

FROM THE director

A MESSAGE FROM CENTER DIRECTOR MICHAEL L. COATS



Hurricane season

Hurricane season is once again upon us. While Rita spared us a direct hit last year, we all saw the incredible devastation caused by Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi. One of my biggest concerns is that because of Rita's "false alarm" and the severe problems of the evacuation, many people will decide to ride out the next storm. I would remind everyone that your first responsibility is for the safety of your family and yourself. I sat through Hurricane Alicia in 1983 with my family, which was only a Category 3 storm, and lost half our house when a small twister tore off a corner of the roof and torrential rains caused the ceilings and walls to crumble. After surviving for 10 days with no power, and hence no air conditioning in August (I think my wife missed the ice more than anything), we elected thereafter to evacuate early whenever a hurricane threatened Houston. We used each event as an opportunity to take our daughter and son to see different colleges in Texas. Our daughter ended up going to Baylor, which I'll always associate with Hurricane Gilbert.

A Category 4 or 5 storm is deadly serious, as evidenced by the overwhelming destruction in New Orleans and along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In a worst-case scenario, much of this area could be under several feet of water, including as much as 12 feet here at JSC. Unfortunately we seem to be in a cycle of frequent and strong hurricanes, so there may well be several major hurricanes this season. We will close the Johnson Space Center as soon as we reasonably can if a major hurricane threatens us, but by the time it's an obvious threat and meets the "Level 2" closure criteria (meaning a "high probability that severe weather conditions pose a threat to the center within 36 hours") the evacuation routes will be crowded. The JSC policy has always been to encourage "liberal leave" for anyone desiring to evacuate early. To be clear, this means you may have to take some personal vacation days until JSC officially closes. During my 20 years in Houston I learned to put aside a few "hurricane vacation days" to evacuate early with my family. Please review the latest updated hurricane plans and procedures. If you have any questions, be sure and let us know. One lesson we've learned is to be prepared in case you have to evacuate, and when you do make the decision to leave, LEAVE NOW! Family has to come first.

Look for a special JSC hurricane emergency planning brochure in May.

JSC's storytellers

by Brad Thomas

It is the job of the Office of Communications and Public Affairs (PAO) to provide information about Johnson Space Center and NASA to internal and external audiences. PAO's 70 team members provide information on all aspects of JSC through numerous avenues—television, media relations, the Internet, a speaker's bureau, special events and internal communications.

Even though it is one event, a space shuttle mission is among the group's greatest challenges. As with many mission support functions at JSC, PAO's preparations for a particular mission can begin more than a year before launch and the amount of mission-related work increases over time. Once a space shuttle lifts off, PAO team members begin about 11 to 14 days of intense story-telling.

PAO News Chief James Hartsfield said a shuttle flight focuses and strengthens the PAO team. Although other projects must still be supported, they sometimes have to take a back seat. "When we fly a shuttle mission, we all turn our attention to that mission," he said.

MISSION PREP

During non-mission periods, PAO mingles its shuttle preparation activities with day-to-day operations. The preparations include the creation of press kits, Web pages, video productions, collateral materials and graphics. Most of this work is performed in Buildings 2 North and 2 South. PAO team members also participate in mission simulations and attend flight control team meetings and planning sessions, ensuring public affairs activities are integrated into the flight

plan. Opportunities are identified and planned that will allow the media to interview the crew in-flight, and a comprehensive television schedule of mission events and broadcasts is produced.

The non-shuttle-related activities are numerous. They include space station support, media campaigns, protocol tours, public affairs support for all of JSC's directorates, internal communications and production of collateral materials such as fact sheets and posters. PAO also sends its team members and volunteers from around the center to work at offsite events, such as the International Festival, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and the NBA All-Star Jam Session.

Meanwhile, there are PAO team members in Building 4 who work closely with the Astronaut Office. They handle local, national and international interview requests for the Astronaut Office and provide public relations advice and counsel to astronauts and management.

PAO also supports the Astronaut Appearance Office. Flight Crew Operations PAO Representative Doug Peterson said they assist in the process of scheduling astronaut appearances. NASA's astronauts make about 800 appearances per year. "No matter if we are flying or not, astronauts still go out to speak," Peterson said.

Peterson said regardless of whether a mission is imminent, there are a number of media requests to interview and film flight crews.

A camera operator catches the action for the Public Affairs Office.

continued on page 4

“On the media side, there is a steady stream of documentaries,” Peterson said. “We help coordinate visits, assess proposals and serve as liaison for the astronauts,” Peterson said. “Our primary goal is to get good coverage without letting it interfere with crew training.”

About six weeks before a scheduled shuttle launch, PAO holds preflight briefings for media featuring the crew, flight controllers and Space Shuttle Program managers. These briefings explain the flight’s activities and objectives and help media plan their coverage. The mission press kit is usually released at this point. The briefings usually mark a milestone in preflight activities.

