

4.1.6 Rocco A. Petrone



Rocco Petrone was one of the most influential architects of the Apollo Saturn program in the 1960's – the driving force behind the launch team and launch facilities at the Kennedy Space Center that were required to send Apollo to the moon. Subsequent NASA roles as Apollo Program Director and Center Director at the Marshall Space Flight Center and finally as President of Rockwell International Space Division, were equally important but did not have the same impact that his commanding presence ensured during his tenure at KSC.

He was born the son of an Italian immigrant in New York in 1926. He attended the US Military Academy at West Point, playing defensive tackle in the 1945 national football championship team. He earned his masters degree from MIT in 1951 and during his 20 years in the army he participated in the development of the Redstone missile and it's growth into the launch vehicle used to propel Alan Shepard and Gus Grissom on their sub-orbital

missions in 1961. It was during this time that he began his close association with Dr Kurt Debus, the first KSC Center Director and one of Werner Von Braun's key engineers from Peenemunde - the original architect of the launch facilities for the German V 2 rocket. When President Kennedy set the Apollo goal in 1961 and KSC was selected to be the launch site Debus borrowed Petrone from the US Army to be his launch director. Petrone subsequently retired from the army with the rank of colonel.

In his new role Rocco was to oversee the design and build of the largest launch complex in the world for the mighty Saturn V that would carry men to the moon and back. Also he would need to shape and lead a huge task force of government and contractor workers in establishing the test, checkout and launch requirements for all stages of the rocket and the spacecraft elements, the command and service modules and the lunar module as well as the infrastructure necessary to accomplish these tasks – some 26,000 workers at the peak. All the greatest aerospace companies in the USA were involved in some role or another with their established leaders well respected in their own rights with commensurate large egos. It was a daunting task to coordinate such a workforce but Rocco rose to the task as if he had been born to it. He assured that we did, in fact, walk on the moon before the decade was out.

I first met him on a face-to-face basis when we had an oxidizer spill down the side of the Saturn 1B launch vehicle for Apollo 7. As the propulsion group supervisor I led the North American Aviation contingent into his office and he blistered me for an hour. His presence was imposing – a big barrel-chested man, as befitting a defensive tackle, with a severe demeanor, almost a scowl, as he talked to you from behind his large government desk. I was suitably cowed but didn't try to make light of our problems – just agreed to fix them and not let it happen again. Apparently that was the right approach. I learned later that he had no tolerance for BS and if you tried it you were mincemeat. From that time on we always had a respectful working relationship, which became closer as the years passed.

My next close involvement with Rocco was when he took over as President of Rockwell International Space Division in California (the successor to NAA) in 1981 thereby becoming my big boss. Shortly after he took command the hyper troops working on preparing STS 2 for launch had another major oxidizer spill – this time down the side of the shuttle orbiter. Propellant servicing was not my responsibility on this occasion but in a déjà

vu scenario that reflected back on that other oxidizer spill 13 years previously, I was brought in to head up the investigation and subsequently to take over and manage the orbiter propulsion, fuel cell and environmental groups.

Rockwell lost out as the shuttle processing contractor (SPC) to the Lockheed Company in 1985 and our launch team at KSC dropped from 2500 to about 300 people. It was a traumatic time for many and I was fortunate to stay on as the Director of Launch Support Services (LSS) – the Rockwell engineering arm that was necessary to be on site to support Lockheed and assure that the design limitations of the orbiter were always met by the SPC. My interfaces with Rocco became common and he would always have me in to his office at Downey for a “chat” when I was at the home plant. His recall of events 30 years previous was amazing as was the detail he could expound on.

His continued resentment of Lockheed in the operator’s role festered with him and because of that his interfaces with NASA were always somewhat tenuous, as he tended to continue to act like the Associate Administrator he had once been and the senior NASA management were not receptive to his posturing and dictatorial attitudes. This came to a head at the time of the Challenger accident when he became enraged with the screw-ups and delays resulting from poor decisions and mistakes by the SPC during one launch attempt after the other. He had been at KSC for these launch attempts but decided to return to Downey before the final and fatal attempt on January 28th 1986. The ensuing debacle on whether Rockwell was go for launch or not on that morning of the launch would not have happened if he had been present – the decision was made by his two vice presidents still at KSC – and the lives of 7 astronauts may not have been lost.

He did not fare well after the Challenger accident and his continued belaboring of NASA over the SPC resulted in a diminished effectiveness as the Division President and he finally retired in 1988. He passed away in August 2006 but the legacy of him as the Apollo Launch Director lives on among us old-timers that worked with him during that exciting and demanding time.