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Noel Hinners, a top NASA official, dies at 78

By Martin Weil September 9 at 6:28 PM

Noel W. Hinners, a scientist and leader of other scientists who had been a top official at NASA, including director of the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Md., and briefly head of the National Air and Space Museum, died Sept. 5 at a hospice center in Littleton, Colo. He was 78.

The cause was complications from basal cell carcinoma, said his wife, Diana Hinners.

From his youth as an aspiring chicken farmer in New Jersey, Dr. Hinners went on to play a leading role in America's exploration of space, having a guiding hand in programs that explored Mars, launched the Hubble Space Telescope and landed men on the moon.

After the first manned lunar landing, Dr. Hinners specified the spots where later manned lunar missions would touch down. He chaired the committee that decided which sites could provide the most scientific information.

Heading that panel, and reconciling the many competing views on its decisions, exemplified the administrative and leadership abilities that distinguished Dr. Hinners's career in space science, exploration and education, in government and out.

His Princeton Ph.D. was in geochemistry, but it was probably his knack for getting the best out of other scientists, and of winning federal support for science and space exploration, that earned him some of the highest honors bestowed by the space agency.

“Even though I couldn’t do the job, I could get others to do it,” was the way he once described his talents in a 2010 NASA oral history. “My whole career has been built on just surrounding myself with the best people I could find [and] letting them do their job.”

But, he could be tough. If his people did not do the job, he directed, “Change them out.”

An instinct for diplomacy was part of his skill set. When Dr. Hinnners headed Goddard from 1982 to 1987, President Ronald Reagan paid a visit. A discussion turned to the possibility of global warming.

As Dr. Hinnners recalled it, the president turned out to believe that any warming was likely the result — not of man-made carbon dioxide, but rather of organic molecules from trees.

“I did not choose to argue with him,” Dr. Hinnners said in the oral history. (He also said he found the president uncommonly personable.)

As head of the National Air and Space Museum from 1979 to 1982, Dr. Hinnners saw his task as not only changing what needed changing but also to find out what was working “and leave it alone.”

With money being the lifeblood of many institutions, Dr. Hinnners showed an adroitness in raising the sums he needed. Sometimes it was through skillful lobbying in Congress and the Executive Branch. But there were other techniques, some of which affected thousands of Washington residents and visitors.

Once, he told his NASA interviewer, “When I needed more money I said, ‘Well, let’s see, we’re charging 50 cents a ticket [at the IMAX theater], let’s charge \$1 a ticket.’ It’s still a bargain, and another \$1 million to play with here.”

He also knew there were limits to that technique. “Don’t want to carry that too far,” he said.

But the job on the Mall as chief of one of the world’s most popular museums lacked the excitement of working on space exploration. Dr. Hinnners, who had been NASA’s associate administrator for space science in the 1970s, soon answered a call to run Goddard.

At the Greenbelt facility, he showed his adherence to the doctrine of management by walking around and visiting scientists and others at their jobs.

This included working with the maintenance crew on a night when a snowstorm had left Washington roads impassible. Not one to fear getting his feet wet — or cold — Dr. Hinnners joined in snow plowing operations on the Goddard grounds, and learned, he said, that “there’s an art to it.”

When he retired from NASA in 1989, it was as associate deputy administrator and chief scientist. The administrative post — third in command at NASA -- turned out not to be his cup of tea.

Being number two is difficult, he said, “but being number three is a loser. Don’t ever do it.”

After leaving government, he found his way to Martin Marietta and, after a merger, to Lockheed Martin Space Systems. He retired in 2002 as the Denver area-based vice president of flight systems, with responsibility for several programs to explore Mars.

They included the costly failures of the Mars Climate Orbiter and the Mars Polar Lander, which were destroyed during their missions in 1999 likely because of navigation and software errors, respectively.

Independent panels traced the problems to insubstantial funding, testing and oversight at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., and its major contractor, Lockheed Martin.

"We made mistakes. No fuzz on that. We own up to that. There is no excusing mistakes," Dr. Hinnners told the Denver Post at the time. He added that a lot of knowledge was still gleaned from the spacecrafts before they were lost.

The son of an insurance salesman, Noel William Hinnners was born on Christmas Day in 1935, in Brooklyn, N.Y., and grew up in Chatham, N.J.

With New Jersey one of the nation's major egg producers, Hinnners entered Rutgers University with the aim of learning to be a good chicken farmer. However, the result of his science courses was a shift in interest to geochemistry.

He graduated from Rutgers in 1958, received a master's degree in geochemistry from the California Institute of Technology in 1960 and obtained a doctorate in the same subject at Princeton in 1963.

That year, he came to the Washington area to work for Bellcomm, an AT&T subsidiary formed specifically to work on systems engineering for NASA's Apollo program. He joined NASA in 1972 as director of lunar programs.

Survivors include his wife of 52 years, Diana Platt Hinnners of Littleton; two sons, Jeff Hinnners of Twin Lakes, Colo., and Craig Hinnners of Woodstock, Md.; three sisters; four brothers; and two granddaughters.

Although Dr. Hinnners spent many early years in academic study, a summer job experience appeared to play at least as great a role in predicting his career path.

He was assigned to a crew selling ironing board covers, and his sales figures were feeble, but his boss saw something in him. Rather than being fired, he said, he was promoted to crew manager.

“Even though I can’t sell ironing board covers,” he said, “I could manage one of the crews.”

It pointed the way to what he once said he considered his major contribution — “creating the environment in which all these other great people can practice their trade and do their good things.”