

**An Oral History**

**with**

**William “Bill” Parsons**

**SSC History Project**

**Interviewer: Martin Oramous**

**2005**

# Biography

William W. Parsons is the Director of NASA's John C. Stennis Space Center. He graduated from the University of Mississippi with a Bachelor's degree in Engineering. He graduated from the University of Central Florida with a Master's degree in Engineering Management.

He began his career in the United States Marine Corps as an Infantry Officer, then worked as a manufacturing engineer and later as an aerospace engineer at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida. In 1990, Parsons joined the NASA team at Kennedy Space Center as a Launch Site Support Manager in the Shuttle Operations Directorate and also worked as an Executive Management Intern and later as the Shuttle Flow Director of the Shuttle Operations Directorate at KSC. In 1996, he became Manager of the Space Station Hardware Integration Office at KSC.

He was first assigned to Stennis in 1997 as the Chief of Operations of the Propulsion Test Directorate. Parsons relocated to NASA Johnson Space Center, Houston to become the Director of the Center Operations Directorate. He later served as Deputy Director of Johnson. He returned to Stennis in 2001 and served as the Director of the Center Operations and Support Directorate. His first stint as Stennis Center Director was in August 2002. He became the Space Shuttle Program Manager in May 2003. As Space Shuttle Program Manager, Parsons led the Return to Flight Activities for the agency and played a major role in the recent success of the Discovery STS-114 mission. He was named the new Director of the NASA's John C. Stennis Space Center on September 13, 2005.

Parsons has received numerous honors, including the Presidential Rank Award, NASA's Distinguished Service Medal, Exceptional Service Medal; the National Intelligence Medal of Achievement; the Silver Snoopy, awarded by astronauts for outstanding performance in flight safety and mission success; the Center Directors' Commendation; and the Commandants Certificate of Commendation from the U.S. Marine Corps.

## An Oral History

with

**Bill Parsons**

*This is an interview by the Stennis Space Center History Office. The purpose of this interview is to document the story of key personnel during/after Hurricane Katrina at SSC. The interview is with Bill Parsons and is taking place on November 30, 2005. The interviewer is Martin Oramous. Also present are Paul Foerman and Shelia Reed.*

**BILL PARSONS:** Bill Parsons, I'm the Center Director at the Stennis Space Center. About a week before the storm, I found out that I'd be coming back to Stennis as the Center Director. Rex Geveden called me up and asked me, "Would you go back to Stennis?" And I said, "Absolutely." Prior to Katrina, they called Tom Donaldson and informed him of the decisions that were being made, but of course, Katrina was bearing down on Stennis, and we said we would talk about this after the storm. Although the storm was a pretty strong storm, and was headed toward the New Orleans area, it was still the mindset of O.K. it'll pass through, there will be some damage and then we will get back to work. Of course the storm increased in intensity. It ended up turning a little bit more north, coming right over Bay St. Louis and Stennis. Having lived on the Gulf Coast before and being from Mississippi as well as having been the Center Director here before, I have a lot of friends here, a lot of family in the area and so I was glued to the television. Watching CNN, the Weather Channel trying to find out what was going on. Of course I knew it was going to be a pretty bad one. I don't think I had a clue as to how bad it was going to be, but I knew it was going to be pretty bad. On Monday the storm hit, Monday morning. On Tuesday afternoon, Rex Geveden called me at my Florida home and said, "Can you come to Washington and be the senior NASA official in charge of disaster Katrina Recovery for both Michoud and Stennis?" I said, "Absolutely." I got on the airplane. Arrived in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday morning. I began operating the Emergency Operations Center in Washington, connecting to the other Centers. Stennis and Michoud are now two days or so into the recovery time. The folks down here were doing the best that they could with what was going on and Headquarters needed to mobilize and try to do what we could, from a Headquarters standpoint, coordinating all the agency assets and activities to help Michoud and the Stennis area. I operated from the Washington, D.C. area Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and on Saturday morning I moved myself to the Marshall Space Flight Center. It seemed like a closer point to what was going on both at Michoud and at Stennis. I stayed at Marshall one whole day, Saturday. On Sunday morning, they had a NASA airplane coming down to Stennis. I jumped on it. Arrived down here Sunday morning. Almost a week after the storm and began operating as the NASA Senior Official for disaster recovery from the Stennis

