

ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

DENNIS WEBB
INTERVIEWED BY RICH DINKEL
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DINKEL: I'm Rich Dinkel. Today is Sunday, the 25th of January, 1998. We're presently at 37,000 feet flying between Moscow, Russia, and Keflavik, Iceland. With me I have Dennis Webb, who's been here in Moscow for the last ten days with me. Dennis has had an interesting experience while he's been over there, and we're going to talk about it.

Dennis, before we get started on that, why don't you tell us what the origin of your trip is and was, and what your normal job is and what you were doing.

WEBB: Okay, Rich. My name is Dennis Webb. I am the manager for ISS [International Space Station] Integration in the Mission Operations Directorate [MOD]. I've been working on Space Station for approximately thirteen years with a couple of little side trips into the Phase One Program and some other things.

I hadn't been to Russia in three years. Three years ago I went with the Phase One to support, do mission assurance on the *Mir* Space Station during Norm Thagard's first flight. So not that I'm an experienced Russian traveler. I had been here, so I had a sense of what to expect. But I have no language skills.

My job coming on the trip was to represent the operations community, kind of a corrupted term that we seem to use, which in the past Cheryl Dapp of the Program Office had supported JPRs and GDRs, and we're in the process of a devolution of operations integration responsibilities.

We went to Moscow. My organization has been supporting the Space Station Program and sending people to Russia for quite some time, but not much at the executive

level. So this trip was kind of a first outing for us in my organization, sending a senior manager for these kind of meetings.

The only attractive thing about the trip was it was going to include a side trip to Baikonur, Kazakhstan, to see the launch facilities. This would be as we were getting close to launching the first element of the Space Station from this very remote place, so not that I was excited about going to Russia, in fact tried to weasel out of it several times, I thought, well, this will be good and I'll be able to serve my program.

A little story before we get to the main story. I was added very late to the manifest. If you're traveling internationally, particularly to Russia, you don't want to be late about anything; you want to be early. You want to have your visa in hand a week before. The previous time I'd gone, I met my visa in Washington, D.C., and ended up having to be arriving by myself with no friends the first time, which was kind of frightening, even more so frightening back then.

So anyway, we applied for my visa two weeks before the airplane comes up, which is against all the rules and somebody has to pay a fine to get it to work. It'll come back and it'll all work out. They were trying to get the airplane full, so I felt like it was a lot of policy helping my visa show up on time. The program bosses really wanted a person from my organization on the trip. So we apply for my visa late. I get a phone call and says, "Okay, it's come in. But yours had a mistake. It was single entry, we need two entry visas in order to go to Baikonur and come back. So we've sent yours back."

I say, "Boy, I'm glad they found that out before we left." So I felt good.

Well, the visa show up literally the day before we get on the airplane. My secretary goes off to get it, hands it to me. We meet each other running across the center. I'm getting my shots and all kinds of stuff. So I think, "Oh, good, I've got my visa."

Then I send a couple E-mails the day before saying, "Is double-entry thing—?"

"Oh, yeah, everything's fine. Everything's fine."

So, come to Russia, had probably the lightest case of jet lag I ever had, perked up the first day. Had a lovely time, was well-adjusted. I didn't have a big speaking role to the early meeting, so it was largely a vacation, observational thing. I was paying attention to what was going on. Takes you a little while to get into the rhythm of listening to Russians and the translations of their speech. So I thought, "Ah, this is good, before I have to get into serious negotiation," as we were going to do later, that I'd have the chance to watch my leaders and friends do it with their counterparts. So that's what we did with the general designers' review and the roll-out of the first Space Station module produced by Krunichev.

The schedule comes up saying, okay, be in the lobby 7:30 in the morning to get on the airplane on Tuesday, I think it was, to go to Baikonur. It was going to be a several-hour trip. Baikonur is the launch facility used by the Russian space agency and it is in Kazakhstan. They picked Kazakhstan as part of the southeast. The closer you are to the equator, the more help a rocket gets when it's lifting off; it gets some help by the rotation of the Earth. If you were to launch from the north pole, you would have to provide every bit of escape velocity to get up. The closer you are to the equator, you get a little bit of help by the Earth's rotation. Kind of a neat thing.

DINKEL: It's also in the boondocks.

WEBB: Oh, yeah, it's also in the boondocks. In fact, one of our fellow travelers, when we were flying back from Baikonur, said we traveled 750 miles from the launch site before he ever saw a town. Although there was a railroad, which was why they picked it.

