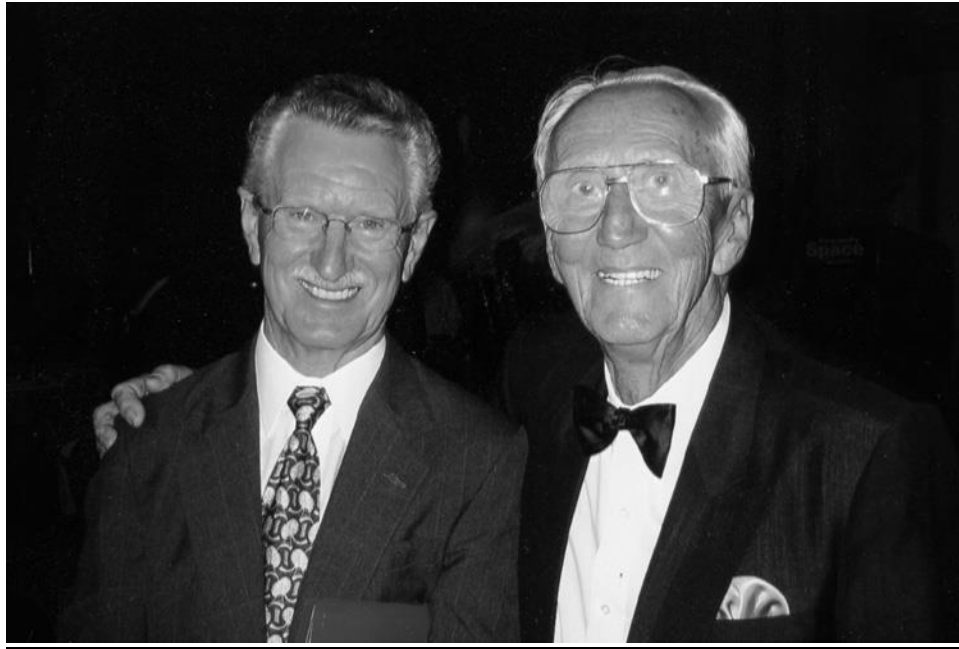


#### 4.1.10 Guenter Franz Wendt



Guenter was born in 1923 in Berlin, Germany. His father immigrated to the USA in 1926, sponsored by an uncle in St. Louis, but then abandoned his family back in Germany and eventually became a US citizen in 1943. Meanwhile Guenter, back in Germany, had completed his apprenticeship in aircraft manufacturing at the Henschel Flugzeugwerke in Berlin in 1942, graduating 34<sup>th</sup> out of 500.

He was immediately drafted into the Luftwaffe, did his basic training in France and then moved to the Flight Test Center at Wenneuchen near Berlin, the Versuchs Anstalt Fur Luftfahrt, to be trained on the early airborne radar systems being installed in German aircraft. He was assigned as a flight engineer/ radar operator to the Junkers 88G night fighter and was primarily engaged in intercepting allied bombers (predominantly B-24's) en route and returning from missions over Germany. He was shot down near Berlin by an British de Havilland Mosquito fighter bomber, He parachuted to safety, worried all the time that the German citizens would kill him and the others in his crew since they expected all parachutists to be the enemy. However they landed safely about 40 miles east of Berlin and learned that the Mosquito that had shot them down had in turn been brought down with its two man crew parachuting to safety in Oranienburg, about 30 miles

northwest of Berlin. They were in a German POW camp for allied airmen and Guenter and his crewmates went to visit them there and share some cigarettes. A short time later his aircraft was shot down, this time by his own German anti-aircraft fire and he had to bale out for a second time – again, luckily, over friendly territory.

As the end of 1944 approached the Luftwaffe literally began to run out of gas and had to curtail their flying. Guenter had a choice of transferring to the SS or to the 5<sup>th</sup> Parachute Division (maybe because of his past bale-out experiences?) under General Rampke. He chose the latter and finished up opposite Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army at the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. He was one of the 12 survivors out of 246 officers and men in his Corps.

