

An Oral History

with

Michael McKinion

SSC History Project

Interviewer: Martin Oramous

2005

Biography

Mike McKinion is the Lead Operator for the Energy Management Control Systems at Stennis Space Center. He graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi with a Bachelor's Degree in Mechanical Technology.

He began his career at Stennis Space Center with Pan American World Airways in 1981. During his career at SSC he served on the Acceptance Test Team for the first Utility Control System in 1983. Mike has also served on the ride-out crew for Hurricane George in 1998 and the Y2K Transition Team.

An Oral History

with

Michael McKinion

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 Michael McKinion and is taking place on December 1, 2005. The interviewer is Martin Oramous. Also present are Paul Foerman and Shelia Reed.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Tell us your name and your job position and go from there.

MICHAEL MCKINION: My name is Mike McKinion. I work for Mississippi Space Services here at the Stennis Space Center. My function during emergencies is a part of the Emergency Operations Group. I work on a console in the Emergency Operations Center with Don Griffith and a couple of other guys from our group. My normal duties are with the Energy Management and Control System. That's kind of a nerve interface here at Stennis oriented toward facilities. Maybe that's how I came to become called the "Operator" in the Emergency Operations Center. We do the hurricane activity several times a year. We're pretty well versed at that. It's pretty routine as far as the spin-up and activating the ride-out crews and the shelters. We expected that with Katrina. We talked about it Friday while the storm was well out into the Gulf. I believe we came in Saturday night or early Sunday morning. The ride-out crews did and started up from there and finished up the final preparations for Stennis, the tying down, the cleaning up and the preparing for the folks that normally come to evacuate. My place to go during hurricanes is already pretty well decided for me. It wasn't a choice about evacuating and so forth. We're used to that part of it. We just weren't used to the part where it actually came up Coleman Avenue. We weren't really expecting that but in kind of a way, I know I was. I had thought about the hurricane season for years. It always bothered me that we always seemed to miss. They can't keep doing that forever. They certainly didn't miss this time.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: What is the biggest effort you have to make in preparing for a hurricane and was there anything done differently for Katrina once you realized it is coming up Coleman Avenue and it is a big one?

MICHAEL MCKINION: No, we really didn't prepare any differently. My function in that spin-up to the hurricane activity is one mostly of communication with the managers and with all the Emergency Coordinators from the different agencies. A lot of e-mails go in and out as far as the status of Stennis and what condition are we in. Until the storm actually hit, it was just like we had done it 20 times in the past few years, same activity.

In the EOC in B1100, you don't really know what's going on outside. You can't really tell how bad the wind is blowing. You are kind of isolated from a lot of that. The television, it just looks like a big whirly thing on the T.V. It's not very scary there. One thing that was different this year, we were able to watch from the EOC the security cameras around Stennis. That was a pretty big change there. We could zoom around the site and go look at different things and that gave us some feedback on what was going on. It was pretty routine up until the storm hit. It was just like all the others I have been involved with over the years.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Where do you live? How did you leave your residence or your family? Did they evacuate?

MICHAEL MCKINION: I live in Bay St. Louis. I came to find out that I was correct in thinking I lived on one of the higher points in the city. The topo map said my house is above 25 ft which there is not many houses in Bay St. Louis that are above 25 ft. Because I do work here, our plan is to evacuate to Stennis. My wife has come out here several times. Normally it is a pretty short stay. We spend a night, go home the next day. Everything is O.K. She stayed out here with me for 11 days this time. We made one or two trips to Bay St. Louis to check the property. We fared much better than many people. Our house was still there. We didn't have rising water on our property. We lost the roof to our house so we did have some damage but we had something to go back to. A lot of people didn't have anything to go back to. We did fairly well. There are three children. Two of those totally lost their house. The third had 4 or 5 ft of water in their house. So, that was pretty devastating to them. The reaction is as individual I guess as the people are. How people react and what they think and what they do and how it affects them, with some people it is pretty nonchalant and with some it's just totally devastating. They seem to be doing well. We are all camping out at our place right now. *Laughter...*

MARTIN ORAMOUS: During the storm you were in 1100 on the north end?