So anyway, we go to Baikonur. We leave fairly early. We go on one of the company's jets. The Krunichev Corporation provides one of the major launch vehicles that they use down there, the Proton. They have a business jet that's goes back and forth, but

obviously it's not going to be full, unless there's a big delegation or a launch happening. So they apparently sell passages to other people.

So we had to go to this little what I call a large general aviation airport on, I guess, the west end of Moscow and we check in. It was kind of a dingy, like a lot of Russian stuff is, it was a dingy airport. But it had a certain--it had a style to it. It was obviously done during a very prosperous time of the sixties. In fact, I like airport architecture.

Anyway, so we go, we check in. Barely even have tickets because we're getting on the corporate jet. I have this vision of, ah, we'll be hugging stewardesses and drinking mini drinks in first class. Well, in the curiously Russian way, when you get into a situation where there's a privileged group and a non-privileged group, it gets sorted out without any words and almost without any gestures. Well, me and my friends, we ended up not in first class, and all the people who seemed to belong in first class end in first class. But the food was wonderful. The airline was operated by Aeroflot, or the airplane was operated. It was a YK-42. I don't know what that means. It's like a small 727. But first class is twice as big. Very interesting.

Anyway, food was wonderful, Russian food. Flew down, we arrived there at about four in the afternoon Kazak time, which is two time zones to the east. I didn't realize that. I thought it was all, hey, you know, it's the other part of the world, so it's all kind of in the same thing. Now, we moved far east and far south.

So we got there close to sunset and we did the tour almost entirely in the dark. It's been very rare that I've done a tour in the dark. We saw two launch pads, [Yuri] Gagarin's launch pad and the Proton launch pad, where they'll launch the first element of the Space Station. Bunch of wonderful processing facilities. And after hearing for many years horror stories of, well, when you stay at a hotel in Baikonur, you'll get black water coming out of the sinks, and that there are holes in the windows and thirty-two below zero stuff you'll be

sleeping in, it was very nice. Very nice. They gave us a great banquet. Wonderful thing. Wonderful thing.

The improvements are largely due to the influx of Western money for satellite launches. In fact, there was a place there where even Russians aren't allowed. It's guarded by Pinkerton guards where American proprietary or export-controlled secrets, national competitiveness technical secrets, the Russians have agreed, okay, you can have your secrets there for a price. So there's this influx of money that is drastically improving the place.

But as interesting historical thing, it was the great secret Soviet space launching facility. So they've probably launched more rockets and blown up more rockets than anyplace in history. Great historical place. It was where Gagarin was launched and where Sputnik was launched. So it was a very emotional thing for us space history dudes to kind of hang out there. We got to go to their museum. I work in mission operations and so we care about consoles. I got to see the console that had the switch on it that launched Gagarin. So, a very delightful thing. So, one of the best trips I've had. We bonded with our Russian host to the Russian space forces who operate the place.

Wake up in the morning, it's cleared off, it looks like that scene in *Doctor Zhivago* where they go to the abandoned *dacha* and it's just sparkling white with a few little trees sticking up around the buildings out in the middle of nowhere. I think, "Ah, what a lovely trip." Have a nice breakfast. Zoom on out, get on the airplane, which, incidentally, the airplane landed and took off from the landing strip that they built for the Buran Space Shuttle, where the Russians copied our Space Shuttle and were ready to operate big time until the establishment in Russian space who had said, "Hey, this is uneconomic," finally prevailed and said, "Well, we made this huge investment under [Leonid] Brezhnev and it wasn't a workable thing." So it flew exactly once. We did get to see the original Buran that flew, while we were down there. So, kind of a long story.

So we get on the airplane, go back. We go through an abbreviated form of Customs, both coming into and out of Kazakhstan. Although I heard later that there was a big drug bust in Baikonur where somebody, as a part of the space launching thing, was using it to smuggle heavy drugs into Russia. If I'd know that going into my little adventure, I might have been even more paranoid.

So we fly back. All of us were a little nervous, because this had been a thing we were not fully in control. Krunichev owned the airplane and ran it. Somehow we didn't fully understand all the schedule. But we're in the air. Beautiful. Flying back, we get to see the Proton launch pad in the crystal-clear air surrounded by the snow. Marvelous. Marvelous.

