The Launch of Space Shuttle Mission STS-125, May 11, 2009.

"You have reached your Destination" Mandy, our talking GPS, proudly announces.

We have? OK. Here we are surrounded by palm trees in a somewhat scruffy looking suburb somewhere in Titusville, Florida. I guess that is what you get when you simply enter a destination called Titusville into your GPS without specifying additional details. We quickly turn to another piece of technology: my iPhone. Turn to the GPS on that one and chose the "where the heck are we" function.

Nice little map. With the flick of two fingers and, "voila"! We are actually almost where we want to be. The shuttle pads are about here, across the Indian River so we want to be close to the water. That would be Riverside Drive, and say Grace Street (I knew some really nice people who once lived on a Grace Street). Ok Mandy, now take us there.

A few streets and turns and again, Mandy responds with the same message "You have reached your destination". But this time…

Oh my God! There it is; my first look at NASA's Vehicle Assembly Building (VAB). It appears as a perfect cube, mostly as a silhouette through the haze of a sunny, dry 96F Florida morning. We also can see pads 39A and 39B.

The silhouette of the VAB across the Indian River. That's our rented car with Mandy in the front window.

It is almost noon and the launch is scheduled for 14:01 EDT (2:01 PM). Plenty of time to walk back to the Subway's restaurant one street back, grab one of those advertised $5 - 12 inch subs (not available on Canada, just advertised there on US Television channels). Then back to our spot to wait for the launch.

It actually seems like a good location though it is not exactly close. Shirley and I find a good spot to sit on the grass in the shade of a few palm trees, about 10 feet from the water's edge. The occasional breeze from the water certainly helps as well.

Waiting for the launch.

But it is a little farther viewpoint than we had hoped. We are joined by a couple who are obviously locals as the set up a lounge chair next to their car in the open sun just behind us.

"Have you seen a launch from this vantage point?" I venture.
"Yup." He responds. "Been coming here since they started launching the Saturn 5 moon rockets. "
"How many launches have you seen?"
"Probably over 120, from different locations around the Cape. But we like it here"

If this location is good enough for "the locals" it is certainly good enough for us. Other folks we spoke to at lunch were aiming to venture to Merritt Island to the North or South of Cape Canaveral. However neither of those sites would permit a view of the pads like this one does. The "ideal" location is of course in the viewing stands on the Kennedy Space Center (KCS) site itself. KCS sells tickets months in advance. They cost $60 and 4,000 of them usually sell out in about 7 minutes. They are non refundable and non transferable. If "your" launch is scrubbed (which very often happens) and you have to fly back home, you get to bring your ticket stub back with you as a nice souvenir. That's it! No refund. Yes, this location will do just fine.

It is now 1 PM and more and more people gather. There are two young guys speaking a foreign language setting up next to us. They both have HUGE binoculars. It turns out they speak incessantly right through to the countdown. Shirley wonders what on earth they could be talking about for so long.

Next to us are an elderly man and two elderly women who also start to jabber about all topics unrelated to the launch, mainly discussing their latest medical conditions. Test results past and future appointments scheduled. I overhear them say that they all "had their knees done". Good grief! Something to look forward to I guess.

All in all about 40 people show up. Shirley and I do not strike any conversations with anyone. Shirley is quite happy watching the avian wildlife that come for a visit and fly around us.

This bird enjoyed the fishing more than the launch.

I think back as to why and how I got here today. I have followed the space program since I was a kid. I remember when Sputnik was sent up by the Russians and the concern/panic that caused. I remember my dad taking me outside in 1960 to glimpse Echo 1, the first satellite easily visible as it was essentially a metal coated balloon about 300 feet in diameter inflated in orbit. Dad always reminded me that it brightened and darkened as it made its way through the sky because "it was deflated on one side". I remember all of the Mercury and Gemini flights and could tell you exactly who flew them and what were the mission objectives (I still know that today). Then, the glory days of Apollo. We all remember where we were when Armstrong walked on the moon. Well, those of us who were at least at an age to be able to remember.

Then the Shuttles. Well, just too many missions and Astronauts for anyone to remember and distinguish. Over 125 missions flown with an amazing record of successes which no one cares about anymore. And in 2010 the Shuttles will fly no more. There are only about 5 missions left and I simply had to see one of these launches. So here we are…

