

# Rocco Petrone: The Italian-American Who Took Us to the Moon

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*[Rocco Petrone at Cape Kennedy in 1969. Photo: Nasa.]*

*The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Moon landing - 20 July 1969 - was just celebrated, and here's the little-known story of an Italian American whose contribution to the Moon mission was crucial for its success.*

From Basilicata to the Moon: Rocco Petrone, whose family hailed from Sasso di Castalda, an impoverished village of 1,000 people perched on the Apennine mountains near Potenza, was the director of Apollo 11, the NASA mission that landed humans on the moon.

Petrone's parents, Teresa and Antonio, left Italy after World War I. As many Italians before and after them, they were in search of better living conditions, and thought they could find them in America. They settled in Amsterdam, in the state of New York, a small town by American standards – but with 30,000 residents, it must have seemed huge to them.

Rocco was born in Amsterdam on March 31, 1926, named after the patron saint of Sasso di Castalda; his second name was Anthony, like his father, who he never really knew as Antonio passed away in an accident at the railway yard where he had found work when Rocco was just six months old; Teresa, who worked in a glove factory, was 27 years old, and was left with three children to support.

But she was resilient, and passed her determination and strength on to her children. Rocco was one of the best students of his high school, all while having an afternoon job selling ice in order to make a few dollars.



*[Sasso Castalda, Basilicata, and the Tibetan bridge.]*

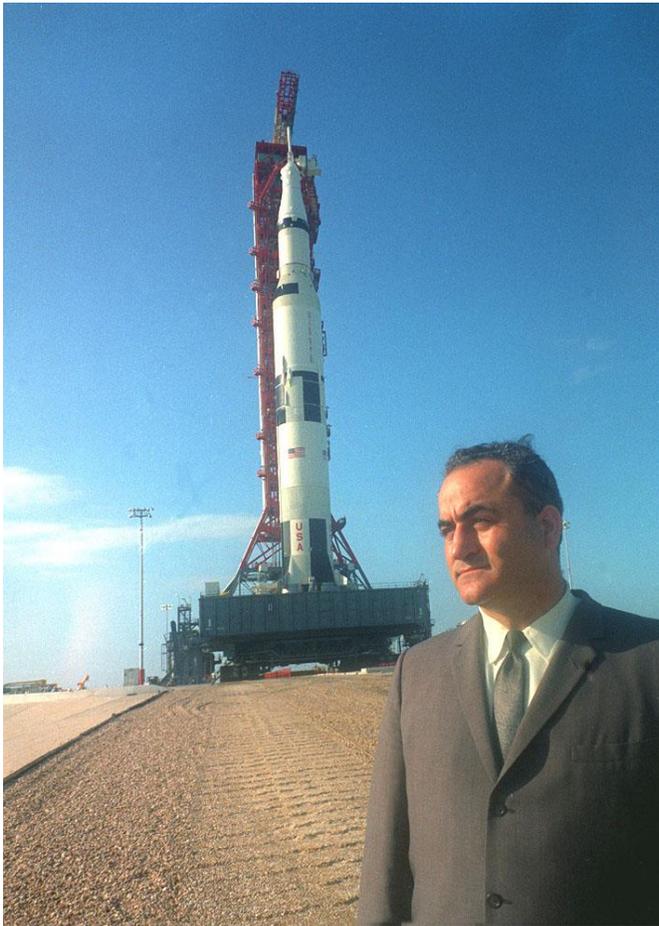
Petrone won an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he distinguished himself quickly as one of the best in the academic program, especially in math and new technologies. He was also gifted physically: at 1.90m (6.2 ft) for 100 kilos (220 lbs), he was a good football player and played tackle on a national championship football team.

After graduating from West Point, and a stint in Germany right after World War II (during which time he also traveled to Sasso di Castalda where he met his grandmother and other relatives), Petrone returned to the U.S. and was accepted at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). There, he received a master's degree in mechanical engineering and became interested in the development and testing of rockets and ballistic missiles.

Working for the U.S. Army for two decades, Petrone helped develop the Redstone rocket, the first large U.S. ballistic missile and the vehicle used to launch America's first astronauts, Alan Shepard and Gus Grissom, on their suborbital missions.

At the age of 30, he was one of the leading experts in the expanding field of ballistic missiles, in a world obsessed by nuclear fear on one hand, and by the space race on the other.