So we're thinking, ah, maybe we can just clear Russian Customs, get back to the hotel, and have a leisurely night. The next day was going to be big joint program review where I was going to sort of facilitate and present about half of the first part of the meeting. A little apprehension, a little nervousness. Anytime you go through Russian Customs it's a little bit spooky, and especially for us who don't do it very often.

So we get off the airplane, get on the little bus that takes us over to the terminal. This is, like I said, it's a general aviation airport, but it has a very small Customs office. The Customs officials are dressed in heavy winter military camouflage stuff. We go into one room, wait, and go through one by one. You show your passport and your visa, they fidget with it, read some things, stamp some things. Then you go through a metal detector to make sure you didn't bring any bombs in.

So I'm about eighth to go through. She looks at my things, turns it over a few times and I'm sitting there, my ears are waiting for that stamping sound that says you're done. Stamping sound never comes. She motions me to stand over there. She takes my passport and visa and sticks it in a drawer.

Now, at this moment, I'm thinking, oh, shit. Oh, crap. I'm in it now. I'm in it now. I'm somehow off track. Of course, now I haven't really thought—I'm starting to think, "Oh,

no. Single-entry visa, multiple-entry visa. Why didn't I look at the thing to see what kind I had?" Although it turns out you can't see unless you can speak Russian.

So I stand there for a little while and my apprehension is starting to rise. Of course, people are starting to see what's happening, that I haven't been allowed through. Then three or four more people go through. You know, they kind of look at me with, "Oh, well, you know, I'm sure it'll be all right."

Randy Brinkley, the leader of our delegation, comes through and they do the same thing to him. I think, "I am saved. I am saved. They are not going to let this extremely high official NASA guy who gets the ultimate VIP treatment, they're not going to let him languish. So whatever is wrong, is probably wrong for both of us and there'll be this immense pressure to get us out." Wrong. In about ten minutes they come for Randy, drag him through, and everything's fine.

So everybody goes through and so I'm still there waiting. The Customs official starts to pack up her little briefcase. Now, our Russian host, who I believe was Russian space agency, I'm not sure, he's very disturbed about this. Although he doesn't speak English, he's kind of comforting me in that non-verbal way, that, "Well, we shall handle it."

Our interpreter kind of comes back and forth a couple times. So, finally, I'm kind of left there sitting with my bags, with my Russian friend sitting next to me. We're just kind of sitting on a table in a very dingy place with a few hammers and sickles still around, the hammer and the sickle in the middle of the wings, which was a symbol of Aeroflot, probably the largest airline in the world at one time. Now it's being split into lots of little ones.

So I'm starting to get a little nervous. Well, no, I get more nervous by the minute and with each event. Well, the Customs official who stopped us, who's a very attractive, young, but extremely businesslike woman, she goes away. She comes back with a man who would appear to be her boss. Our interpreter and our wonderful people from the NASA Moscow

Technical Liaison Office, people who live in the Embassy and kind of look after NASA's governmental business, come over, Brenda Ward and our interpreter, Elena.

So there's a lot of kind of normal negotiation in Russian with that hurried, blah, blah, blah, yeah, yeah, no, no, and pointing and gesturing and pained looks and stuff with the more senior official. It becomes apparent that I do not have a valid visa to enter the country. They say, "Where is your third page?" and all of that. At that point it dawns on me I don't have a multi-entry visa. No one's ever said those words, but it's like, "Well, you do not have a visa that works." Okay.

So, everybody exits for a while. It's just me and the Customs official and so she motions for me to come and we walk through the terminal. I think, "Oh, where am I going?" So I'm carrying my briefcase. I'm starting to think, now, okay, they're going to hold me until I get a valid visa. I figure that out. I start to say, "Now, I'm a senior official of the American Government. They're not going to shoot me." There's no doubt that I am not a terrorist, a Kazak terrorist or anything like that.

As it turns out, when she and her boss were arguing, it came out that apparently there had been a lot of Americans showing up with single-entry visas and that it appeared that I was being made an example. Okay, as a bureaucrat, I can understand that. I've made examples of other people. So I say, "Okay. Okay. I think I understand the cause of my problem." This is the engineer working. I understand the cause of my problem, I understand their behavior. It's not arbitrary. You could say it's arbitrary, but, no, it's towards an end of achieving better social order in this small airport that seems to be being abused by Westerners who think they can go in and out of the country, just because they're working on the space program. Okay, I grasp all of that.

