what we had to do, but we never let ourselves come out as individuals as to what we really felt and thought. And I think those kinds of things are worth talking about in the future, because those are the kinds of things that I think future generations need to know. If you had Neil Armstrong and Christopher Columbus sitting side by side here right now, I can almost promise you you'd ask them the same questions. You wouldn't say, "How many kilobits and nanoseconds did it take you to go around the moon and Mr. Columbus, how many square meters did you have in mainsail?" You know, technology has long since been forgotten and overshadowed by time. What you would ask them both is, "Gee Mr. Columbus, gee Mr. Armstrong, did you ever think you might not get home?" Or "Gee Mr. Columbus, were you ever concerned about sailing off the edge of the Earth? And Mr. Armstrong were you ever concerned about hitting too hard on the moon?" You know, you'd ask them the same philosophical, maybe even spiritual questions, and that's what people can relate to today. That hasn't changed and I don't think it ever will change. We haven't changed. You know, we

50:00 got the same heart, the same soul, the same mind. You know. We understand fear and enjoyment and all those things related to different things we've done in our life. And I can promise you that Columbus had the same feelings and thoughts that Neil did.

KM: Right. Good point.

GC: And those are things I think that are worth talking about as we go into the future.

KM: Right; I agree with you. Gene Cernan, I want to thank you very much for this wonderful interview and opportunity to conduct it for our oral history program. Thank you.

End of Interview

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