Section 12 - NASA Russian Public Affairs Working Group (WG-1) Report

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12.1 Responsibilities

The NASA/Russian Public Affairs Working Group (WG-1) was responsible for the planning, development, and execution of all public affairs aspects of the Phase 1 Shuttle/*Mir* program. This included the issuing of press releases, status reports and press kits, the scheduling and conduct of press conferences, distribution of television, coordination and execution of interviews by media and educational organizations with crew members on both the Shuttle and the *Mir* Space Station, distribution of photographs, guest operations, and selection and logistical coordination of commemorative items. In addition, international television and video crews were granted access to document astronaut and cosmonaut training, space hardware and mission control operations in both the U.S. and Russia.

12.2 Structure

The WG-1 was led by U.S. and Russian co-chairs and met for the first time at the Russian (MCC-M), Korolev, Russia, in June 1994. Public Affairs representatives from NASA Headquarters, NASA's Johnson Space Center (JSC), MCC-M, Russian Space Agency, Y.A. Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center, RSC Energia (RSC-E), Space Command, Institute of Biomedical Problems (IBMP) and Central Scientific and Research Institute for Machine Engineering participated in this WG.

It was decided during the first WG-1 meeting to establish three sub-working groups: television, news operations, and protocol and guest operations. These sub-working groups were responsible for the detailed planning in these areas. We found this to be a very useful organizational structure and it is being used in the International Space Station (ISS) Partners Public Affairs Working Group.

A NASA/Russian Public Affairs Plan was developed and signed prior to U.S. Astronaut Norm Thagard's flight onboard a Soyuz capsule to the Russian *Mir* space station as well as for each Shuttle/*Mir* docking mission. This plan outlined the exchange of information, photographs, video, biographies, preflight and mission press conferences, exchange of in-flight television, in-flight interviews, written status reports, protocol activities, guest operations, receptions, commemorative items, and a contingency plan.

Over the years, the WG-1 participants developed a strong working relationship that was based on mutual respect and trust. As the relationship matured, it became easier to plan and coordinate public affairs activities.

NASA placed Public Affairs representatives on a rotating basis at MCC-M for Astronaut Norm Thagard's 105-day mission onboard the *Mir* Space Station (March 16-June 29, 1995). Once Shannon Lucid was launched on board the Space Shuttle

(STS-76) on March 22, 1996, NASA public affairs officers began a continuous presence in MCC-M and in June 1997, a permanent Public Affairs Officer (PAO) was located at MCC-M through the end of the Phase 1 program.

12.3 Accomplishments

The value of having a PAO at MCC-M was clearly evident in 1997, when the world's news media paid increased attention to the *Mir* due to a solid oxygen generation canister fire and the Progress collision. The NASA PAO worked closely with the NASA Operations Lead, Russian Public Affairs representatives, and Public Affairs officials at NASA Headquarters and JSC to coordinate the timely release of accurate information to the news media. This was a challenge for both sides, particularly with a substantial time difference between Moscow and the U.S.

NASA and MCC-M management held news media briefings on an almost daily basis after the Progress accident. In addition, NASA released daily written status reports for weeks following the collision.

NASA and the MCC-M Public Affairs representatives consulted frequently and exchanged information about *Mir*-related public affairs activities in the U.S. and Russia. They also coordinated the visits of U.S. news media representatives to MCC-M and other Russian organizations, and finalized the weekly in-flight PAO events with U.S. astronauts onboard *Mir*.

The story of the Phase 1 Shuttle-*Mir* program was perhaps best illustrated through the exchange of television between the U.S. and Russia and the broadcast of all key events to the world through NASA Television. Through the eyes of television cameras on the *Mir*, U.S. media and audiences throughout the world were able to see a variety of crew activities on board the Russian station and witnessed key operational accomplishments such as Shuttle, Progress and scientific module dockings with *Mir* as well as space walk activity, including the first joint U.S.-Russian space walk conducted in April 1997.

Similarly, through Shuttle television systems, all elements of the *Mir* and crew activities were seen by viewers around the world, highlighting the collaborative work undertaken during the joint cooperative program. One of the most effective video segments captured during the Shuttle-*Mir* docking missions was a tour of the *Mir*'s modules, conducted both on STS-79 and STS-84. In-flight interviews and news conferences held with U.S. astronauts residing on the *Mir* and the cosmonauts were broadcast in the U.S. and distributed worldwide. WG-1 worked extensively to arrange VIP calls to the joint crews during docked operations and coordinated events such as the celebration of the 50th U.N. Anniversary during the STS-74 mission in November 1995. One of the most important images produced from the Shuttle-*Mir* program was taken from a Soyuz vehicle of Atlantis joined to the *Mir* during the first docked mission on STS-71 in July 1995.

The WG-1 designed and produced commemorative items. These items included plaques for each mission that were flown to *Mir* on board the Space Shuttle and Phase 1 aluminum coins that contained metal from both the Space Shuttle and the *Mir*. U.S. and Russian flags and mission patches were flown on the Shuttle to *Mir* which were returned for use as presentation items. When other international crew members flew, flags from their countries were also flown.

As the result of the Space Shuttle/*Mir* docking program, people all around the world became very familiar with the Russian *Mir* space station. Our WG was very successful in providing information to the general public through the release of our joint products and joint efforts.

12.4 Lessons Learned and Applications to ISS

On occasion during Phase 1, in particular during the fire and the aftermath of the Progress collision, NASA had to release information to the public about developments on the *Mir* many hours after Russian officials released information to reporters in MCC-M. While it is important to wait for the proper officials to address the contingency issues, information should be provided to the news media as quickly and accurately as possible. During ISS, we will have to issue news releases in a timely manner and direct comments to the news media with consistent information. The release of that information should contain initial information to the public followed by more detailed information through technical experts as soon as updated information is acquired.

The importance of having a NASA public affairs presence in MCC-M was demonstrated during Phase 1. We now have two PAOs permanently assigned to MCC-M and will continue to have that presence throughout the ISS program. In addition, NASA has invited all the international partners to have a permanent public affairs representative based at the JSC news room to coordinate ISS public affairs activities.

On occasion, operational issues resulted in the last minute cancellation of scheduled U.S. television events from *Mir*. The success of the missions and the safety of the crew on ISS will always take priority. But, we will make every effort to try to accommodate scheduled television events from the Russian ISS segment during Expedition l. For the duration of Expedition 1, the Russian television system link will be the only broadcast quality television path available to us from ISS.

We are in the process of developing an ISS public affairs contingency plan that will be approved by the ISS program management and international partners prior to the launch of the first ISS component, the “Zarya” or FGB module.

To create a more efficient working environment in MCC-M during ISS operations, the news media should have a special room in which they can conduct their business away from the areas where technical experts are working, including the MCC-M balcony and the flight control room. The news media will have access to Public Affairs representatives and technical experts for interviews in a separate office in MCC-M similar to the way the news media conducts its interviews at JSC.

NASA 2 astronaut S. Lucid and NASA 3 astronaut J. Blaha aboard *Mir*