So we're walking through the terminal and I think, well, perhaps I'm going to a more official place. As it's true, as in point of fact, I was. But we went to a lesser place. We went out of the airport and across the parking lot under the shadow of an aesthetic display of an

Aeroflot airplane, to a very dingy-looking little building. When we got inside the walls were this strange wooden lathe stuff. No windows. We were in a hallway. My Customs official spends about five minutes trying to get the door unlocked. I say, "Oh, crap."

I am now—I'm going into a jail. But if she doesn't know how to open the door, that means this is not an accustomed place for her. Eeee. Okay. But I'm being polite. There are some senior officials, old grumpy-looking men smoking cigarettes and kind of giving me the eye. So I think, okay, I'm going to be locked into a little room. Okay. I can deal with that, because I know why I'm here and I know what it will take to get me out, and I have my friends in the Moscow Technical Liaison Office, as well as the damn program manager of the International Space Station Program and I am one of his people. So, okay, it's all right. I can be locked up for a while. They will get me out.

Well, we go in and she fidgets with unlocking another door and it turns out we're going to her office, or it's the office of the person who does what she does, near as I can tell. It has a little bench where perhaps three detainees could sit while things were sorted out, a little ante room or a little room off to the side that has an ancient, like an XT clone IBM-PC, which we'll hear more about later. Then a completely clean desk.

Now, I have a very messy office. Most people I know have messy offices. This was an extremely orderly office. I thought, well, okay, maybe this isn't her office, but it's an office that they do whatever it is we're going to do. But it had telephones and a fax machine. So I thought, "Aha! Aha! There shall be a lifeline."

So we're sitting there waiting for a while, and then about half an hour later--no. Now, what I've done is I say, now, I don't know how long I'm going to be here. I haven't asked, and if I had, it wouldn't have mattered, because we don't speak the same language. I think, okay, I have my briefcase. I have some stuff. I actually brought some food along. I have a book, it's a book called *The End of Science* by John Horgan, where he interviews a lot of deep scientists. I think, okay, this is exactly the time I've needed to read this book. It is

dense. It is incomprehensible. I think, okay, I shall do that. I've read about how prisoners of war work through the most complicated problems to keep their mind occupied. I'm not a prisoner of war. This is not a big thing. But all of those little things you've learned about dealing with adversity hit.

Now, I also start to think, now, I have a belief in life. If you look at the people that are street people, bag ladies and things, I don't know if it's true, but there's an anecdote about them that says, well, they were perfectly normal people living perfectly normal lives and a couple of uncomfortable or awkward things happened to them and--poof--they lost everything and were on the street and had no means or skills to get out. Well, it started ringing in my ears, oh, my God, that's what's going to happen to me. I don't know the language. I don't understand the system. So I have now veered off the safe path a little bit. It probably doesn't take much to slide me all the way down the slope—visualized gulags and all of this.

Now, during the whole time my mind oscillated between these, "Wait a minute, I'm a senior official of the American Government. I have nothing to fear," and the other thing of, "Well, I guess in an hour they're going to take me to the basement and beat me with rubber hoses." But all the time, I'm thinking, "Now, what will I do that will keep them most comfortable with me?" So I shall be extremely polite. I shall be positive and I will not whine. I suspect people whine in this situation a great deal. Not that they beat them with rubber hoses, but the further you get off from the path and the more angry the people you're dealing with are with you, the worst things can happen. Maybe that makes me a conciliatory person. But I thought, well, remember we're retreating back to rationality, I understand what they're doing. They're doing their job. They appear to be doing it very professionally, and I shall not give them any trouble.

So, sit here for about a half an hour. Then my friends come in and there's another flurry of mostly Russian, yelling at each other, which is actually just their way of

communicating. Finally our interpreter, Elena, says, "Okay. Here's the thing. We're going to have to go get you a new visa. We can go to Sheremtyevo Airport." I forget how to pronounce it, but the main airport in town. "We shall have to pay a fine. We'll get you a new visa and then you'll be able to leave."

Aha! Aha! So the engineer says, "Okay. I've understood how I've gotten here. I understand the actions and motivations of the people who are detaining me and we have a way out." Okay, the process is complete.

They say, "Well, it will take us a while to do it. Here is a phone number of the embassy, and talk to Kent or Doug." Kent Brast [phonetic] or Doug England.

So I say, "Okay. I know of these people."

So they wave me goodbye and there's a sadness about them, you know, "Oh, we have left our comrade behind." There is a sadness in me about, "Oh, my God, they're going." You know, I was tickled that they stayed that long, because there was stuff going on. I felt bad having been in some way a part of delaying everyone. Of course, everyone had to be bummed out about the whole thing.

