



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Naval Research Laboratory Space
Science Interviews, 1986-1987

by Smithsonian Institution Archives

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., <i>osiaref@si.edu</i>
Title:	Naval Research Laboratory Space Science Interviews
Dates:	1986-1987
Quantity:	files (Reference copies).

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9539, , Naval Research Laboratory Space Science Interviews

Historical Note

World War II and the advent of the Cold War led the United States government to underwrite basic scientific research that could be applied to military purposes. Because the United States Navy was concerned about the effect of nuclear radiation on its wireless radio communication system, it funded studies in astronomy and aeronomy--the examination of the earth's atmosphere--at the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL) in Washington, D.C. Wartime advances in rocketry and electronics enabled physicists and engineers to study non-visible radiation at ever greater distances from the earth's surface. These studies resulted in more sophisticated views of the composition of the atmosphere and of solar radiation, and in the revelation of the presence of stellar X-ray radiation between 1946 and the early 1960s. By the latter period, however, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) began to eclipse NRL's pre-eminence in space science.

Herbert Friedman was born in 1916, received his Ph.D. in physics from Johns Hopkins University in 1940, and began working at the NRL a year later. After two years of using X-ray radiation to detect manufacturing flaws, he was appointed head of the Electron Optics branch of the Rocketry Division. In 1958 Friedman took over the Space Science Division until his retirement.

Edward T. Byram earned his degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Toledo before the war, during which he served in the U.S. Army for three years. He spent two years at the Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Company and joined the NRL's Electron Optics branch in December, 1947. Between 1962 and 1972 he contributed to 54 papers on X-ray astronomy.

Talbot A. Chubb was born in 1923 and took the B.A. in physics that he received from Princeton University to the Clinton Engineer Works in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in 1944. His doctoral advisor in physics at the University of North Carolina referred him to the NRL in 1950. Chubb headed the Lab's Upper Air Physics branch from 1959 to 1981.

Robert Kreplin spent the summers of 1948 and 1949 at the NRL while finishing his B.A. in physics at Dartmouth University. After receiving his M.A. in 1952, Kreplin returned to the NRL permanently.

Charles Y. Johnson was born in 1920 and received his B.E.E. from the University of Virginia in 1942. After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II he joined the Cosmic Ray Section of the NRL. He headed the Air and Ion Composition Section from 1954 to 1958 and the Aeronomy Section until his retirement.

Julian C. Holmes was born in 1930 and received his A.B. in physics from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, in 1951. He joined Johnson at the NRL in 1956 as a Physicist.

Introduction

The Smithsonian Videohistory Program, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation from 1986 until 1992, used video in historical research. Additional collections have been added since the grant project ended. Videohistory uses the video camera as a historical research tool to record moving visual information. Video works best in historical research when recording people at work in environments, explaining artifacts, demonstrating process, or in group discussion. The experimental program recorded projects that reflected the Institution's concern with the conduct of contemporary science and technology.

Smithsonian historians participated in the program to document visual aspects of their on-going historical research. Projects covered topics in the physical and biological sciences as well as in technological design and manufacture. To capture site, process, and interaction most effectively, projects were taped in offices, factories, quarries, laboratories, observatories, and museums. Resulting footage was duplicated, transcribed, and deposited in the Smithsonian Institution Archives for scholarship, education, and exhibition. The collection is open to qualified researchers.

Descriptive Entry

David DeVorkin, curator at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum (NASM), recorded five sessions with the men at the NRL who pioneered the sciences of X-ray astronomy and aeronomy. DeVorkin was particularly interested in how technologies and techniques developed for one purpose crossed disciplinary boundaries to affect or create others. Participants detailed how they adopted, applied, or improved on extant technologies for their hybrid research; throughout the sessions there is ample visual documentation of artifacts and working equipment used at the NRL. The video sessions were arranged in two collection divisions: 1) X-ray astronomy and 2) aeronomy.

This collection consists of five interview sessions, separated into two collection divisions, totally approximately 16:00 hours of recordings, and 390 pages of transcript. There are three generations of tape for each session: originals, dubbing masters, and reference copies. In total, this collection is comprised of 22 original videotapes (22 U-Matic videotapes, some of which are 60 minutes in length, and some of which are 20 minutes in length), 15 dubbing master videotapes (15 U-Matic videotapes), and 8 reference copy videotapes (8 VHS videotapes). The collection has been remastered digitally, with 22 motion jpeg 2000 and 22 mpeg digital files for preservation, and 22 Windows Media Video and 22 Real Media Video digital files for reference.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Aerobee rockets
Astronomy and astrophysics
History of science and technology

Types of Materials:

Interviews
Oral history
Videotapes

Names:

Byram, Edward T.
Byram, Edward T. interviewee.
Chubb, Talbot A.
Chubb, Talbot A. interviewee.
DeVorkin, David H., 1944- interviewer.
Electron Optics Branch. Naval Research Laboratory.
Friedman, Herbert, 1916-
Friedman, Herbert, 1916- interviewee.
Holmes, Julian C.
Holmes, Julian C. interviewee.
Johnson, Charles Yothers, 1920-
Johnson, Charles Yothers, 1920- interviewee.
Kreplin, Robert.
Kreplin, Robert. interviewee.
Naval Research Laboratory (U.S.)
Rocketry Division. Naval Research Library.

Container Listing

Series 1: Early X-ray Astronomy

This collection division contains three sessions with four of the pioneers of early X-ray astronomy at the Electron Optics Branch of the NRL: Edward T. Byram, Talbot A. Chubb, Herbert Friedman, and Robert Kreplin. They discussed the sources of employees and equipment; changes in equipment and launch vehicles; preparation of equipment for launches; working environment at the NRL; and interpretation of experimental data. DeVorkin complemented each interview with extensive visual documentation of the equipment discussed and of the laboratories where it was developed and tested. Sessions were recorded at the National Air and Space Museum and the Naval Research Laboratory between December 1986 and July 1987.

In Sessions One through Three, DeVorkin interviewed all four participants in a group and then in pairs to review the progression of astronomical research at the NRL between 1945 and the early 1960s. Scientists from physics and engineering backgrounds collaborated on the adaptation and development of radiation detection equipment to exploit the higher altitudes attained by successive generations of rockets.

Box 1

Transcripts of Interviews

Session 1: 12 November 1986

Session 2: 8 July 1987

Session 3: 31 July 1987

Video Recordings of Interviews

Session 1: 12 November 1986

Session 2: 8 July 1987

Session 3: 31 July 1987

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Series 2: Aeronomy

This contains two sessions with Julian C. Holms and Charles Y. Johnson, who led the postwar development of aeronomy at the NRL. They discussed the design and operation of specialized laboratory space and equipment; design and operation of the Aerobee rocket's instrument space; and the interpretation of experimental data. DeVorkin complemented both interviews with extensive visual documentation of the equipment discussed and of the laboratories where it was developed and tested. Sessions were recorded at the Naval Research laboratory in July 1987.

In Sessions One and Two of this second collection division, DeVorkin interviewed the two men who led the NRL's study of the upper atmosphere between 1945 and 1980. Here too the need to exploit newly available rocket technology required a combination of theoretical and applied sciences as well as technical craftsmanship to develop and adapt the appropriate experimental equipment.

Box 1

Transcripts of Interviews

Session 1: 8 July 1987

Session 2: 30 July 1987

Video Recordings of Interviews

Session 1: 8 July 1987

Session 2: 30 July 1987

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