



In the Shadow of Eyjafjallajökull

I have always looked forward to attending the biannual ECS meetings ever since I attended my first one in San Francisco in 1983. In the early years, my time at the meetings was devoted entirely to attending symposia and absorbing as much technical information as possible. In recent years, most of my time has been spent attending committee meetings; but I still cannot stay away from technical sessions because of the simply amazing advancements in science and engineering being reported in the symposia. There is no question about science and engineering being alive and well at these meetings and, of course, the wealth of technical information exchanged at the meeting in Vancouver—a very successful meeting, I must add—was no different than at all previous meetings.

However, for me, being in Vancouver was an opportunity to stroll down memory lane, so to speak, because my previous, and only other visit to Vancouver, occurred in 1964. It was a weekend respite from a two-week school at the Boeing Company in Seattle, which I was attending, compliments of the U.S. Air Force. As an instrumentation technician on the Minuteman I missile system, I probably was working with what was, for those days, one of the most advanced electronic systems available, a system that worked well most of the time. I must admit that a fair number of the missiles launched from Vandenberg AFB just managed to clear the beach before plunging back to earth or ending in a ball of fire inside the silo.

What does this rambling have to do with the ECS meeting in Vancouver? Probably very little except that the present day technologies discussed in symposia at Vancouver brought back memories and visions, for me, of the rather “slow” and “crude” electronic control systems to which the United States entrusted nuclear warheads in the 1960s. I believe that it is almost impossible for the human brain (at least mine) to appreciate the tremendous technological advancements that have been made since then (45+ years later). To me, it is at least as mind boggling as what my grandmother witnessed

in her lifetime—she was born before the modern automobile was built (Benz in 1891) and lived to see the United States send men to the moon and back several times.

It is humanly impossible to fully appreciate the significance of the many important contributions to science and engineering that have been presented at the 217 meetings of ECS, but it is probably realistic to conclude that the world would be a totally different place technologically were it not for the many scientists and engineers who, twice a year, make it a priority to attend and participate. These revelations often mean, for many participants, that the days just prior to a meeting are a high stress time when they are collecting, analyzing, and plotting last minute data and fine tuning their presentation material. Unfortunately, for some Vancouver meeting participants, the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull added an extra level of stress to their lives when it threatened to prevent their attendance.

This unanticipated event serves as a reminder to all of us that even though continuing advancements in scientific and engineering technologies allow humans to exercise control over more and more aspects of their lives and have produced, for most people in the world, a continuing improvement in quality of life, there are some phenomena about which we, as scientists and engineers, can do little, if anything. In spite of these kinds of events, we scientists and engineers continue to focus on advancing the various technologies that form the basis for the existence of ECS.

Until we meet again in Las Vegas in October, I leave you with a quote from Charles Vest, President Emeritus and Professor of Mechanical Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, that could easily be the byline of ECS: “Looking ahead, I believe that the underlying importance of higher education, of science, of technology, of research and scholarship to our quality of life, to the strength of our economy, to our security in many dimensions will continue to be the most important message.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bill Brown'.

Bill Brown
President