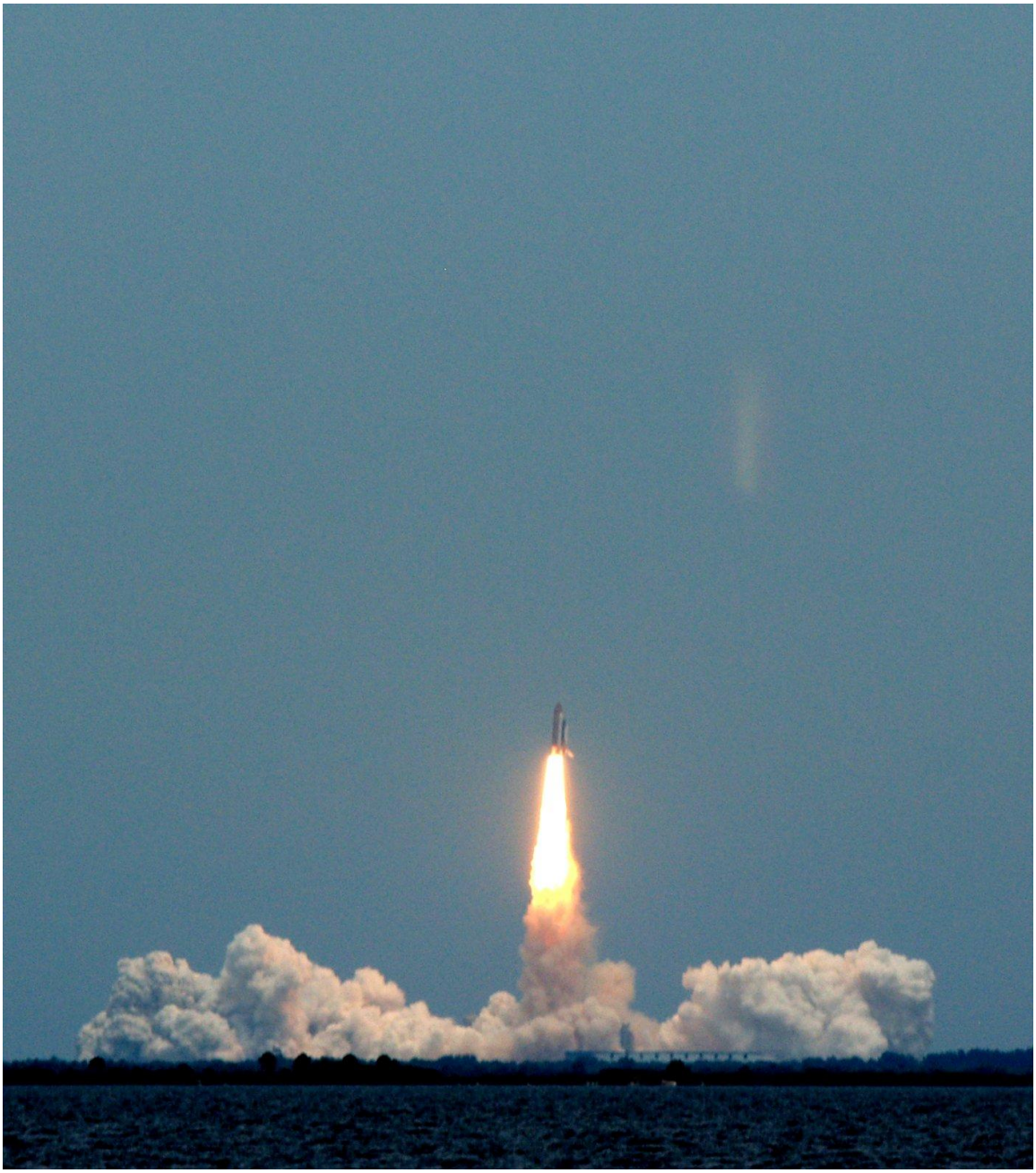
13:30 EDT, 30 minutes before launch, and there are huge rain clouds behind, to the East of us. This is not good news. We can hear the T-38 jets flying around inspecting the weather conditions and testing the landing strip in case there is a need for an abort. The sky looks clear over the pad but those are definitely rain clouds behind us. The shuttle cannot fly through the rain. The tiles which protect the shuttle through its 17,100 MPH fiery re-entry are so fragile that drops of rain at high speeds can cause them to shatter; a dime dropped from a 12 inch height will break a tile.

13:50 EDT. Someone turns their car radio on so that we can hear the broadcast from the Cape. The weather in Madrid is good in case an emergency landing is needed there because of an aborted launch. The rain clouds are far enough away. No weather delay is anticipated. We are GO!

14:00 EDT. My binoculars have been glued to my eyes for 5 minutes now, just in case.

The countdown on the radio is at T minus 10 seconds. All of a sudden I see an amazing billow of steam expanding at an impressive rate. I know this steam is caused by the thousands of gallons of water per second is being sprayed at the flames on the pad. This water is not to cool the heat of the flames but to absorb the noise; it is the noise energy that converts the water to steam, not unlike what happens in your microwave.

A incredibly glaring bright orangey-yellow light appears. The shuttle starts to move. The two Solid Rocket Boosters (SRB's) are lit. Nothing can stop this launch now, for better or for worse. The Shuttle clears the tower in about 6 seconds. It is already going 100 miles per hour. And all the while, there is perfect silence until the noise, sounding very much like far away thunder, kicks in.



The steam, the fire, the speed. What can I say?

It is hard to believe there are 6 men and one woman on that vehicle which looks more like a single stick of fireworks as it heads to the heavens. One cannot help but think of the unthinkable. Especially when one hears the ominous "Go for throttle up" as the Shuttle has passed Max-Q (maximum dynamic stress). This is when Challenger exploded 73 seconds into it's flight. But this is May and nothing bad is likely to happen since it seems that all of NASA's disasters which have caused loss of life happened within 6 calendar days of each other. Apollo 1 January 27, 1967 (3 lost), Challenger January 28, 1986 (7 lost), and Columbia February 1, 2003 (also 7 lost). How strange.

The Shuttle is visible only intermittently as it gains altitudes and distance measured in seconds and in miles. Cloud banks in front of it prevent me from seeing another event I had hoped to see; the separation of the SRB's and maybe even the parachutes as the SRB's return to the ocean to be recovered. No matter. I saw what I came to see.

Roll program complete. The Astronauts are now heads down. Flames from both SRB's are visible.

The car radio is turned off. Within minutes the audience has gathered their folding chairs and blankets, and are quickly moving out. I am still in awe by the fact that I have actually seen this launch.

Done.

I stare at the dissipating condensation trail still bewildered by what I have seen. No, it was not grandiose as one might have imagined. We did not feel the heat of the flames or get bowled over by the noise. Just a simple uneventful launch, which took NASA 2 years and millions of man-hours to prepare for and which took me almost 50 years of hope that I would see some day. I do not have a "bucket list". But if I did, this definitely would have been on it.

We start feeling a few rain drops as we walk back to the car. It doesn't matter now.

OK Mandy, take us back to the Orlando.

Ray Verdone, May 16, 2009.