

Flights & Fancy

WHIMSY, NOSTALGIA, AND JUST PLAIN MISCHIEF

What Would You Send to Orbit?

AS A UNITED SPACE ALLIANCE

employee providing engineering support for crew training, I had the pleasure of working with U.S. Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Robert Behnken, who flew on space shuttle missions STS-123 and -130. During the final weeks of training for -130, Bob offered to carry a personal item of mine into space. His offer was flattering, but it also presented a challenge. How do you choose an object worthy of such an experience?

The widget of my choosing would undergo all the physical contortions of a space shuttle flight: The uneasy *twang* just before liftoff (the swaying of the shuttle stack caused by the three main engines firing), the cacophonous shove of the solid rocket boosters, and the majestic awkwardness of zero-G.

My choice was made somewhat easier by the need to keep the item small. Whatever I chose would have to fit within a tiny imaginary box, one whose dimensions were never given. Bob said that wedding rings were a popular selection. So much for Granddad's lucky anvil.

After I mulled the options and whined to my wife, Nicole, she eased my burden. Sensing that I felt obligated to choose an object meaningful to our whole family, she said, "The kids and I already have plenty of space stuff. This should be just for you."

Soon I had two candidates, which represented my two major interests: music and model airplanes. One was the trumpet mouthpiece that had escorted me around the country while I was a member of the Blue Devils Drum and Bugle Corps, a larkish adventure

that proved to be the swan song of my musical ambitions. The second: a Cox .049 Babe Bee engine, an internal-combustion icon among aeromodelers.

In the end, I chose the motor. It was a Cox motor that had provided my first taste of powered flight. The tiny buzzing engine pulled a plastic Fairchild PT-19 through meandering circles as I stood in the center, fighting off vertigo. In later years, a stable of Babe Bees powered countless projects and endured my compulsion to disassemble and investigate all things mechanical.

I still bear scars from moments of carelessness around whirling six-inch propellers, but I can think of no other engine that could have powered my explorations of flight within the skills and budget of a 12-year-old. Those experiences drove my ambition to study engineering and become a part of the space program.

Cox engines are no longer produced, but during its 40-year run, the factory churned out the nitro-burning engines by the million. Any American kid with an interest in model airplanes, cars, or boats since 1956 probably owned at least one Babe Bee.



A Babe Bee that powered countless aircraft models hitched a ride to space.

After I had chosen my personal space shuttle payload (NASA called it "ballast"), I realized that I no longer owned any .049s. I had given away the whole stash when I converted my fleet of radio-controlled models to electric power. I e-mailed my flying buddies, explaining that I needed a Babe Bee, stat, and was immediately offered multiple engines. The engine I gave to Bob was not one I had ever used, but that was of no concern to me for this purely symbolic gesture.

When *Endeavour* launched in the early morning of February 8, 2010, I watched on a TV monitor with other support engineers at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. We all cheered the liftoff, the astronauts, and our good fortune for being part of such an accomplishment. I added a silent *Hooray* for the Babe Bee, nestled somewhere among the people, parts, and provisions being propelled atop columns of flame to the International Space Station.

■ ■ ■ TERRY DUNN