Space Center. It was not very long after that, probably not that day, the next day that I took a helicopter trip over to Michoud. Michoud was surrounded by water. They still had not had an opportunity to get any other supplies in to Michoud other than by helicopter. They still had the ride-out crew there hanging in there. I had the opportunity to land there, observe some of the damage. As we flew back, we went down along the Slidell area and across to Bay St. Louis, Waveland and down a little bit into Gulfport. From a helicopter it was devastating to see what had happened. It was unbelievable.

**MARTIN ORAMOVS:** Had you ever seen anything like that before?

**BILL PARSONS:** No, nothing. I've never seen anything like it. I was here as a seventh grader for Camille. My dad was stationed at Keesler Air Force Base. We were getting ready to move to the Mississippi Gulf Coast when Camille hit. So it delayed our movement from my hometown of Magnolia, Mississippi to the Mississippi Gulf Coast for about four months. So, I came here four months after Camille and moved into College Park in Gulfport, Mississippi. I remember I rode up and down Highway 90 and saw what the results were of Camille. By then, to be quite honest, it was pretty cleaned up. They had cleared a lot of the debris. There were a lot of slabs out there. We had the ship, the boat that was over across Highway 90 and of course some of Highway 90 was damaged and all that but nothing like anything that I saw during Katrina. So, again that just takes your breath away. It kind of makes your gut hurt when you see what had happened.

**MARTIN ORAMOVS:** There was no way to prepare for it?

**BILL PARSONS:** No, no. Over the next few days, one of the things I did do was I wrote a good friend of mine an e-mail. His name is Joe Dowdy. He went to Ole Miss with me. He and I went in the Marine Corps together and he spent 24 or 25 years in the Marine Corps as an Infantry Officer. He had a great deal of experience in Lebanon, in Mogadishu, Somalia and in Iraq. I just said, "Hey are you free?" He is now out of the Marine Corps, and he has a consulting business. I haven't seen him in about 20 years, but we had stayed in contact through phone calls and writing. I just sent an e-mail and said, "Are you available to come help me with hurricane relief down at Stennis?" He said, "Absolutely." That was really all I got back. I said, "Are you serious?" He said "Absolutely." We brought him on contract with Jacobs Sverdrup through Marshall. He showed up and met me at Marshall when I arrived there. He got on the airplane and came down here with me. He was extremely helpful in organizational kinds of things that we needed to do to continue the disaster recovery and things we were dealing with. One of the things probably most important was the fact that he recognized immediately that having a helicopter go into Michoud was not a sustaining kind of logistical support that would last very long. After he flew the route with us, he said, "We've got to get trucks in there." It turned out that the military was trying to get a forward base. They saw that Michoud was an island. They were headed that way. Joe went over and discussed it with the Navy Seabees and some other military folks. He was able to get a NASA contingent to go with him and got a convoy through. That was probably about 10 days after the hurricane. That was a big moment because we were taking bottled water and supplies by helicopter, and you can only just do so much, and they needed so many other things to

sustain their ability to keep the facility safe so that we could recover from Katrina. So, we got a convoy through and after that we were able to get convoys through on a regular basis. Joe probably spent the next four or five days just taking trucks back and forth because he knew the route, and he was comfortable with it. It's something that he had done many, many times before in other situations. So, he was very instrumental in helping MAF. MAF did a number of things for themselves. They were very innovative. They were forward thinking. They ended up putting in a water well eventually but before that we did get a Reverse Osmosis Purification Unit (ROPU) from AMES Research Center. They drove the ROPU all the way from the San Jose, CA area straight through to Mississippi. Joe met them immediately when they got here. We shot them over to MAF and began making water. They had enough water up to that point but water was becoming a concern because the New Orleans water, natural gas and electricity just weren't coming into the place. Probably the biggest other factor that we dealt with was diesel and gasoline. The contractors and the various folks that worked that from all levels of NASA allowed us to get the fuel that we needed to keep the generators operating to produce emergency electricity. We were able to restore commercial power to Stennis pretty quickly. I can't remember the date. I know that it was within 10 days or so. That was a big day. That was just power coming in and then it took many days after that to ripple that through and bring up different buildings here at Stennis. But that was pretty big and the fact that we had fresh water was pretty big.