Despite all the near misses of 2 years in the military he survived the war and was discharged from the Luftwaffe by the British in Hamburg in the summer of 1945. He then spent the next 4 years in a grim post-war Germany as a vegetable farmer, driving a Red Cross truck and working for Esso to keep body and soul together. In 1949 he reestablished contact with his father in the USA who agreed to sponsor his immigration there and he arrived in St. Louis in the fall of that year to start a new life.

With limitations on his employment still in effect because of his nationality he worked as a truck mechanic and an airline maintenance mechanic and, after securing his A and E license in 1952, as an instructor for Osark Air Lines. He finally took out citizenship in 1955.

As a new US citizen he began work as a structural engineer with McDonnell Aircraft in St. Louis. He moved on to the new manned Mercury space program in 1958 and transferred to Florida in 1959 where he began his reign as the capsule pad leader or "Pad Führer" as John Glenn later named him.

In this role he was the man who controlled the 'White Room', that area around the space capsule that led to the spacecraft hatch. This was his world. He was the last person to 'tuck' in the astronauts and to close the hatch. He was renowned for his tight discipline and organization yet he tempered it with humor and there were many good-natured exchanges between him and the astronauts. With typical Teutonic efficiency he was not one to be outsmarted by the crews and usually gave more than he received in practical jokes. In the process he became close friends with many of the original seven astronauts and spent much personal time with them in the off-hours.

These relationships with the original seven as well as the subsequent astronauts formed the basis for much of his book 'The Unbroken Chain' written in 2001.

He worked all ten of the Mercury flights (four manned) and twelve Gemini flights (ten manned) before being summoned to work for North American Aviation (later North American Rockwell) in 1967 after the tragic Apollo 1 Fire that took the lives of Grissom, White and Chafee. This was to be where our lives would cross, as I was then the supervisor of the Reaction Control Systems Group for NAA and together we would be part of the team that climbed back from the grim days of the fire to the eventual landing of men on the moon in 1969.



Helmet Day in 1984

Guenter and I exchanged many good-natured barbs back and forth over the years but always had a good relationship. He respected my engineering knowledge and I respected his discipline and concerns for the safety of the crews, both astronauts and the ground personnel. We had a mixed bag of people in those hectic Apollo years and one shift I was working a problem on the operational communications net with Guenter and José Valin, our electrical power engineer. My English accent, Guenter's German accent and

José's Mexican accent totally floored the good old USA technician I was working with who declared "Doesn't anyone on this program speak American?"

If Guenter had one flaw it was that he enjoyed interfacing with the press more than our company management liked and this caused a real rift between him and our big boss Tom O'Malley, the VP and GM at Florida. Tom tried to get Guenter off the program more than once but Guenter had friends in high places and always managed to circumvent O'Malley's plans. Eventually O'Malley retired and Guenter continued on in the shuttle program finally coming to work for me as the Orbiter Safety Engineer in the new Launch Support Services Group after Lockheed took over the operations contract.

We worked together for the remaining 5 years of Guenter's employment with Rockwell and again enjoyed a great working relationship. One day we had an "oddball hat" day at work and we both came in WW II helmets. Alan Shepard had presented his German helmet to him prior to the Apollo 14 flight, an event that greatly perturbed the senior NASA wheels that were very sensitive about the political ramifications since it had been seen on national TV. We all just laughed it off.

Guenter retired in 1989 and was feted by astronauts and fellow workers alike. He didn't slip slowly into the background, however, but spent much time working with Hollywood, Tom Hanks in particular, as a consultant on several space movies, assisted in the recovery of Mercury capsule, Liberty Bell 7 from the depths of the ocean and co-authored the book on his career in the space world - "The Unbroken Chain". He was indeed one of manned space flights "characters"- a link with the past but with his eyes on the future. Many lives were in his hands during those eventful years and he never lost one!

He passed away in 2010.