So, they leave. Now starts my five hours or my six hours in the custody of the Russian's Customs Agency. So I read my book and every so often the phone will ring and she will do stuff. After everybody finally left, she reaches into the table, takes out this big thick loose-leaf book with plastic pages and she goes over it. Now, I have no way of knowing, but I suspect, being what appeared to be a very hard-working professional person, she said, "Now, I've done something I haven't normally done. Let me check the regulations." So she did that for about fifteen minutes, looking over things, then put it back extremely neat. Much more disciplined than me.

Then the phone would ring and sometimes it would be for her, sometimes it would be for me. The ones for me were Kent Brast from the NASA office in the embassy saying, "Okay. Here's what's happened. We've sent Yvgeni Menken [phonetic] over to Sheremtyevo

to get you a visa. We have collected \$150 from whoever was around here to pay your fine. So we think it's all going to be okay. We've got a contact at the Russian space agency and they have done what they need to do to make this happen."

"Okay. Why, thank you." And so I hung up the phone. I don't know a lot of Russian and I know "please" and I know "thank you" and "you're welcome." But I would have given anything to know "excuse me," because when I'd go over to use the phone I could just kind of point at the phone and go, "[grunting noises]. Can I please use the phone?"

So I started stewing on this. Okay. RSA [Russian Space Agency] is involved. I don't know anything about the visa process. RSA is involved. I say, "Wait a minute. I should have been approved for a two-entry visa. Everybody organizing the trip knew I needed a two-entry visa." I spooled back to the event back in Houston where, "Ah, you should have gotten a two-entry visa, but you only got a one-entry visa."

So I called Ken back, I said, "Ken, there should be a really detailed Russian paper trail inviting me for a two-entry visa."

He says, "Oh, yeah. Yeah, we'll call Mandryev [phonetic]," the man over at the Russian space agency.

In retrospect, I think now this was obviously the turning point and I personally took an action that saved my butt. I don't think so. But anyway, I feel like I'm taking action on my own, so it contributes to my sense of well-being.

Hours pass. I read through some of my book and I come across an odd passage that I started laughing. It's John [unclear], the big astrophysicist, says, and the quote is, "If you haven't found something strange during the day, it hasn't been much of a day."

I laughed to myself and said, "I have found something strange today."

So the hours pass. I get about halfway through this very dense book. Occasional phone call. Mr. Andryov [phonetic] called me from RSA. He says, "I am deeply sorry, Mr. Webb. It will be another three hours. It takes this long. But we have signed the paper and it

should all be fine. But I am deeply sorry it will take so long, but--but--but your people are coming."

Oh, I thanked him profusely. I mean, he may have been the guy who made the mistake. I mean, any number of people could have made the mistake. But at this point I was very eager for anyone who said it was going to be okay and we have done the right things.

We left the place once. I wasn't sure what happened. My official—I can't call her a guard—motioned to me and said, "Come. Come with me, we're going back to the airport."

I thought, "Oh, maybe now I'm going to the basement with the rubber hoses."

So she takes me, we go kind of back close to the snack bar. I think, "Oh, she's taking me to dinner! How lovely!" Well, no, we didn't go to dinner.

So she took me into the office of someone. She had called a woman friend on the phone. I recognized the names as female names. So she dropped me off in the office of a woman who appeared to have nothing to do with Customs. I think, near as I can figure out, she had to go process another plane in. I can imagine her thinking, "Oh, dear, I hope there's not another one of these losers with the wrong visa and then I'll have to have two of these guys hanging around." [Tape recorder turned off.]

Okay. So she's motioned me out. We walk across the parking lot back into the airport terminal. I think I'm going to get dinner. Instead we turn down this little narrow hall and I think, "Oh, dear, now come the rubber hoses."

Well, we went into an office where a woman who looked like she was probably about my age, not dressed in the pseudo military garb. In fact, it looked like either a business administrator's or a scheduler's office. Some odd office machines that every so often would click. She says, "Sit down over here." So I sat down there.

It was about this time I figured, ah, she had to go out and do a job and so she figured, okay, from watching this guy, this Mr. Webb, who has the wrong visa, he's probably not going to run away. So I can leave her out of military custody." So this woman who didn't

speaking any English and who did business on the phone and occasionally some kind of weird teletype would type some stuff out. I was just sort of there for a while.