MICHAEL MCKINION: I was in B1100 during the storm. I was in the EOC that's right off the lobby. That's the 137C room right off the back corner of the lobby. There was a big rush of activity when the roof let go up there. I didn't see it. I didn't hear it. I just heard the people. I heard the big surge of activity outside the room, the radio traffic. We knew something was going on there. The folks in the EOC, they cautioned us when the eye came over Stennis not to go outside. Don't go outside. The first thing you do is get up and walk outside and see what's going on. The surprising things in addition to the debris, there was a lot of debris out behind the clinic is where we walked out the door. A lot of debris, a lot of things came off the roof and damaged vehicles and that kind of thing. The seagulls were the surprising thing, the amount of birds that were around. It was a thought that people never have. What do birds do when this thing happens? They get in the eye and they can't get out. There were seagulls everywhere. We didn't stay out too long. Actually, the eye was over us for quite a period but we stayed out about ten minutes and came back in. It was a new experience.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: What were the biggest challenges you faced? The eye has come through, the storm passes, you have got literally thousands of people on-site that aren't usually there even during a hurricane plus all the destruction. Where do you go from there?

MICHAEL MCKINION: Well, that was the new part for us. We had never done that before. We hadn't rehearsed that part of our plan. It was kind of a play it by ear type of thing. We had the ride-out crew. They were still here. They were doing well. We could cycle through shifts and keep somebody on the console all the time. The new group we had to interface with was the FEMA people. There was a group there that you didn't know who they were or where they came from but they were here. There were a lot of things happening at Stennis that we hadn't rehearsed. We didn't know how to deal with a lot of that stuff. Those guys came and briefed us on basically their role here at Stennis. There was a lot of incoming traffic. There was a lot of traffic coming in the way of 18 wheelers and tractor trailer rigs big vehicles under the FEMA contract. We learned a lot about that working with the security folks to determine where to send those vehicles. How to route them to the FEMA guys. Where were they located? We had to come up with some signage to put on the highway to help the truckers who were from Coast to Coast. They came from all over and they were looking for FEMA. We learned how to determine Stennis traffic versus FEMA traffic. That was the main thing there with getting that going.

The people from outside the disaster area were real helpful in the fact that they weren't involved. It was kind of difficult because you were involved, the people here were involved because their homes were flooded or flatten or whatever the case may be so the folks that came in from outside the area were helpful in that regard because they were still kind of thinking clearly not that we weren't but we had a lot of things to worry about during those days right after the storm. The primary thing that was a concern for most folks was the lack of fuel. The local stations were out of service, under water, no electricity so fuel was a big problem. On the other hand, people were trying to go to their home and see what it looked like. So, every time you drove you came back and you had that much less fuel in your car. That was a concern. We tried to encourage people to go in groups together to their homes and look and do whatever they could do. If there was nothing you could do, there was no need to go because you would be sitting on the side of the highway here in a day or two.

The folks from out-of-state did a good job. I supposed they train in these type disaster responses. It is like running our hurricane drill. That's pretty standard operation for those guys. They just look at it like work. It wasn't a disaster to them, it was just work. They showed up and took it like that. For us here at Stennis, there were a lot of people to take care of and a lot of decisions being made. I have to give Don Griffith a lot of credit for that. He was totally overwhelmed and continued to hold his own with all the decisions he had to make. We certainly tried to help him every way we could. The crews that were out here, I don't know how long everyone stayed but we stayed about 14 days or so before people started coming back to work in limited numbers. It was like a brand new day to

them but it was like we were just worn to a nub after 14 days it was time to do something different.

MARTIN ORAMOVS: How did the lack of power and the lack of communication affect Emergency Operations?

MICHAEL MCKINION: That's where we had the emergency crews, the ride-out crews and the electrical engineers. Those guys... we've got a lot of portable generator capability. We've got some fixed capability out at the test complex that can operate some generator power. They were making decisions as to what buildings to power up. Who had power and who didn't have power, lift stations, how to get rid of the waste water, all of those kinds of things were things you had to deal with and they met every few hours to regroup and make sure we were working on the hottest priority of the moment and that changed every 3 or 4 hours something new would float to the top and would need to be taken care of.

The Power Company, I don't know the timeframe for restoring power to Stennis, but I think the Power Company had power back out to Stennis within 10 days maybe, two weeks. I don't know the dates but it was pretty impressive that they were able to put power back out here to Stennis that quickly. That got the majority of our facilities back on commercial power and in turn reduced the stress on the fuel supply system because if you are running all of the generators, they use a lot more fuel than the power company does to keep these buildings under power. The fuel guys worked really hard to move fuel around in their tankers to keep the generators running. There was a lot of stress on the supply system in that regard. The warehouse system did above and beyond type work in dealing with the donations. Those were particular additional things that you didn't really know how to deal with. You don't know how you've got to stop and take the time to sort all that donated food or clothing or whatever it is. So, there was a lot of labor involved with that you had to expend to try and deal with that kind of thing.

MARTIN ORAMOVS: What did Emergency Operations have to move into as far as what you had to deal with? Were you trying to locate people? Was that part of your function?