I guess somewhere in there Tom Donaldson and I talked about the transition of me as the Center Director. We decided that it would be in the best interest of Stennis and ongoing operations for me to take over as the Center Director. We discussed this with NASA Headquarters. They agreed. Tom and I made the transition. We were still working really hard. FEMA was coming in here and had logistical support being based out of here. We had a lot of military coming in here too. We decided that Tom would go over as part of the Governor's office and work with MEMA, Mississippi Emergency Management Agency and FEMA and be an on loan executive from NASA to work with them and the coordinating of their activities through at least the six county area along the Mississippi Gulf Coast that was affected by Hurricane Katrina. He began doing that and I continued working the recovery of Stennis and MAF. I worked the day to day activities at MAF until they became more self-sufficient. That took probably a month, maybe a little bit longer. When they became self-sufficient, my role as the NASA Senior Executive in charge of recovery diminished a little bit. I was still working budget issues, supplementals, damage as well as what we were going to do for recovery. Because I was the previous shuttle program manager, I was very interested in the damage to the external tanks and how we were going to get those back on-line and how we were going to get tanks from the Kennedy Space Center back to Michoud so they could begin the work to do Return-to-Flight II. The Shuttle Program made some tough decisions. Decided to move the tanks back from KSC to Michoud which started the road to recovery of the Space Shuttle assets to be able to launch in May or sometime early next year. The last thing I would tell you is there are a lot of individual stories, but the one big story is how this agency came together to help the Stennis Space Center and Michoud Facility. Within this agency we're not beyond being very critical of what we did. But I'll tell you if any outsider had watched this agency perform and watched the NASA contractor employees

perform you would be proud to be a part of this agency. They responded to this disaster. They took care of the people. They gave the funding required to jump on the recovery almost immediately where the buildings would not be any further damaged. They committed themselves to learning how to do this better. They are going through a lessons learned process right now. We have had hurricanes at the Kennedy Space Center and Langley. We have dealt with hurricanes here at Stennis, and of course, Rita came in soon after Katrina and threatened the Johnson Space Center. I believe for upcoming natural disasters or any kind of man-made disaster, this agency is better prepared due to the fact that we have dealt with hurricanes, the Columbia and Challenger disasters, and now one of the largest natural disasters in recent times and we've done a darn good job of it.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** You are talking about a lot of people here not only in the agency who came together and tried to help but the number of people who were affected, who lost their homes and not sure if they are going to have a job or not. What point and what did you think about as far as how are we going to get these people taken care of?

**BILL PARSONS:** Well, I can tell you the first thing you do is you take care of the people. These facilities and everything else won't get better unless the people are there to bring them back up. Then the next most important thing was to make sure the people had what they needed. They had information, and they knew they were going to get paid. They knew that if you needed to get out of this area and get your kids in school, we were going to do what we could to get you there. They knew that this agency was going to take care of them. Not only our civil servants but our contractor employees, and I think that setting the tone of "you don't have to worry about that" was key. Because that's what everybody was worried about. We are going to take care of you and just get yourself in order and we're going to keep you informed and we're going to let you know how to get in touch with FEMA, and we are going to have workshops, and we're going to have places you can go and ask questions, and we're going to bring in people to talk to you. We're going to get the Red Cross in here. Doing all of those things, helped people first see that there was a way through this maze of what was going on and the tragedy that occurred. Also, I think it helped us all get to bond and work towards a common goal. I would say, that if any positive can come out of a disaster like this it is watching people take care of each other and look after each other and get themselves on their feet. One other thing that we did do was we held an All Hands, and I brought in Roy Estess. Roy Estess was here for Camille, and he had a lot of lessons learned from that hurricane. The External Affairs folks brought me documentation from back in Camille time. I read through that and got a lot of good ideas of things that we could do, but Roy offered a lot of things that they did during Camille with people going out clearing trees and helping remove carpet, sheetrock and things like that. So, we established employee teams and started doing that. We worked closely with our resident agencies and the Navy to make that happen, and I think all of that in itself was part of this recovery process. Roy also said they didn't do a bit of government business, NASA business, for about three months. So, I was already prepared to say if we go through Christmas, and we don't get any NASA business done, that's O.K. But I was extremely surprised on October 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> or something like that we tested a RS-68 engine. On October 22 we tested a SSME, Space Shuttle Main Engine, for the first time. So, I think with the fact that we put people first

