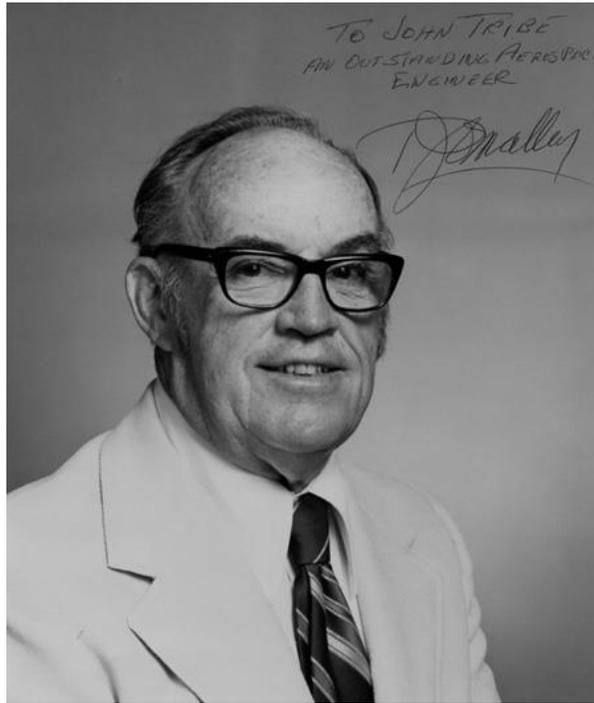


4.1.4 Thomas Joseph O'Malley



Tom O'Malley, TJ, the FBI, King of the Wee Ones – he went by many names, some not as respectful – was born in Montclair, NJ in 1915, one of eight children of Irish immigrants. He was educated at the Newark College of Engineering – now the Newark Institute of Technology – and graduated with a BSME.

He started in aerospace at the Wright Aeronautical Corporation in Patterson, NJ, in 1940 and spent 18 years with them finishing up as Division Manager of Experimental Test. In 1958 he accepted a job with Convair Astronautics, a Division of General Dynamics, at Cape Canaveral Atlantic Missile Range in Florida. He became a Test Conductor (or Site Manager) first at complex 11 and then at complex 14, the site for the Atlas/Mercury launches. His move to complex 14 was driven by Convair's need to place some strong leadership there at the behest of Walt Williams, the dynamic NASA Mercury Program Manager. One of Tom's earliest lessons from Walt was he should never use the expression "no sweat" as an answer to any concern brought up and this lesson was subsequently Tom's mantra throughout the rest of his career. As the complex 14 test conductor he led the checkout and launch of the first six Mercury program launches culminating in the

successful launch of the first US astronaut into orbit, John Glenn, in February 1962.

It was during this time that I first came to meet Tom and his assistant test conductor, George Page – two names that would be part of my career for the next 35 years. I was the periscope observer on complex 13 so that we could look at the back side of the Atlas on complex 14 during one of John Glenn’s launch attempts and that morning I’d overslept. Charging out to the Cape I found that all the roadblocks were established and the blockhouse secured for launch. I called into the complex 14 blockhouse and found that Tom and George were ticked at me but they did have the guards allow me in and opened up the blockhouse for me. Not a very encouraging first impression with a man who I’d been told was the FBI incarnate (the ‘BI’ stood for Big Irishman!).

Another of Tom’s claims to fame at that time was to be the “Mystery Guest” on “What’s My Line”, a popular TV program in those days. He was, of course, unknown by sight but would be recognized as the man who pushed the button that launched Glenn (we really did have an engine start button plus a big red cutoff button in those days). We watched the show with trepidation, fearing the worse, because Tom had, to say it mildly, a very colorful vocabulary and could be relied upon to use it if he was tweaked. Luckily he wasn’t and he restrained himself admirably thereby depriving the national TV audience of one of his more entertaining sides (entertaining if you were not on the receiving end!).



After Glenn's flight and a stint as Chief Test Conductor Tom took a Chief Project Engineer's job up at the Electric Boat Division of General Dynamics in Quincy, Massachusetts. The Navy subsequently scrubbed the program he was working on and Tom found himself being recalled to Florida with a new challenge – assume leadership of the North American Aviation (NAA) Apollo Command and Service Module test and checkout following the disastrous Apollo 1 fire in early 1967. Once again many of us old Atlas guys who were now working for NAA would be back working for O'Malley and somehow it felt comfortable even as we realized that once more we would be exposed to a leader who was not appreciative of screw-ups. One guy described a session with him where he would be trying to explain why he had made a bad decision while Tom, meanwhile, had flipped open his skull and put an eggbeater in it to straighten him out! It could be a very daunting experience.

