John Reynolds (3/3/24)

The Rumble in the Jungle - October 30, 1974

In October 1974, I was a staff member at COMSAT laboratories when we were invited to come down to COMSAT Headquarters in L'Enfant Plaza to watch the heavyweight championship fight between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali. It would be held in Kinshasa, Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) and be transmitted "Live Via Satellite" to viewers around the world. This was a critical event in COMSAT's history. It involved the greatest boxer of all time, the biggest sports event ever produced to that date, and, to my mind, the most important invention of the late 20th century, the global communication network. This is my story of that event.

I will start with a little background. I graduated from the Worcester Polytechnic Institute in 1962, majoring in physics. That was the same year COMSAT was created by an act of Congress, *The Communication Satellite Act of 1962*. I am a scientist, but I also believe in fate. Although I did not know about it at the time, this was a fateful convergence of events. My first job was at the Sprague Research Center in North Adams, Mass. Sprague was one of the first companies to make and sell integrated logic chips, the tiny predecessors of today's computer chips. Then, in 1968, another fateful event occurred, I was given the opportunity to join the assembling group of scientists and engineers at COMSAT Laboratories.

I vividly recall a conversation with a businessman on the flight down for my interview. I mentioned COMSAT and joked that NASA was as likely to launch our satellites into the Atlantic Ocean as into orbit. That was a risk the young company was ready to take. I found out later that COMSAT hedged its bets by insuring their launches with Lloyds of London! He told me that he had bought COMSAT stock and intended to pass the shares on to his children. He believed that investing in COMSAT was investing in the future.

I got the job and became a Member of the Technical Staff in the Applied Sciences Laboratory under Ed Rittner. My group and I in the Physics Lab concentrated on making more efficient and reliable solar cells. COMSAT's technical guru, Sieg Reiger, for whom Reiger Auditorium was named, used to say that that the COMSAT Laboratories staff was a brain trust, there to form Tiger Teams to solve the difficult problems that come with any innovative technology. But that was not enough to attract and keep the best minds in the business. We were also empowered to do interesting and useful research.

Now we come back to my subject—the global event dubbed The Rumble in the Jungle. According to some estimates, the fight was watched by as many as one billion television viewers around the world. In the United States, the TV signal was sent to an estimated fifty million pay-per-view and closed-circuit theater-TV watchers.

Unknown to the fight organizers, a group of COMSAT employees also watched in the COMSAT control room. I do not know who planned this gathering, but I do know that we all felt entitled to be there. The contingent from the Labs made themselves as comfortable as possible. Most wound up sitting on the floor. I recall that there was an initial delay because the TV signal was

scrambled. But, in a room that managed the global satellite network, no one expected that to be a problem. Anyway, someone gave a nod and someone else made quick work of unscrambling the signal.

The result was the famous upset victory by Ali in the eighth round. I was rooting for him and was glad he had taken back his championship. The fight was also a commercial success, which is notable because Congress intended COMSAT to be a viable commercial communications satellite system.

I will end this story with words from "The Communications Satellite act of 1962" which became COMSAT's mission statement:

> The Congress hereby declares that it is the policy of the United States to establish, in conjunction and in cooperation with other countries, as expeditiously as practicable a commercial communications satellite system, as part of an improved global communications network, which will be responsive to public needs and national objectives, which will serve the communication needs of the United States and other countries, and which will contribute to world peace and understanding.
> The new and expanded telecommunication services are to be made available as promptly as possible and are to be extended to provide global coverage at the earliest practicable date.

COMSAT was born when this country was doing big new things like sending men to the moon. The United States also wanted to bind the countries of the world together in a global network that "will contribute to world peace and understanding." Our country was in a hurry to get it done and in a way that would have a lasting impact.

I think it is fair to say that only 12 years after the company was created, this milestone event proved that the extraordinary people at COMSAT had successfully accomplished its mission.
Postscript: I continued working as a physicist at the Labs. Later, I added a degree in software engineering to my credentials. (Earlier, I had met and married Jo Tyler who also worked at COMSAT as the manager of the semiconductor fabrication facility, or cleanroom for short.) I continued at COMSAT as a software developer and then worked at several other companies.