

# The Personal Side of NASA

By Phil Konstantin/Photos courtesy of NASA

**NASA.** It is hard to say without inspiring a little awe. "NASA" conjures up images of phenomenal feats in space and, unfortunately, heartrending tragedy. But there is another side to NASA and the people that work there — a human side.

Charles "Pete" Conrad has enjoyed a prestigious and varied career with NASA. He was on the

Gemini 5 and 11 missions, the Apollo 12 mission and the first Skylab mission (oddly enough it was called Skylab 2). Pete has even done television commercials for Nikon and American Express ("Do you know me? I once walked on the moon").

During his stay aboard Skylab, Pete went through some very serious withdrawal pains. His object

of dependency? *Butter cookies!*

It started simply. Pete was talk-

*Above: An overhead view of the Skylab space station cluster in Earth orbit on February 8, 1974. It was photographed from the Skylab 4 Command and Service Modules during the final fly-around before returning home.*



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*CHP Officer Phil Konstantin, I.D. 11643, worked in Houston's Mission Control during the end of the Apollo program and throughout the Skylab program. Here, he shares a few personal stories that never made the headlines.*

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ing to his wife, Jane.

Houston: "Pete, your wife wants to talk to you."

Houston (Jane): "Happy birthday, Pete. Are you through eating?"

Skylab (Pete): "Yeah, I'm finished."

Houston: "What did you have?"

Skylab: "I had spaghetti and I'm holding two extra butter cookies tonight to eat with my ice cream to celebrate my birthday."

(Pete was the first astronaut to eat ice cream in space.)

After every meal, the Skylab astronauts had to report exactly what they ate to the doctors and the medical experts on the ground.

Houston: "Could you give us your meal consumption list?"

Skylab: "Sure. Conrad: 100 grams filet mignon, substitute four butter cookies for spinach, substitute butter cookies for broccoli, etc."

But then things began to get serious.

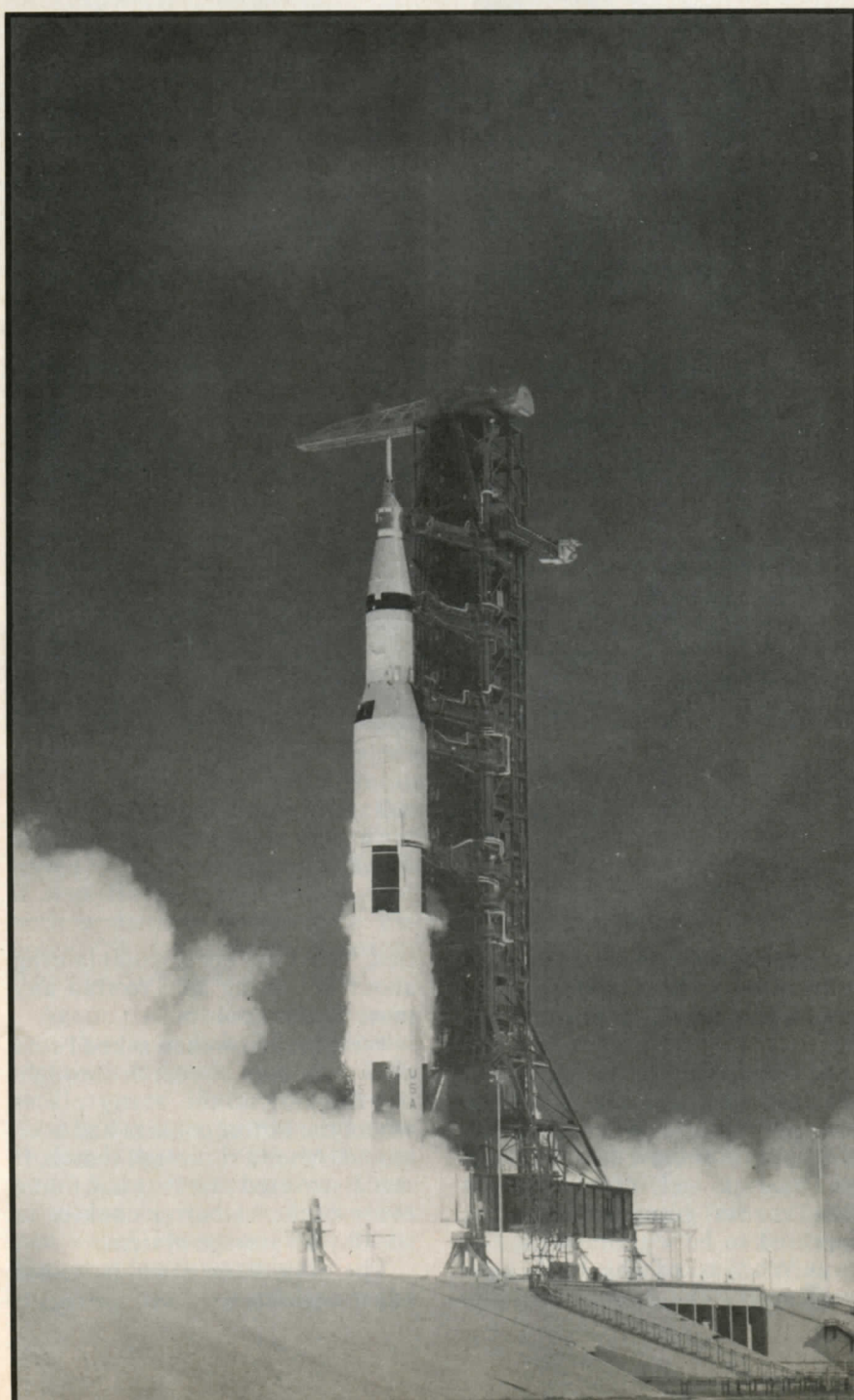
Skylab: "We've been having a very serious discussion. We want to make sure, make very sure that Ticonderoga (their recovery ship) has a large enough supply of butter cookies on board to handle us."