About forty minutes later, my official, again the very attractive, young, efficient, polite woman, comes and gets me. We go back to the same place and wait. I'm figuring out she probably had to process another airplane's worth of people. I do believe she was glad she didn't have another person who couldn't speak her language and with whom she was going to be burdened until she was relieved.

So we go back and sit and I read another few more chapters of incomprehensible KO-plexity [phonetic] and *End Of Science* stuff. All the time she is working, filling out forms, talking on the telephone in a very businesslike way. She takes her coat off and I can see, yes, this is a very attractive woman, even though she's wearing suspenders and these big bulky cold-weather pants. Camouflage. I don't know what you're camouflaging yourself from in a small commercial aviation airport, but it's camouflage. That's kind of the universal symbol of authority now, isn't it? Now, there's a paradox. You know, the universal symbol of authority was a big, big, kind of elaborate general's outfit with big pointy hats and all kinds of shiny stuff. In these allegedly modern times, it's camouflage.

Well, anyway, so we go back. A few people come in from time to time. Of course, at the end of the paranoia spectrum is, "Oh, these people are going to come to beat me now." And at the other end is kind of, "Well, it probably has nothing to do with me," which seemed to be the case.

In fact, I guess I was a little offended that there wasn't more interest and they'd say, "Oh, come, we have trapped an American. Let us go see the trapped American." Now, there didn't appear to be any of that.

So I got to thinking, now, I feel very bad because she is probably stuck here until she gets rid of me. So she's probably just as eager as I am for the thing to be resolved. But in her apparently 100 percent professional way, she will stay here with me until I'm gone.

Well, another woman comes in and they speak in Russian in an animated way. My official leaves and she says, "Dosvedanya," to me, which implies she's not going to be back. The new woman sits down at the desk, and it's a slightly different situation. Where my original guard had, I'll say, a wonderful mix of authority and femininity, this woman was, we'll say the B Team. Apparently, the whole time I was there, she never had to go process an airport. She was second shift.

When she would walk about the room, she was kind of clumping in this—you have this vision, or those of us from the Cold War, raised in the Cold War, have this vision of Soviet bureaucrats as kind of stomping around, people yelling at each other. She had this quality. I'm a person who tries to see the beauty in all persons, particularly women. By the end of our time together, I'd come to see her beauty, but it took a little more work. She was a pleasant person. Again, treated me completely professionally. She showed me how to make tea for myself and stuff. But I don't think she was quite as professional as the other person, or maybe she didn't have anything to do. She went in and turned on the computer, because those first-generation computers have a set of sounds they make they come up. I couldn't watch.

I started hearing beeping and then I heard the computer playing in its little cheesy, primitive computer beeping music, it starts playing *It's A Small World*. It does this several times and then it goes beepy, beepy, beepy, beep, like she's playing some kind of game. She does this for about an hour. Well, now, this is becoming less and less threatening all the time. I thought if she was going in to type up a report of the odd behaviors of the American captive. But, no, it was she was playing video games. And she called and talked to her friends, apparently, and giggled about things. Like when you talk to your friends, the way we all giggle.

Then the phone rings and it is Yvgeni Menken, who is one of the TTI interpreters. TTI's a company, Tech Trans Incorporated, who NASA has contracted with to provide

Russian and English translation and interpretation both in the United States and in Russia. They also do logistics, meaning transportation to and from airports. In fact, this one lady, both times I've been there, a person named Olga, always wears a big fur coat, meets the delegations who arrive at airports. It's become a sign of comfort when you get to see Olga. That means, okay, I'm now back in the hands of the TTI people and they will get me to the hotel and it will be an uneventful event.

So anyway, phone rings, "Hello, Mr. Webb. This is Yvgeni Menken. I believe we have met."

I said, "Yes, Yvgeni, I do recall you."

He says, "I have got your new visa. I'm speaking to you from the car phone in the TTI van."

Since my last time here, they've equipped all the transportation vehicles for NASA with car phones. I've seen it used several times when I was here. It's a great thing. The infusion of technology. Some things transcend where they are. In fact, you see as many cell phones in Moscow as you do in Russia, and, in fact, they're in wider application as it relates to the way we do business, I think, in Russia.

So anyway, it's Yvgeni calling from the car phone. Yvgeni I had met three years ago when I was here with the Phase One Program, the Americans visiting the Mir. Yvgeni is a hustler in a sense, that Yvgeni prides himself on being able to work out a deal anywhere. In fact, I'd heard, when Kent had called me previously, he said, "We've sent Yvgeni Menken," I was generally reassured. Although one time, Yvgeni had tried to get me into the control center when I wasn't allowed, it didn't work and I had an embarrassing half hour.

