

The end of an era: Space flight honoree's first, last launch

Cassandra Locke | DCMA Public Affairs

Gail Bennett's dream came true recently when she witnessed the very last space shuttle launch and tour Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla.

After 35 years of service toward the space shuttle external tank program, Bennett, a Defense Contract Management Agency property administrator, who retired Sept. 30, reached the pinnacle of her career as she received the esteemed NASA Space Flight Awareness STS-134 Honoree Award for her dedication to quality work and flight safety.

Many thoughts crossed her mind as she prepared to view the STS-134 launch April 29. External tank 122 that was to fly with STS-134 is the tank Bennett affectionately calls "The Hurricane Tank," as it was damaged when Hurricane Katrina devastated the New Orleans area in 2005.

"The repair of the damage to this tank mirrors my own rebuilding of my home and life, like many others who lost everything during Katrina," said Bennett.

Painted on the intertank access door of this tank is an insignia which shows the restored ET-122 in flight with a shuttle on its back flying out of the eye of the hurricane.

Although the STS-134 launch was rescheduled for safety reasons, Bennett was able to watch the STS-135 take off July 8 and tour the space center.

It was absolutely amazing," said Bennett. The space center tour completed the external tank veteran's experience by capturing how the various parts of the program came together to create a successful launch.

"This is a dream come true, and I

am proud to have been a part of such a prestigious program," said Bennett.

Bennett was responsible for continuous evaluation and analysis of the property control system of the external tank production and facility contractor, while having oversight for \$2.1 billion of NASA property located at the NASA Michoud assembly facility in New Orleans where the external tanks were manufactured. She and her team developed and implemented the bar code tags and scanner program, which provided an effective means of inventorying government property at the NASA Michoud facility.

According to Philip Heisler, DCMA property center supervisor, the entire facility was divided into zones. Each zone was given a discrete bar code tag which displayed a specific location when scanned. Heisler said any item of government property moved within the facility was easily located, along with the date, time and badge number of the individual who moved the item.

"The bar code tags and scanner program contributed to cost savings and cost avoidances by enabling government property to be located easier and faster thereby reducing overall inventory costs," said Heisler.

The NASA Michoud assembly facility



Gail Bennett, recently retired Defense Contract Management Agency property administrator, got a tour of the Kennedy Space Center. After 35 years of service toward the space shuttle external tank program, Bennett received the Space Flight Awareness STS-134 Honoree Award for her dedication to quality work and flight safety. (Courtesy photo)

is an 832-acre site. It is one of the largest manufacturing plants in the world and has 43 environmentally controlled acres under one roof.

"Working at this facility felt like a city within itself," said Bennett. "The fact that I can walk past an external tank every day is something not many people can say or do."

According to Heisler, over the course of the shuttle program and other programs located at Michoud, it is reasonable to estimate that a total life cycle cost reduction of \$1 million has been achieved. This amount is based on the reduction in man hours to perform physical inventories, reduction in time for reconciliations efforts, and a reduction of time to perform the inventory.

The Space Flight Awareness program is highly competitive, and individuals must have contributed beyond their normal work requirements to achieve significant impact on attaining a particular human space flight program goal and been a key player in developing a beneficial process improvement.

Since retiring in September, Bennett said she is now focused on travelling. 