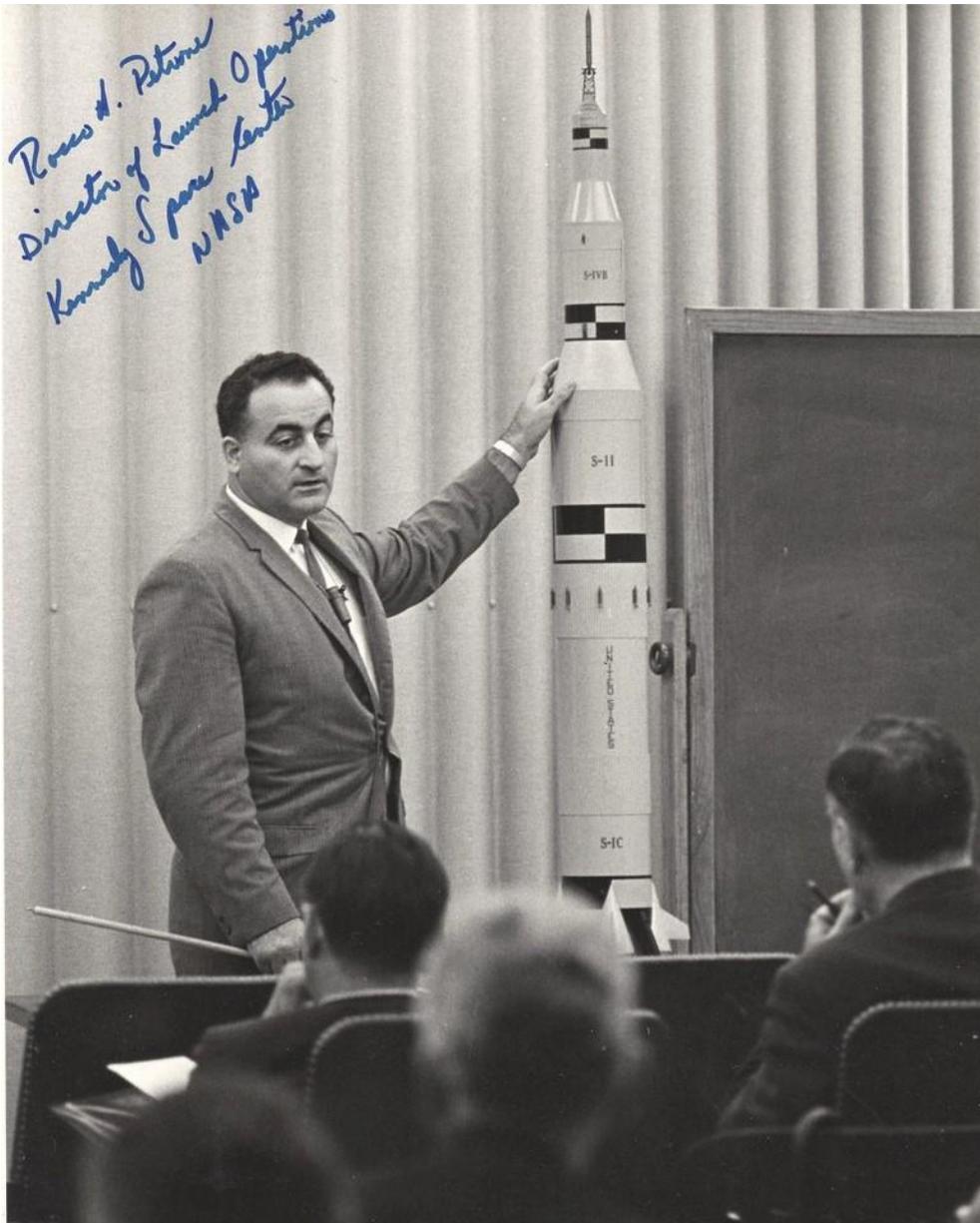
Which is how he ended at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1960. He was specifically requested by Wernher von Braun, a pioneer of rocket technology and space science, whom Petrone had met years earlier when both were working in Alabama.



*[Petrone at the Apollo 11 rollout on May 20, 1969.]*

At NASA, Petrone was assigned the task of designing and constructing the launch pads for the entire space program, a task to which he was fully committed, day and night, never intimidated by the immensity of the job ahead; or if he was, he never showed it, something that earned him the nickname of 'tiger', a boss who always asked for the best possible performance of his collaborators, but he demanded it first of all of himself.

Petrone oversaw the construction and development of the Saturn launch rockets, which were instrumental to the Apollo lunar mission, until, in 1964, he became the director of the Apollo program.



It was during that time that he developed the habit of compiling extremely detailed check lists, which all of his team members were required to go through countless times before giving their OK, which had to be signed in their own names. His obsession with quality control was also influenced by the 1967 capsule fire which he witnessed, when three astronauts died.

Petrone was gifted not just at engineering, but also at communicating; he often won arguments, and was able to convince politicians to assign further funding when needed. In Petrone's obituary, the *Washington Post* recalls the following episode: "When he asked for fresh batteries

for Apollo 11 during launch testing, few others felt this expensive request was worthwhile. But Kennedy Space Center Director Kurt Debus got this reply from Washington: ‘If Petrone says he wants it that way, then do it that way.’”



And yet, he was human, and that morning on July 16, 1969, he too was on edge. He woke up to a crescent moon, a good omen. He is the voice behind the famous countdown. Lift off was at 9:32 am, as scheduled.

“I believe that space offers the world a chance for peace,” he is quoted saying. “If people envisioned the world without the frontiers created by man, we’d learn to live better, and more united.”

Perhaps the moon was in his destiny. [Interviewed by \*We the Italians\*](#), Italian journalist Renato Cantore, author of the book “Dalla Terra alla Luna,” which recounts the story of Petrone, says of Rocco’s ancestral hometown: “Sasso di Castalda, which is a small mountain village in the Basilicata (Lucania) region from which the Petrone family left in 1921, is a town that reaches almost 1,000 meters high and in cloudless nights from there you can see the moon like nowhere else in Basilicata. It is an area extraordinarily free of light pollution and therefore the observation of the sky in this place is particularly impressive.”

Petrone died in 2006 in Palos Verdes Estates, California, aged 80. He was passionate about history and devoted his years as a retired man to its study, especially the history of the American Civil War.

A man who started with nothing, and reached the moon.