

William Heink

by Suzanne B. Bopp
Alumnews Staff Writer

Bill Heink grew up in California and has lived in Florida since 1964, but he feels his roots are really in Wyoming.

He came to the Cowboy State in 1958 because his father, who worked in logistics with Convair, was transferred to Cheyenne to work on the Atlas missile activation. "He asked me to come along and go to UW," Heink says. "It turned out to be the best decision I ever made because I met my wife there."

That wasn't the only reason it was a great decision; Heink loved his UW experience. "What I thought made UW a great place to go was that it had the same small town, small school feel as my hometown of La Jolla," Heink says. "Classes were small, people knew each other. You were more than just a number on a chart. You had the feeling the University cared about you. I was probably a fairly immature kid who had a propensity for being a smart mouth, but the professors took me under their wing and I got a great education."

He's pleased to note that things have not changed much in the years since. His oldest daughter came to UW to study special education, graduating in 1990. "The atmosphere and people and feeling is still the same, even though it's grown bigger," he says.

His fond memories of his college years include one particular spring afternoon football game, when it was snowing so hard he and his friends couldn't see across the field, but they stayed nevertheless. "We figured if they were playing, we'd be there," he says. He also recalls being in the engineering building the day the brand new petroleum lab blew up, blowing glass all over. "It made a very

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also been involved in Boy Scouts, "it seems like all my life," having joined when he was eight and being registered almost continuously since, assuming various leadership roles along the way. This year he was given the Silver Beaver award, the highest honor a scout council can give to a volunteer scouter. Heink also serves on numerous boards and committees.

As successful as he's been, his family has been his greatest pride: his wife, Mary Lou, and their three children Karl, Jobie and Leta, and their eight grandchildren. Heink and his wife also have hosted seven foreign exchange students through the years, all of whom are still in



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big noise," Heink reports.

Heink grew up in the aerospace industry, but his decision to study engineering was not due to his father's inspiration. "Quite the opposite," he says. "He was not an engineer, and he often spoke in very derogatory terms about engineers. It was always, 'You can't believe what those engineers want me to do now.'" Nevertheless, both his parents were extremely supportive of his decision to pursue an engineering career, and Heink had no doubts himself. "I had a natural interest in things technical and especially electrical," he says, which expressed itself in the young Heink in the form of household experiments. "I wonder how I managed never to burn the house down," he says.

After graduation, Convair offered Heink a job that took him to Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, the west coast rocket launch base still used today. In the working world, he discovered that UW's small-school feel had come alongside an excellent education. "In all honesty, one of the things that pleased and surprised me in dealing with people from other, bigger schools, was that my education in engineering was probably stronger than theirs."

It was at Vandenberg that he found his future. "I went out there and saw my first real rocket launch and I was hooked," he says. He would spend the rest of his career launching rockets. But he didn't stay at Vandenberg long; Heink was soon chosen to go to Cape Canaveral and help build a new launch pad there. He worked on that pad for a couple of years before NASA decided that the pad was unnecessary and work was halted. Heink decided to see what other jobs might be around. It turned out to be a good time to be in the rocket launching business: the year was 1965 and the Apollo program was getting into full swing. "I threw my application in and went to work for Boeing on the Apollo program," Heink says.

The Apollo program would last for 10 years, what Heink describes as "a very busy time in my life. I was working 80-hour weeks. I'd sometimes get home and find pictures of my three kids on the kitchen table next to a cold dinner, just to remind me that I still had a family!"

During that time, he helped launch the Saturn V, the biggest rocket the U.S. has ever flown - longer than a football field, developing 7.5 million pounds of thrust at lift-off. Walter Cronkite came to cover its first launch. "They built what they thought was a very nice press box in a trailer, three and a half miles from the launch pad," Heink says. "But when we launched, we damn near destroyed the trailer from the acoustic vibrations."

The huge window, through which Cronkite was to watch the launch, was bending in and out; he was trying to hold it and prevent it from shattering as the ceiling tiles fell down around him. All while the broadcast continued.

As a member of the Apollo launch team, Heink got 14 manned missions under his belt, including the six that landed on the moon.

He predicts a bright future for space travel and has no doubt we'll go back to the moon. "I think the moon will likely serve as a staging base for mankind's move out into the solar system," he says. "Man has an innate desire to explore. There will be slowdowns and setbacks.

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"My strongest recollection is surprisingly not Apollo 11, the first one we landed on the moon, but Apollo 8, a lunar orbiting mission and certainly the gutsiest move NASA ever made," he says. It was the third launch of Saturn V, and the first one with people. "The Russians were breathing down our necks. NASA decided to take a three-man crew and fly them to the moon."

The tradition is that once the Kennedy Space Center launch is completed, the responsibility for the mission gets turned over to Houston. "For the launch team, it's party time." Heink was on his way to join the party, but stuck in a traffic jam.

"It was a beautiful morning," he says. "You could look up directly overhead and see the moon. I was listening to the car radio talking about the mission when the astronauts, orbiting over Hawaii, conducted the engine burn that sent them on the way to the moon. Tears ran down my face. Mankind had never done anything like that before." Now, more than 30 years later, Heink still gets choked up speaking of it.

After working his way through a series of engineering management positions, Heink eventually found himself in charge of the Boeing Space Shuttle operation at the Kennedy Space Center when he was appointed Site Director of Florida Operations in 1998.

"It seemed to be a natural culmination of a lifetime career in the rocket-launching business, and the job was truly a dream come true because of all the outstanding people I had working on my team," he says.

Somehow, Heink has found time for many other pursuits away from the launch pads, such as being a part of the National Management Association for years, and serving as national chairman of its board in 1995. He's

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