and we worked that then, they felt comfortable that we weren't going to forget them. We knew some things weren't happening as fast as we wanted them to. We weren't getting people in homes as quickly as we would like, but they knew that we weren't going to give up on that, and they knew that we were going to continue to work for them. I believe what helped is they said, "Well, there are certain things that we could do at work and let's concentrate on that while we are waiting for other things to work themselves through." And we did that. I think the test kind of said, "Hey folks, if we want to get back to work, we can." I think you realized we had about 25% of our employees either lost their homes completely or couldn't live in them. About 75% of employees that didn't lose their homes or didn't get impacted but they probably had extended family members or all kinds of different situations they were dealing with. So, I don't think that from a whole it's probably a good statistic to say 25% lost their homes. It was probably more like 60%-75% of the Stennis people were significantly impacted.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** I work here. I can't think of one person that I've talked to since the storm that didn't have something happen to them. Trees on their house, water, they might be able to live in it right away but everybody got hit. You have a kind of feel for how this community reacted and responded and also how are we doing now? Three months out. Everybody is still talking about it.

**BILL PARSONS:** Sure. Well, I'm a Mississippian and I think the community are a bunch of tough people. I think the state of Mississippi responded pretty good. Stennis responded outstanding. Setting up our partnership with FEMA and military organizations, but I think the state of Mississippi did pretty darn good. I watched the Governor and I watched the way the local officials responded and so, and so forth and nobody was grandstanding and nobody was trying to get the CNN spotlight on us. They didn't mind if it was over in New Orleans. I think what I saw was people saying, "O.K. That was a pretty nice punch. That's harder than we've been hit than I can remember but we're going to get back up and we're going to get going again." As I walk around, the people with the biggest smiles probably lost everything. It's kind of interesting and the people that were kind of shaking their heads when you ask them what happen, they said, "I did O.K." And they look down and that meant that they didn't lose their homes or they got two foot of water or four foot of water but they say, "I did O.K. compared to some people." I was just amazed at the resiliency of the people along the Gulf Coast and all the people that work here. I think over the last three months, we made tremendous progress. We still have a long way to go. We still have a lot of people living in temporary housing, but we've allowed everybody to get off the site as far as living in office spaces. That took 2 ½ months. We had people living in offices for 2 ½ months and we finally have gotten all of those folks in at least trailers or some other temporary place. We still have probably 70 or 80 trailers or RVs on the site at different places. A lot of those, and I would say probably 90 percent of those are Navy. Many of the military personnel are supporting the war in Iraq or doing other things in support of DOD missions, and we felt it was necessary that those folks stay out here to support the mission then that was the right thing to do. We do have some NASA folks in RVs out here. The NSSC, the NASA Shared Services Center, was trying to build up and move here to Stennis. Of course this threw a big chink in it. But to ensure that they were still going to come here and to work with the NSSC to make

that happen, we've moved some RVs out here so that folks that are trying to set that up can utilize those RVs and continue to work to get the NSSC set up here at the Stennis Space Center. Continue to bring those jobs here.