Tom was a great one for getting in early and doing the rounds and for showing up unannounced in the middle of the night (we were working round the clock in those days). One night he came upon some technicians asleep in the basement of the Operations and Checkout Building and fired them on the spot. Unfortunately the techs worked for Grumman, not North American so Tom was embarrassed. To preclude that ever happening again he instituted a uniform of blue shirts and pants for all his technicians and quality inspectors. The rig became known as 'O'Malley Blues' and lasted throughout the 70's. In retrospect seeing the working troops in their blues presented a much more professional look than the tee shirts and jeans of today's workers.

With Tom at the helm we successfully landed on the moon in 1969 and when Buzz Hello moved up to head the B-1 program in California Tom became Vice President and General Manager of Florida Operations for NAA (by then North American Rockwell and then finally Rockwell International). He steered us through the rest of the Apollo program, Skylab, ASTP and into the shuttle era. He finally retired in 1982 after the first two Shuttle launches. By then I had spent nearly 19 years working under him and today, in 2007, he's 91 years old and still going strong – not quite as solid on his pins but his mind is as focused as ever. It's often easy to forget we don't work for him still.

Tom's presence at KSC was always felt – he was never a shrinking violet and met every challenge head on. He made hard decisions and, sometimes,

(depending on your viewpoint) wrong decisions, but he was never wishy-washy and you always knew where he stood on an issue. He backed his people to the hilt externally yet he was a tough taskmaster internally administering justice ruthlessly when he felt it was warranted. He was somewhat feared but always respected by the customer – he never forgot who paid the bills – and you would not hear him tell NASA that a job wasn't in the contract ... he'd take care of it. He is understandingly recognized as one of the Cape institutions during a remarkable period of launch and exploration.

August 2013 Some further words on Tom ...

Tom passed away in November 2009. He was 94. Immediately prior to his death he was in Cape Canaveral Hospital and I wrote to John Glenn in Virginia and asked him to make one last call to Tom – it would be a real booster for him I believed. John called me while I was en route to the hospital and Melinda told him I would be with Tom shortly. When I reached his bed he was barely conscious but recognized me. The phone in his room rang and one of his granddaughters answered it. She looked bewildered and said its John 'somebody' wanting to talk with my grandfather. I took the phone, said hello to John and explained the situation there. I told Tom it was John Glenn and held the phone for him. Tom said "Hi John" and then listened for a few moments. I don't think he heard much of whatever John said to him because he did not have his hearing aid in but he appeared to be concentrating and his eyes were open. He said goodbye and I took the phone from him and thanked John for calling. Tom became comatose shortly after that and died the next morning.

One of the last things he asked of myself and another friend and fellow co-worker, Lee Solid, several days earlier was "to take care of things' after he was gone i.e. help his family and particularly his wife Anne sort things out. One of her requests to us was to facilitate scattering his ashes at the entrance to Complex 14 near to Tom's Guiding Light.

Neither Lee nor I was quite sure what his "Guiding Light" was but this became clear later. The request was forwarded to the KSC Deputy Center Director who tasked KSC Security to make it happen. They worked with CCAFS Security and the ceremony was arranged. The immediate family (5) plus Lee, KSC Security and myself attended the short ceremony as his ashes were dispersed behind the Mercury Memorial at Complex 14.

Shortly after this occasion Anne O'Malley called me and asked if some sort of memorial could be placed at the site. Again Lee and I asked the deputy USAF Base Commander at Patrick AFS in January 2010 if a plaque could be placed in that area. He said he didn't see a problem and asked his staff to work with us. Meanwhile I designed and commissioned a plaque and support stand to be built by the American Bronze Foundry in Sanford, which would cost the O'Malley family some \$1200. After a long negotiation with various USAF and civilian personnel approval was finally realized in August 2010 and a short ceremony with the immediate family celebrated its installation. It was located across from the Mercury Monument next to a lamp standard that was also part of the O'Malley lore. In the early 60's when Tom would come out to Complex 14 in the early hours he invariably missed the turn in the pitch darkness of that area of the Cape. His "friends" on the base arranged for a special lamp standard to be erected at the entrance to Complex 14 and mounted to the pole, and still there today, was a small brass plaque that read "O'Malley's Guiding Light".

2 years later at another small ceremony we placed Anne O'Malley's ashes with Tom's.

Today tour busses stop and hear about this aerospace legend and his light and to see his memorial plaque. In 2012 I took John Glenn to see it.

Footnote:

When Tom's nemesis, Guenter Wendt (see separate article on him) passed away in 2010 I made the mistake of telling his daughter that we had placed O'Malley's ashes under the bushes behind the Mercury Memorial at the entrance to Complex 14. She thought that was a grand idea and arranged to do the same with Guenter's, much to my horror. Every time I go by that bush now I expect to see it catching fire!