But I thought, no, no, Yvgeni is three years older now. He's probably closer to getting his degree in engineering. I think he's working on the equivalent of a master's. Actually, it's probably good to have a hustler, someone who prides themselves on their ability to negotiate working for you.

So I hear Yvgeni's voice and my spirits rise. He says, "It will take us two hours to get across town, but I have skillfully gotten you a visa. So this will soon be over. I look forward to seeing you."

I said, "Oh, Yvgeni, I look forward to seeing you."

So, Yvgeni arrives. He hands me back my passport. Now, that's been on the scary items here, that I don't have my passport or even my expired visa. The passport is kind of, well, this is my rod and my staff and my salvation. That in all difficult things, see, I'm an American. Please take care of me. Like it says on the inside of the passport. Doesn't always work that way.

So Yvgeni shows up with my passport and visa in hand. It's the bad visa that I had, the visa that wasn't good enough, but it had all kinds of junk stamped all over it. The stamp appeared to make it acceptable again. Curious thing that you have these elaborate documents, but somebody with a rubber stamp and ink can suddenly transform the document from a bad document to a good document. Again, that thing about when you hear them stamping your thing, that says, "Aha, it's over."

So Yvgeni and I get into the TTI van and drive the hour back to the hotel. We visited a little bit, but he's not all that interested in talking to me, other than to explain how skillful he was in getting my visa without having to pay a fine. Now, that I'm back in custody, I say, "Oh, I'm glad I don't have to come up with \$150," where during my unfortunate incarceration I would have said, "Thousand dollars? I can raise a thousand dollars. Do we need a thousand dollars? Yeah, we could get a thousand. Whatever, get me out of here. Get me out of here."

So the adventure was basically over. Got back to the hotel. We had arrived at, I think, 2:30 or 3:00, and I got to the hotel at 10:30 at night. I was very tired. I was very tired, this whole time trying to be very disciplined in a way that you're not normally disciplined. I'm used to being able to bellow at people and do pretty much what's at the top of my head, as

long as it furthers the organization. But six hours of very self-constrained activity, it's takes a toll. I didn't realize it at the time.

So I get to the hotel and, of course, people are fabulously excited to see me, because there was this worrying and, oh, but for the grace of God go I. Some of the people told me stories. They said, well, they got on the bus and there was this brief period of just incredibly awkward silence. Then people started making jokes and it was--because, of course, again, we were all senior government officials representing our government in this nation. It would eventually get resolved.

DINKEL: Let me ask you a couple of questions. Other than the realization that you were probably mistaken as a drug dealer, because of your long hair, did that thought occur to you?

WEBB: Well, and for the record, let me say I've been growing my hair for about three and a half years, an uncharacteristic thing for a NASA manager. So I conventionally wear it in a long ponytail down my back. Actually, that never really occurred to me, because even though it is a visually different thing that does make me stand out, and it's a conscious thing I've done, partly for myself, but partly for the transitional time we are at the center. That occurred to me, but my identity to them was as an American, a government official that tried to abuse their system. So I didn't really worry about that. I also believe I have the manner of an executive. Her opinion of me related entirely to the passport.

When I speak about her professionalism, if there had been a thing, that say, "Ah, we have a drug-smuggling American here among us." There was a complete, if distant respect thing going on. So I never did worry about that. Now, I have been told there are extremely surly Customs officials over here and that perhaps in that circumstance that could have happened to me. But within about five minutes of this, I realized, no, I've attempted to break or violate their Customs regulations and they're dealing within procedure. So I never really

felt like that. If I had, I'd have a memory of saying, "Why the hell didn't I cut my hair before I got on this trip, like I had considered?"

DINKEL: That's interesting. You know, of course, I'm leaning towards lessons learned on this. It's obvious to me from what you've told me so far, that you've taken this situation while you're in the middle of it, in a very empirical, non-emotional fashion. Would that be one of your lessons learned and one of your recommendations? And if so, what else do you have to recommend?

WEBB: No. I have kind of a philosophy about life, even though I carry kind of an outlandish persona, is that there are a lot of ways to interact with your environment and the other people, but you'll always be more successful if you understand their viewpoint and where you have to cooperate to get something to work within their system.