It's kind of interesting, of the 48 NASA people that lost their homes, I offered them a one-way ticket anywhere they wanted to go, to any center and we would make it happen. I said, "You can leave and you can go to another center and we'll get you a job and we will PCS you, Permanent Change of Station, and we'll take care of you." Of the 48 only five or six chose to do that. That says that the five or six people said, "I don't have anything there and I don't have anything to go back to and I just don't want to go back." But then think about it, 42 people who lost everything said, "No, that's my home. I'm coming back. I'm going to rebuild and we're going to make it work." That is just one statistic of a lot of statistics that are like that. I would say that there are a few people that left. There are a lot of people that there is just no way in the world they're going to go anywhere. They're going to rebuild right here and stay in this community and it will be better.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** What about you? Is there anything that stands out in your mind that is the hardest thing that I've had to deal with, the biggest obstacle? The thing that kind of hit you in the gut that said, "How are we going to handle this? How are we going to solve this problem?"

**BILL PARSONS:** Well, I think when I had almost 300 people living out here on the site in offices and I walked around and visited with them, and I saw their kids and I saw their elderly parents or their dog or whatever situation they had, when I saw those folks and I talked to them and they would tell me, "Thank you, I had no where else to go," that probably tore at me more than anything. You have to weigh this compassion and everything that you are trying to do against hey we've got to enable these folks to get back on their feet and try to determine what is the right time to ask them to leave. When can they leave, when is it really that they can leave and how much or how far do we go? You want to make it the right balance because you can't just ... people don't need to be living in office spaces. It's not the right thing to do. On the other hand, when they don't have anywhere else to go, what else can you do. So weighing that and making those decisions was probably for me the most tough human decision that we had to make. I had a lot of people helping with that, and I would say that we did it pretty well. I think that the balance was about right. It's not to say that there weren't people that found themselves in pretty tough situations. But the fact is I think the balance was right. That was the hardest thing for me. Just knowing that you had to enable these folks to kind of get on with their lives and getting on with your life was not living in an office space here at the Stennis Space Center. Enabling them to find a way to get themselves a home and start setting up and start being part of the community again. Because we are isolated from the community. We have 125,000 acres around us and we are isolated from the community. So, if you are out here, you are isolating yourself from the part that's rebuilding and to get those folks back out in the communities, that's where you start rebuilding. That's where this community which is so important to the Stennis Space

Center starts rebuilding. This community was so devastated that was really tough to do. We're still working on it. We're not done. We have a long ways to go.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** Is there anyway to compare what you have had to deal with here with anything else that you have ever faced?

**BILL PARSONS:** You know this is probably going to sound a little funny. The Shuttle Program was harder. The reason for it was it was hardware, it was technical decisions. Dealing with Katrina and the people hurt. This was harder from a stress standpoint. This was hard in that it was people, but it was so easy to make the decisions. For me, the decisions were so much easier because it was about people, and it was about doing the right thing for the people. Doing the right thing for that hardware in the Shuttle Program, you had 15 opinions and everybody had a technical paper they wanted to show you. Every decision I made was so difficult and there was never a clear right or wrong, white or black or anything like that. So that made it hard. Here it was easy because when you said we're going to do the right thing for the people and when you focused on those kinds of decisions it was usually clear what the right thing was although it was heart wrenching to see the devastation and to know these people had been through what they had you also gained strength by watching people deal with their issues. It was easier to make the decisions because you just did the right thing. Making sure you ask people, "What do you need? "What is your biggest obstacle and how can I help you?" And they would tell you and you would go, "O.K. I can make that happen." That gave you a sense of accomplishment, and it made me feel really good. So I don't know. That's kind of the way I've looked at it. This was tough from a human standpoint to watch just how many people were impacted by this, but it was so much easier from a leadership and management standpoint because it was easier to pick the right thing to do.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** You know this is going to happen again some time, probably, maybe not while you're here.

**BILL PARSONS:** I hope not.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** Is there anything you might tell someone who would be in a similar position as you that could help them out?