MICHAEL MCKINION: The group upstairs, I don't know who was in charge but I just thought of them as the group upstairs, I think it was Environmental Services Lab or Earth Research Lab, they had a Call Center and we worked with the communication guys. Once the phones came back up, the phones were off for quite a long period but once the phones came back up, the only way you could not hear a phone ringing is to not hang it up. If you hung it up, it would ring. So when you were talking to someone that was like you were on break. If you finished the conversation and hung up you just got to meet a new person. When we got the com guys to redirect the phones upstairs, they probably had a staff of maybe ten people answering phones that took a lot of pressure off the Emergency Operations Center. We were able to get back to our line of work and manage the Emergency a little bit better for Stennis. People would call, one the com techs, one of the computer techs, Terry called, and was very excited because the phone worked. She had

been calling for a week and the phones didn't work. She finally got to call and I knew Terry. She asked, "How are things at Stennis?" I said, "Well, they are very hectic but we are O.K." She asked about coming home. I said, "No, where are you?" She was in Arkansas. I said, "You need to stay there for another 3 or 4 days, maybe a week. There is really no reason to come here. The sooner you get here the worse it is going to be because there is no service, there's no electricity, there's no fuel. If you are staying in Arkansas in a hotel, you would be better off to stay there for another week or so."

MARTIN ORAMOVS: Could you tell us what the normal function of the EOC is and is it any different because of the storm making such a direct impact?

MICHAEL MCKINION: Well, we never trained and we've never experienced the devastation of a storm. We've always trained on the front side of the storm. We trained what to do to prepare. There was a lot of learning going on for us but that is kind of our business. We are in the facilities business. My group with the MSS group, we are in facilities. We manage fuel, electricity, and air-conditioning. That was what we normally do. The information that people wanted; I guess our big learning curve there was the contacts off-site. The NASA contacts at Marshall. The State contacts, the Highway Patrol, the folks in Louisiana, the Emergency Response people in Louisiana. Some of those were significant where in the past they hadn't been. If the disaster doesn't actually strike, you never get a chance to talk to these folks. So, we had to meet those people. On a real low level, the most significant thing that I learned was don't hang up the phone until you get a name and a phone number because the first thing the next person you mention that to will say, "Who was that and how do I get in touch with them?" There was a lot of that. It was just standard practice to get the names and phone numbers no matter what they were talking about.

Michoud was a new function for us. They were isolated down at the Michoud Assembly Facility. They were isolated from the rest of the world so to speak. So we coordinated a lot of shipments on the helicopters to go there. They took ice, water and food to those guys. Some time during all of this, it was determined that the Highway 11 Bridge was open so then they started doing truck convoys to Michoud to take them what they needed. A lot of those things were brought by Kennedy, a lot of generator capability. Marshall brought a lot of people down to help. They wanted to know what should we bring. Do you need food, water? The fellow told them, "No we need about 10 sets of washers and dryers and 300 lbs of Tide." *Laughter...* The priorities change when you get people here that have been here a week, you need to wash some clothes. That was a pretty high priority there. In MSS we hooked up the power, the washing machines and wherever the people were they had washing machines out the door in some mechanical room or out in the atrium. After the 1st week that started to become higher on the priority list. You needed to wash some of these clothes.

MARTIN ORAMOVS: It sounds like up until now everything has kind of been a dry run.

MICHAEL MCKINION: It has. It has for me and I've been here at Stennis doing the hurricane drill for, well I've been here a little over 20 years but I think I've been in the Emergency part of it for probably 15 years and we've never had anything approaching this as far as a disaster. I think we held our own. We did O.K.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: In a way you've been rehearsing it for 15 years. Is there anything that really stands out that surprised you or just blind sided you that you didn't expect?

MICHAEL MCKINION: No, not really. There were a lot of experiences when you see peoples' reactions. Some people do real well and some people don't. I don't see anything that totally surprised us other than the Com System going off when the phones went out in the EOC. That's not a bad thing you just can't talk to anyone. It's actually a slow time. You can't talk to anyone. That's probably something that we really need to address. I'm sure the guys that manage the phone system are going to take care of that. The local phone companies, they didn't do any better. The surprising thing for me was how fast the cell phones came back up. I had thought about that over years how everybody is going to the cell phones, what are we going to do when the storm comes and blows all of the towers down? Go find a pole, climb up that baby and hang whatever these things use to talk on, they hang it right up there and go back to talking. So they were back on quicker than the normal phone service. I don't know how many days into the storm the AT&T folks brought us some telephones. They brought some phones to the South Gate and hooked up some telephone service so people could go and call their family and that kind of thing. That was probably the biggest thing that really surprised us I supposed is just the total lost of communication and I'm sure the guys that plan for this kind of thing have got that first on their list.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: How would you characterize the overall effort of the whole scene here at Stennis?