I consider myself a paradox in that my job for the last year has been to force the system to work in Space Station, or my home organization, where there's been low desire and low motivation. But the higher the stress, the higher the stakes, the higher the danger of a situation. Generally I think the more you have to find common ground. It was a natural thing for me to be well behaved. I was a well-behaved person. My mama raised me right. That kind of stuff.

But let's talk a little about that. It was a discipline and I went on a higher level of discipline about that. In fact, people have accused me of being a jerk over the last couple of years, because I've had to be confrontational to get things going. I was pretty sure confrontation was not going to help me. So that's a lesson learned, but it's a lesson I've always known. I think it was a successful strategy for me, was figure out their system, what they're trying to do, what their goals are. Try to understand their goals. Help them with their

goals as much as you could. I really couldn't, other than to participate positively in the process and be responsive.

There was no running off. I mean, I'm an American in a part of Moscow I have no earthy idea about. I don't speak Russian. I could have walked out the door. They might have tried to stop me. Maybe not. But what am I going to do? I don't have a passport. I'm not welcomed then.

Now, the other lesson I don't really have a way to put it into words. Let me talk about the following couple of days. The next day was a very stressful day for me. I had to present, perhaps, an hour, hour and a half. It turned out it took four hours. Everybody in the room, except the Russians who were enjoying it, was mad at me. There were a number of unexpected things that I hadn't really prepared myself for in the meeting. I hadn't done the preparation I should have. So it was a very long day.

We finish our part of the thing and go off and negotiate protocols, which is where you sit across from the table and yell "Nyet, nyet," and, "Da, da," to the Russians and try to come to agreement on complicated--getting to agreement on difficult things, because this is a fairly high-level management thing. The problems we're dealing with are not the ones that could be solved easily at the lower level. So it is a very difficult process. I hadn't been negotiating with Russians in literally three years, so I was a little rusty, although I feel I have excellent negotiation skills.

So anyway, they finally run us out of the office at six. I hit a wall of a depression sunk on me. Part of it was about my preparation. Going back, I would have prepared a little bit differently for the negotiations that we had. But the thing I'd gone through, never a true threat to me, but this being detained, being an unwelcomed guest, because that's what I was. I was a person who should not have been allowed into the country, and yet somehow there I was and I had to be dealt with. Very tough.

It came out the night after I arrived in the hotel. I was joking around. I'm going to be a celebrity for a little while. People, "Oh, my gosh, how did it happen?" So I told my story fifteen or twenty times already. Teresa Williams, one of the person on the trip with us, who I had cultivated a friendship with, she came out and we were just kind of sitting in the little office area we have set up for us in the hotel. We were talking, and I started to cry, kind of as I am now. I can't really explain it, but I think it's depression.

It's a sadness. Again, intellectually, the engineer had no fear and worked the process. But the sense of unwelcomeness. So I asked Teresa for a big hug, and I got one, and I was better.

DINKEL: [unclear].

WEBB: No, no, no. A hug from a Marine, God forbid! And it's still with me, and when that part opens up, it's frightening.

So I'm not sure what the lesson learned about that is. I guess it's a vulnerability, because it could have gone very badly. Through my own discipline and the excellent support of the support system we built in Moscow, and it wasn't always this good. If this had happened to me four years ago, it probably would have been a couple days.

Now, I've heard this has happened at other times. In fact, one of the people coming in on our trip didn't have a visa at all. Now, I would have never gotten on the airplane if I didn't have a visa, because I have a sense of what the system is about. Again, you don't want to mess with an essentially hostile system. There's no benefit there.

DINKEL: Yes, that's very good. It underscores just another endorsement of the power of positive thinking.

WEBB: Oh, yes.

DINKEL: I bet you there's one more lesson learned here. Make sure before you leave, administratively, that you've got a multi-entry visa.

WEBB: Yes.

DINKEL: Okay. That's a fascinating discussion. Is there anything you want to close up with in final thoughts?

WEBB: No. It was a good trip, on the whole, and I'm really tickled I got to come. I'm in a way thankful for this experience, because it's an unusual experience, fairly harmless stray from the straight and narrow. But on the whole, I'd rather not have. It's interesting that I'm having--we haven't really decided if I'm going to be a regular traveler to Russia or not. We need to add a depth to the executive participation in this meeting from my organization. I am having second thoughts.

Dinkel: Thanks a lot, Dennis. I really appreciate it. I think the experience we just had here together was an opening and a catharsis of sorts. Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]