**BILL PARSONS:** Well, I think the Stennis Space Center was/is in a position to deal with such a disaster, a category 4 or 5 hurricane and although we sustained a great deal of damage we did very well. This center will improve its position from where it was because of the money that we will put into the facility and the things that we will do to ensure that we will be better off the next time. So, I think from a facilities standpoint and from a center and everything else, this center is prepared. I think that this community has to be aware that evacuation is paramount and that the Stennis Space Center, although a place to come to, is not the ideal place to come. It's a last resort. When you evacuate here, it is a last resort, but we had no choice but to open our doors at that point and time when people are evacuating. If they can't get any further than here, then they should come here, and we'll protect them. Hopefully, we'll build some facilities and do some things that might

help us do that better because we weren't really ready, and we're not set up to do that to the extent that we did it for Katrina. But then I think that the most important thing that I learned is that in the plan that when the hurricane goes through, it's not turn your radios in and get back to work. Just go assess the damage and get back to work because I think when you have a disaster of this size, and it takes out peoples' homes and people are displaced from their homes, I think you need to plan for the fact when you have employees that have no where to go, and they don't have a place to live they're going to have to have a place to stay or they are going to have to have some kind of shelter or they're going to leave. If they leave, you're not going to be able to do your mission. This Agency is located in areas that have all kinds of different disaster scenarios that can occur, and we need to plan for the displacement of people from their homes for extended periods of time and how do we maintain our workforce and keep the skills in the area so we can do our mission. Because I think our facilities will recover much faster than the people are going to recover from the disaster. We have got to make sure that we've thought about what do we do about those people. I tell you a lot of lessons learned from what we did here. People that needed to be displaced went off to other centers and helped worked the mission of Stennis from other centers. I think that as soon as we can get people back in here, we are, but in addition to that, we've made arrangements to have a FEMA site built with RVs that our employees can get into it first and also the community. We've done a lot of things. I think we're going to capture those lessons learned in an After Action Report, and we're capturing it in the Governor's Commission's Report on some of the things that we can do better to prepare ourselves, and I think that those are the things that are highest on my list, but there are probably many, many other things that people need to consider in dealing with this kind of disaster. It just doesn't end when the hurricane is a 100 miles away. It continues if it has really done the devastation that we've seen with Katrina.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** It's been three months and we're still continuing. Anything else that you can think of that we haven't talked about that you might want to touch on?

**BILL PARSONS:** Well, the people that ran the Emergency Operations Centers across this agency, especially here at Stennis and MAF just did an outstanding job. The ride-out crews worked. It helped sustained our facilities and keep them where they could be brought back up both at MAF and Stennis. So, again it tells you that this agency, this Gulf Coast, the New Orleans area is not about our product or our mission as much as it is about our people. It is what our people do. So, again, I go back saying they just did a fantastic job. If we will take care of them, they, we, will take care of the mission and what we have to do as an agency. So, I'm just proud to be part of it.

**PAUL FOERMAN:** One more thing... (Inaudible)

**BILL PARSONS:** Satellite phones. That was a big lesson learned. We lost all communications. We lost our telephone systems. In the meantime, Marshall which is kind of the networking center, brought in satellite phones and coordinated through Headquarters. A gentleman named Bill Bounds was the communications expert at Headquarters. He coordinated his assets throughout the agency, brought them to Marshall

and brought them all down here. The satellite phones were instrumental to establishing early communications. Eventually we got the phone systems back up. We had a FEMA-trained NASA Incident Commander from AMES that came down here, Bob Oplinger and Bob showed up here and he was able to speak FEMA Incident Command Center language and so we sent him over there to coordinate things. We could use a few more of those folks in the agency when we are dealing with this kind of situation because you've got to be able to speak their language. Turns out that they're modeled a lot after a military unit, a Marine Corp Unit. So, when you sit there, and you go in there and you start looking at them, if you have a military background, you can catch on pretty quick, but we need people trained in emergency response and incident command structure that FEMA uses for these early responses. We had somebody. Bob came from AMES and did that. In those early days, the only transportation we could use to get here was aircraft. There was no way to drive into here. Get aircraft in here and get helicopters over to MAF and we brought air bosses. People that can control aircraft and plan that from over at the Johnson Space Center. Again, we utilized all these different expertise and skills throughout this agency. Scott Reagan and I can't remember the second gentleman's name came over from JSC and ran our air assets for a couple of weeks. You couldn't have been able to do all this without this agency sending in those skills and those special equipment that we needed to do the recovery with.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** That's good.

**PAUL FOERMAN:** Yes, very good.

*(End of Interview)*