

Cooper Garbles Gemini-5 Pre-Launch Problems

If anybody worries that Cooper's stories might actually be automatically credible, here's a simple check of his Gemini-5 launch story in which he confuses two separate events and confabulates his mental processes in a situation that never actually happened...

My space history colleague Harrison Rigby (HMRigby@Mindspring.com) located the references in the NASA history of the Gemini program, <http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/History/SP-4203/ch11-3.htm>

The two important historical descriptions in the NASA book are:

“Another requirement for the first rendezvous flight that Cooper and Conrad rehearsed was a simultaneous launch countdown, which involved their Titan II and spacecraft on pad 19 and an Atlas-Agena on pad 14, to give the launch crew and flight controllers some experience in launching two vehicles at precise times. On 22 July, the Gemini V crew went through the motions of a double launch, including five holds - for propellant tanking, a faulty command panel switch, spacecraft problems, erratic range sequencer performance, and spurious pulses received at Lockheed's ground stations. The demonstration lasted 867 minutes instead of the scheduled 505 minutes, but it did give the needed practice. When the test ended, the lowered erector could not be raised. The crew had to be rescued with the "cherry picker," a cabin on the tip of a crane that had been used in Mercury and that Cooper had insisted be included in the Gemini program. Riding it down gave him a sense of vindication.”

...and the subsequent first real launch attempt:

“Although thunderstorms threatened that morning (August 19), the operations crew decided to push on and launch, if possible. But the predicted storm welled over the pad area, and - shades of *Gemini 2!* - a lightning strike near the power facilities caused the spacecraft computer to waver. Finally, the erector was raised and the crew was helped out of the craft. Propellants were drained, pyrotechnics removed or defused, and a 48-hour recycle begun.”

In LEAP OF FAITH, Cooper (p. 115-118) mixes together events from the July countdown practice and the actual first launch attempt, along with some other narrative details of unknown origin, as follows:

Cooper: “Come launch morning, Pete and I found ourselves sitting in the spacecraft on a late countdown hold waiting for some last-minute problem to be solved. This was our most vulnerable time, the last twenty minutes of the countdown, because the final firing sequence had begun to take things over automatically; all systems had been activated and were ready to go.

NASA TEXT: This was a description of the July 22 countdown rehearsal, not an actual launch attempt.

COOPER: “All of a sudden a big thunderstorm moved in.... Before it could be decided whether to continue the wait or scrub the mission and shut everything down, lightning hit a main power cable, knocking out power to our pad and other systems.... We would not be going into space this day.”

NASA TEXT: The thunderstorm showed up on the August 19 first launch attempt. But power did not fail. However, the spacecraft computer showed some effects, so the launch was cancelled.

COOPER: “It was finally decided to roll out the emergency cherry-picker... It had been designed to evacuate astronauts in an emergency but as yet had never been used under real conditions.”

NASA TEXT: The cherry-picker had been used for the practice on July 22, not the launch attempt on August 19. On that attempt -- when the thunderstorm occurred -- the erector worked fine and the crew exited the spacecraft normally.

COOPER: “When the cherrypicker got close enough to the venting rocket, two technicians climbed to the top. Using a speed wrench, they unbolted the hatch -- freeing us in five minutes. We weren't so much relieved as disappointed at not getting off as planned.”

NASA TEXT: These thoughts are fictitious since the cherry-picker was used on the rehearsal day when nobody expected to launch, not even the crew.

COOPER: “That night Pete and I had a couple of beers in Hangar S, trying to uncork the built-up and unused adrenaline. As we talked about our prospects for launching the next morning and tried to relax, technicians worked through the night shutting down the rocket, topping it off with fuel, and recycling and resetting all its electrical systems. “

NASA TEXT: After the cancellation of the first real launch attempt on August 19, in which the cherry-picker was NOT involved, the vehicle was turned around for a 48-hour recycle, and launched not the next day, but the day after.

“We launched the following morning, August 21, 1965, at 8:59 AM, from pad 19 -- one of two Gemini pads at the Cape.”

NASA has records of only one Gemini pad on Cape Canaveral.