PRIME-TIME NARRATION

Even though PAO’s preparations for a mission are extensive, the pace of support changes instantaneously once the journey to space begins.

Like numerous groups at JSC, PAO provides 24-hour support for shuttle missions in orbit, but there is one source of mission support that sets the stage for the other areas in PAO. “There is one primary stream of information during a mission: the broadcast stream from Mission Control,” Hartsfield said.

NASA TV provides around-the-clock coverage of a space shuttle mission, with a member of the Public Affairs team providing commentary from inside the Mission Control Center (MCC). Periodic news conferences, with key program managers and flight operations personnel, are also broadcast during the mission.

The commentator is a member of the MCC team and has the call sign PAO, which stands for Public Affairs Officer. The PAO in Mission Control provides mission commentary to explain air-to-ground transmissions and flight control operations to the media and public, and essentially acts as the interface between MCC and the outside world.

Kyle Herring is JSC’s lead commentator. He said that a commentary team is usually assigned a year in advance, and that serving as a commentator in Mission Control requires extra effort due to the subject matter and the nine-hour shifts on console. “Learning about the mission is critical. You study like you are in school,” Herring said. “From a broadcasting standpoint, it is the only position that stays on for nine hours.” During a shuttle mission, the commentator must follow what is taking place in both the station and shuttle flight control rooms.

When the shuttle is not in flight, PAO produces a daily live broadcast and commentary to update the progress of expeditions aboard the International Space Station. Similar broadcasts are produced live for all dynamic station activities, like dockings and spacewalks. PAO also produces a live broadcast of Soyuz launches and landings that include astronauts, a task that includes sending PAO personnel to Moscow and Kazakhstan.

Hartsfield said NASA TV is primarily designed to serve the media, providing commercial outlets with the

information and imagery they need to cover a mission. But many cable and satellite providers also offer NASA TV to their viewers.

FILLING IN THE GAPS

PAO’s hub during a mission is in Buildings 2S and 2N. The television and audio control rooms are located in 2S, where most of the NASA TV “behind-the-scenes” work takes place.

PAO’s NASA TV personnel produce on-orbit crew public affairs events during a mission in addition to the continuous live broadcast of activities. Some of the in-flight events can involve three different media organizations during a 20-minute time slot or, when international crew members are involved, with media at multiple locations around the world.

A flurry of activity is often found in 2N’s newsroom. The newsroom staff provides background and timely information to the media. The newsroom is sometimes open 24 hours a day, as it was during STS-114.



Catherine Borsché, writer, Joanne Hale, Space Center Roundup editor and Kendra Phipps, JSC Features editor.

NASA/BHR JSC2008E14032

Newsroom personnel can spend hours on the phone fielding questions from media around the world or holding face-to-face conversations with reporters. The newsroom team members gather information for and prepare status reports, press releases and briefings.

Working with the newsroom are other members of PAO who escort and assist media who set up shop on site. During STS-114, dozens of media from around the world were located in the Teague Auditorium Lobby and at Building 9. A number are expected to visit the center again for STS-121.

While media have visited JSC for decades, a relatively new tool at the disposal of PAO is the Internet. Hartsfield said the Internet has caused the biggest change in the way things are done during his 18 years with NASA. “The Internet is a great pipeline to the public,” Hartsfield said. “The Internet team strives to put out a product that directly reaches the general public, is easily understood and is interesting.”

The five-member Web team can provide information to the media and public within a matter of minutes. The team provides information via www.nasa.gov and spends months building pages, preparing graphics and creating features in preparation for shuttle and station missions. During a 10-day shuttle mission, hundreds of updates can take place, including summaries of events, up-to-the-minute snippets, graphics and features. Similar updates take place during dynamic space station operations.

The Internal Communications Team, whose primary job is to keep the JSC workforce informed on day-to-day activities, must continue to do its regular job and provide mission support. This support can involve creating special editions of the Roundup, writing stories for JSC Features or lending a hand to the newsroom or Web teams.

After the shuttle lands, there are still several public relations events that PAO supports, such as the crew return ceremony at Ellington Field and events around the country during the next month or so.



Public Affairs Writer/Producer Tim Allen (left) and Camera Operator Tom Youngblood film an event in the Teague Auditorium.

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Public Affairs Audio Engineer Greg Wiseman works in the Audio Control Room as Live Television Producer Victor Scott is at the board in the Production Control Room during International Space Station commentary.

NASA/BHR JSC2008E14035

As it does for many teams at JSC, Hartsfield said a space shuttle flight pulls PAO together and boosts morale.

“The day after a flight has landed, everyone is always exhausted. But there is no better feeling than the pride many in PAO feel when they look back at the job they just completed and the teamwork it took to make it happen,” he said.