

# Bill Polits sees both Tek's past and future as great

By ED RICHTER, CAROL KOVAL, DON LEIGHTON

**Bill Polits** (VP and Director, Corporate Quality Assurance) retires December 21 after nearly 34 "exciting and challenging" years at Tek. He and his wife Virginia have rented a condo at Sun Valley and plan to spend a few months there skiing and relaxing. After that the schedule is open: bicycling, sailing—maybe some in the Virgin Islands—and flying. (Bill recently sold his airplane, but retains his membership in the Tek Flying Club.)

Bill and Virginia live at Johns Landing along the Willamette River. They have three grown sons—Russ, who lives in Beaverton; Dick, who works for Tek in Clark County and lives with his wife Susie and baby Jessica in Battleground, Washington; and Bill, who's studying music near Santa Fe.

Bill started at Tek as a summer employee in 1950 while still a student at OSU. After earning his EE degree in 1951 he came to work full-time in engineering. In 1959 he was named Instrument Engineering Manager, and in 1966 Vice President of Engineering. (He is Tek's longest-term VP.)

Bill moved to CRT and IC manufacturing in 1969, and in 1971 was named Group Vice President for Manufacturing. A decade later he became Director of Corporate Quality Assurance.

Tekweek interviewed Bill last month, just after he announced his retirement.

## It's been quite a varied career, hasn't it?

Varied and exciting. I feel fortunate; I don't know whether I would have had these kinds of challenges in another company. It's been a great experience, and I look back on it and see it as a terrific time for me.

## What was it like back then, in the early days?

Well, smaller, of course, and with a great sense of teamwork. I don't think I realized at first what the potential was. We all worked together, and then we became world leaders, and that was exciting, to be part of an organization that lead the world with great products.

## And now?

Now we have a chance to do it again. It's a tremendously healthy company, and divisionalization has given us a chance to get back to that grassroots spirit of teamwork again, after years of operating as a functionally oriented corporation. I'm optimistic about Tek's future. There are some great signs. I think we're in the best position we've been in for a long time.

## Is there an element of sadness in leaving all of this, after so many years?

Oh, I'm going to miss it. It's probably going to take me a year or so to get used to the idea. But on the other hand, I didn't want to spend 10 more years on the job, and then find myself physically unable to do some of the things I want to do.

## Does any one job stand out?

Well, I spent 18 years in engineering, and that was a happy experience. When I got into manufacturing, I discovered I had a lot to learn. I enjoyed it, but managing a large function like that carries with it a lot of special kinds of cares and worries, and I'm not as comfortable in that kind of setting as I am in some others.

When I came into the quality business, I thought, 'Well, I've been in engineering and manufacturing, and I guess I understand quality.' But I was in for a real eye-opening surprise; it's a whole new world. I'm fascinated with the potential of just-in-time, and some of the other elements. The potential for profitability is enormous, and I feel fortunate to have played a part in all of that.

## Any good stories from those earlier days?

One occasion I remember was when we were getting ready to show the 535 oscilloscope for the first time, at the Wescon show in San Francisco. It was 1953, we were still a young company, and not nearly as organized as in later years. Howard Vollum worked all night with me and some other engineers on that scope, and Howard finally left around 5 a.m., went home, packed a bag, came back to load up his car, and took off for San Francisco without any sleep.

## And how did it come out?

Sensationally. It was the first plug-in scope, and a revolution in the industry. We were on top of the world. And those early trade shows were great experiences. Tek was so far ahead, and everybody knew it. We'd have informal technical sessions on how to use the products, and people would come up to us, asking for advice. It was a real ego-builder. Now you can understand why I feel so fortunate to have lived through all of that.

## Let's talk about this new emphasis on quality...

It's not new for Tektronix, although the organized approaches are. But from the beginning, Tek had a well-deserved reputation for quality and reliability. We set the standards! The instrument looked good on the outside, and on the inside as well. It was functionally easy to use, and it was dependable because it had the Tek logo on it. And it's still that way.

## But haven't there been recent developments—more emphasis—on quality?

Yes, but in a different climate. During the past decade



BILL POLITIS

or so, Tek, along with other U.S. industries, slowed down the rate of improvement in quality and productivity; at the same time, Japan was moving ahead even faster.

We're all aware of what some of the competition did to us. We were behind in some areas, but today we're catching up fast, and making some really good progress. (Executive Vice President) Wim Velsink has developed the concept of "manufacturing excellence," including the partnership among engineering, manufacturing and marketing. As it becomes a reality, you'll see how valuable it is.

## That's a nice-sounding title; what does "manufacturing excellence" mean?

Actually, it breaks down into what we've identified as TQC (total quality commitment), PI (people involvement), MRP, which I'm sure you know about, and JIT (just-in-time). And you can't have one without the others, if you're going to succeed. JIT, for example, involves a lot more than just productivity and inventory control. It's a complex process, requiring MRP support and everyone's involvement. But again, its potential is astounding.

What we're talking about here is the preventive approach to improved quality, and that's what the Corporate Quality Assurance role has been: offering programs, bringing in the experts, auditing, providing the tools, such as seminars and training sessions.

## Will CQA be divisionalized?

Anything's possible, although I think it's more likely that it will continue to exist as an entity of its own. Divisions, though, are ultimately responsible for their own quality levels.

In all of this, the important thing is to remember the phrase "fitness for use." We have to satisfy the customer.

## And who is the customer?

It could be the next person down the assembly line, or the buyer who pays for the finished product; the relationship is the same, really. If you're working on an assembly line and passing down your work to the next station, that next person is your customer, and what you provide had better meet specs and also be fit for use. Not only that, it has to be delivered just in time. It's dangerous to make assumptions; the only certain way to proceed is to know your customer, and learn what's needed. Then know your suppliers, to make certain you get good parts, on time.

What you're doing now is adding value, and the same principles hold true whether you're reporting for Tekweek or running an administrative function.

## Do you have some thoughts about where you'd like to see the company go, how it should grow?

I think we as managers have to learn to change. People on the firing line can make better contributions, but they can't do that unless they're asked, and challenged to, and that's where the manager comes in. We're good at that now, but we have room for improvement.

We also need to create an atmosphere where people understand that they have ownership in their jobs, that they control their destiny. We can't develop just-in-time and all the other techniques without people involvement, any more than we can do it without MRP. There's still more creativity to be tapped, and it's our job as managers to see that the climate exists for that to happen, and happen naturally.

I see those kinds of improvements happening right now, all over the company. It's a good, healthy sign. We can't rest on the past, because everything around us is changing. And if there's a real key to this improvement it's that spirit of teamwork.

## The same spirit you talked about from the Fifties?

The same spirit. A much bigger company, with a lot more technology, but the same kind of attitude. It worked wonders for us then, and it's still just as potentially valuable. Five people working together can do ten times as much as one person can, if they're working toward that same goal.

## And if you had one wish for the people who follow you at Tek, what would it be?

That they enjoy the same kind of excitement, the same kind of challenges, that I've enjoyed. And that they share in the success they bring to Tek. It's been a wonderful experience for me. I want it to be just as good for them.