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Out of this world: Former Grumman employees Al Contessa, Dick Dunne and Roger Schaefer discuss the trials and tribulations of working on the lunar module.

Lunar module team members share their stories

By: David Winzelberg July 22, 2019

“Relief.”

That’s what Roger Schaefer felt when he watched the moon landing on TV from his Centereach home on that historic Sunday in July 1969.

Schaefer, a former technical advisor on Grumman’s lunar module team, recounted some of his experiences as one of a trio of former Grumman employees who discussed the making of the legendary moon shuttle craft at a meeting of the Long Island Metro Business Action group at the Courtyard by Marriott in Ronkonkoma last week.

Schaefer, who spent 38 years at Grumman before retiring, was joined at the event by Al Contessa, a former thermo dynamics technician, who worked for Grumman in Bethpage and at NASA’s Houston Space Center, and Dick Dunne, former director of public affairs for Grumman.

Contessa, who started making rockets in his friend’s basement when he was in the sixth grade, was one of the youngest to work on the lunar module project. Assigned to the upholstery department at an air force contractor in Syosset, Contessa was just 19 when he and his mates were tasked with developing insulation for the lunar module that would have to withstand a 500-degree swing in temperature. His high-tech toolbox consisted of a roll of tape, a pair of scissors and a staple gun.

“It had to be light as possible,” Contessa recalls. “It didn’t have to look pretty, it just had to work.”

Schaefer was working on trucks and tanks at a Brooklyn contractor before he went to work at Grumman’s Bethpage campus.

“I was a mere engineer who didn’t know very much about space flight when I fell into it,” Schaefer said. “The closest thing I had experienced was watching Captain Video on TV.”

Responsible for creating a full-mission simulator that mimicked the cockpit and instrumentation of the lunar module, Schaefer relied on primitive analog computers to analyze data.

"There's a thousand times more memory in your phone than there was in the lunar module," said Schaefer, who went through "several hundred" moon-landing simulations in advance of the real thing. "It was by an act of God that we got there."

Like his fellow former lunar lander alumni, Dunne has been busy leading up to the 50th anniversary of the moon landing. He estimated giving interviews and attending events more than 20 times in the last three months, including talking to students at his grandchildren's elementary school in Islip.

"I'll talk about it to anyone who'll listen," Dunne said.

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