Houston: "Hey, Pete, I tried to eat them out of those things and never could. So, I'm sure they'll

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On July 16, 1969, the 363-foot Apollo 11 spacecraft was launched from Kennedy Space Center at 9:32 a.m. Aboard were Astronauts Neil A. Armstrong, commander, Michael Collins, command module pilot, and Edwin E. Aldrin Jr., lunar module pilot. Four days later, Armstrong and Aldrin made their historic lunar landing.

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*One month before his history-making moonwalk, Astronaut Neil Armstrong, Apollo 11 commander, was training in the Apollo Lunar Module Mission Simulator. His words, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," as he stepped onto the moon's surface on July 20, 1969, are remembered by everyone who watched and listened to the live TV coverage that day.*

have enough for you."

Eventually the inevitable happened: Pete ran out of butter cookies.

All the astronauts are given some medical training in case of emergencies. Late one evening, one of Pete's fellow crew members called Houston and informed them that Pete was going through what appeared to be withdrawal symptoms. When asked what he thought was causing the problem, he rep-

lied, "Well, he keeps complaining about not being able to find any more butter cookies."

Well, Houston then asked Pete's crew members to search throughout Skylab for the many places where the butter cookies had been stored. After a thorough search, it was discovered that Pete had found every cache of butter cookies in the Skylab storage system.

The suggestion from Houston? Sugar cookies.

Too bad! Pete had eaten those, too.

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On Apollo 16 there was broadcast a most unusual monolog. These comments were not meant for anyone in particular, but were the idle chatter of one of the astronauts while performing some routine and boring tasks. I don't believe even he knew that the microphone was on.

"You know, I don't mind the rigorous training I had to go through to get this job. I don't mind being cooped up with two smelly guys. I don't mind the low pay we get when compared to the skills we must have. I don't mind being away from my kids most of the time. I can put up with being separated from my wife for three months due to the quarantine. I can even handle the possibility that I could very easily be killed out here in space. But I'm not going to drink anymore of that G-- D-- Tang!"

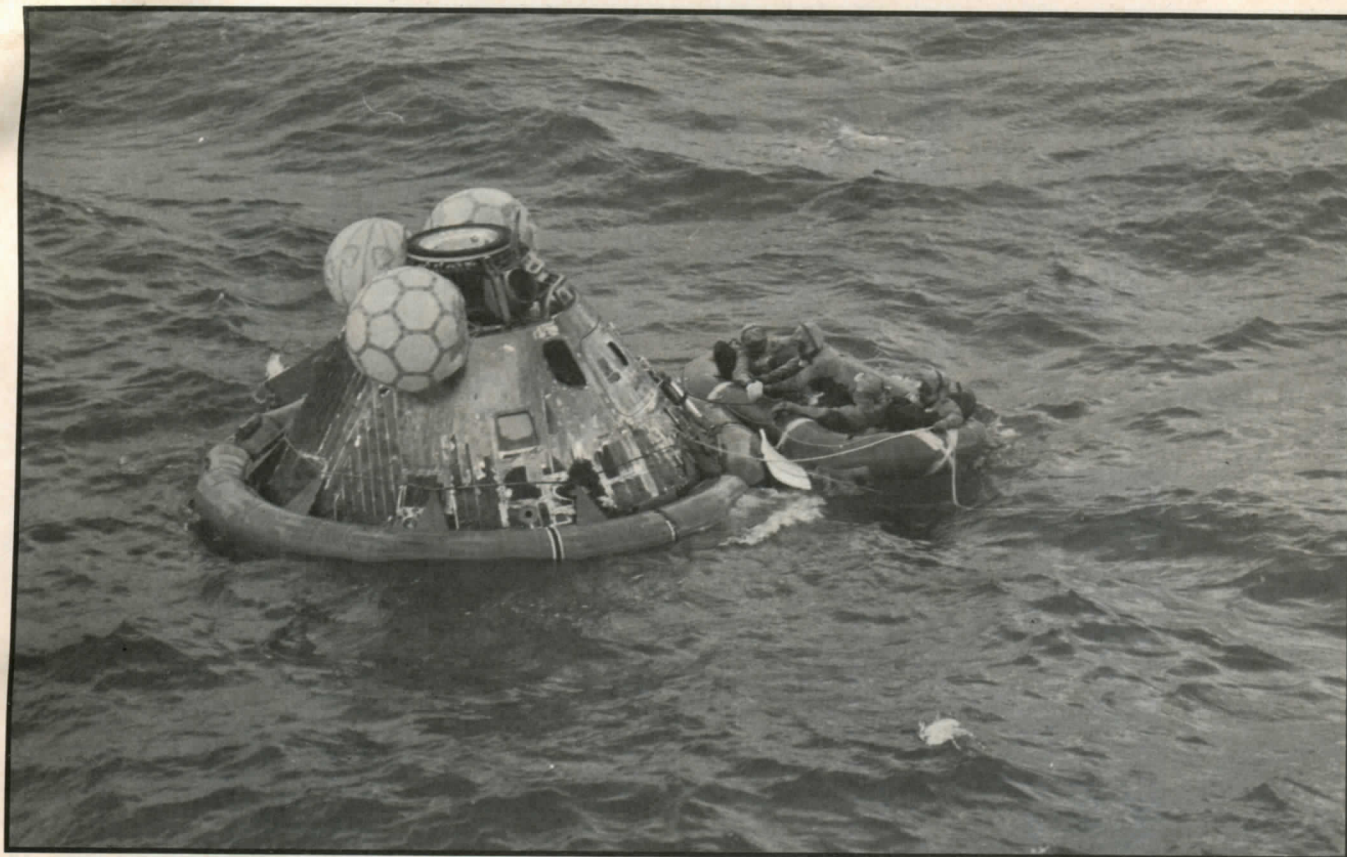
During Apollo 14, the medical people realized that the astronauts were getting dangerously low in certain elements in their bodies from prolonged weightlessness. It was decided to put chemicals in the Tang. To be properly absorbed, the dose had to be very large. And, notwithstanding the old television commercials (for those of you old enough to remember them), one of the astronauts said drinking this "new" Tang was like chewing a piece of gum with the aluminum foil still on it.

I have often wondered if the orange rocks that were found by the Apollo 17 crew might have been Tang dumped by the Apollo 16 crew.

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During a routine press conference, a reporter once asked a question that still makes me wonder about that kind of psychological effect it had on the astronauts.





*The Apollo 11 splashed into the Pacific Ocean on July 24, 1969, at 11:49 a.m. only 12 nautical miles from the USS Hornet, the prime recovery ship for the historic lunar landing mission. The three Apollo 11 crewmen,*

*along with a Navy diver, await pickup by a helicopter from the Hornet. All four men were wearing biological isolation garments.*

"How does it feel going into space in a rocket that was built by the lowest bidder?"

★★★★★

The standard procedure to wake up the astronauts in Skylab was to play some music down the line and then for the "Capcom" (Capsule Communicator—the only person on the direct communications line to the astronauts. He was also a member of the backup crew) to ask the astronauts if they were up yet. The astronauts had an alarm clock and were supposed to set it each day so they would not get behind schedule.

After a particularly long previous day's work, the astronauts did not wake up at the first call. So, Houston played another song and then called again. Again, no answer. Nor was there any response after playing the Marine Corps Hymn, The National Anthem, America the Beautiful, Anchors Aweigh, the Air Force Hymn or even Stagger Lee.

After about 30 minutes of continued efforts to contact the Skylab

crew, a rather sleepy voice said, "Houston, this is Skylab. What can we do for you?" The answer was, "Wake up!"

The next day when it came time to wake up the astronauts, the Capcom played some soothing music and said, "Skylab, this is Houston." A very sultry female voice responded, "Houston, this is Skylab. What can I do for you?"

The Capcom did a double take and looked at the flight controller next to him to see if he had heard it also. He had. So, Capcom said with a distinct question in his voice, "Skylab, this is Houston. Are you guys awake up there?"

Again, the female voice, "Houston, this is Skylab. To whom did you wish to speak?" Houston: "Uh, well, anyone that's up." Female: "Excuse me for a minute Houston. Honey, Houston wants to speak to you." There was a pause, then, "Houston, he wants to know what you want?" Houston: "Well, to be honest, I don't remember!"

During the night, one of the

astronauts had had a completely private talk with his wife. And during their talk, to get back at the ground crew for harassing them about oversleeping, the astronaut recorded his wife's voice saying several things that could fit any greeting the Capcom might send up.

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During the wait between the landing of Apollo 11 and Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon, there was a great amount of impatience by almost everyone watching television for Neil to hurry up and get out. There was a delay of several hours between the landing and those historical first steps on the moon. What was going on during that time?

Well, there were lots of technical things and tests that had to be done before egress, but the best explanation I ever heard came from Neil's wife. When one of Armstrong's sons asked, "Why is daddy taking so long?" his wife, Janet, said, "Oh, daddy's still trying to think of something to say." 5109