MICHAEL MCKINION: Well, it was pretty awesome when you go out there and see all the trees lying on the ground. These are not just little trees, these are big huge trees and they are all snapped off 30ft in the air just like a lawn mower came through. They are all pointing in the same direction. That kind of told me that there was no tornado involved in that. It was just a big wind that blew all this down. I think overall Stennis fared pretty well. It's a pretty robust facility. The facility did fare pretty well. The trees and the forest and all the greenery around Stennis has come back out in a false Summer is what people have told me what that is. Everything has kind of re-blossomed again. Even though it is Fall, everything has come back out green. A lot of tree damage this far away from the beach.

The FEMA guy told us and I've heard this from people who have studied from outside the area, they've studied the slosh models and those kinds of things and it talks about how the susceptible the Coast was to flooding. People in the local areas all talked about Camille, who got water and who didn't. This raised the bar pretty significantly but the FEMA guy said if the storm had tracked about 20 miles further to the West that he

thought there would be water in this building. So, that was pretty much an eye opener there. If that's the same guy that said Bay St. Louis is going to flood then we need to get some dikes built around here. That was a surprising thing. You can see some water lines that just make your mouth open. You just can't believe the water got that high but it sure did. It was a lot of water.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: When did your EOC effort start winding down?

MICHAEL MCKINION: I don't remember. Mine did after 14 days. I took a few days off. We probably worked in there another week or two. We might have stayed active in there for a month overall. My office in the Energy Management Office is almost like the EOC as far as the environment anyway. We continued to monitor the radio the traffic with the FEMA Group 24/7 there. Don stayed here in the EOC probably for two months. He may still be in there today. I don't know. He didn't have a home to go back to so he was staying somewhere around Stennis. He may have a trailer to stay in now. He stayed there for quite a while. I think we pretty much put a sign on the door and said the EOC is closed probably after about 30 days and started to try and route the traffic somewhere else.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Did you ever think you would have to spend 30 days in the EOC?

MICHAEL MCKINION: No, but like I said as more and more systems come back, the phones systems come back you've got people you can hand things off to, once those systems got reestablished you could stay there a long time. That's the kind of thing we do at our office anyway. We answer the phone and hand it off to whoever needs to take care of whatever the individual is looking for, the group or the agency is looking for, power, water, sewer, whatever the case is. It's good to get a copy of it because your memory starts to fade and all those things you thought you would never forget start to kind of go away and I don't really have the urge to go back and try to remember all that. When it's exciting for the Waffle House to be coming on-line in Bay St. Louis it's a pretty slow time. *Laughter...* I called my wife on the cell phone two days ago and said, "They've got salt and pepper shakers on the table, it won't be long now." *Laughter...*

MARTIN ORAMOUS: The simple things are things you miss the most.

MICHAEL MCKINION: Oh, yea. My wife and I are big on the restaurant circuit. We don't have children living with us so we are out adventuring looking for somewhere to eat.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Slim pickings right now.

MICHAEL MCKINION: Pretty slim. We found a little Sports Bar in Diamondhead the other night that was kind of a breath of fresh air. So that was an interesting night. We will go back there. We'll go back for Monday night football again and check that out.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Is there anything that you can think of that stands out in your mind that we haven't gone over or talk about?

MICHAEL MCKINION: No, it's just... getting back to the people in town. Everybody's got a story. You just have to slow down to listen to their story and hear what they are dealing with. It's one of those things. I was real aware of hurricane season and you studied hurricanes and every year you come away from that with a new thought about how to judge the track of a hurricane, how big the storm is, a 30 mile eye versus a 5 mile eye. That kind of thing and it doesn't devastate the whole Gulf Coast like this storm did here. This storm here, I think they're showing a clip of Mike Reader talking about this might be the worse case scenario and I think it was. It could have been a little bit worse for New Orleans but not a lot. I spent a little time looking at that and those folks over there had a pretty hard time with their levee system. I have no doubt that the people will continue to live and enjoy the Coast and do all the things you do on the Coast. It just may take a little while to get back to some semblance of normalcy. As long as you stay off the beach it looks pretty good but when you go down to the beach it's pretty bare.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: How do you think we're doing now at Stennis and in the community overall?

MICHAEL MCKINION: Stennis is good. They are back testing rockets and things are pretty well back to normal. There are still some people that are missing from work that haven't come back to work and that kind of thing. For the most part everyone is back at work. Maybe not really excited about their living conditions, they are all in trailer parks and staying different places. I think Stennis is pretty normal. One of the funny things that I will tell you about the cafeteria when we were staying here at Stennis. I enjoyed having no choices. You show up with \$5, I want a plate. *Laughter...* It doesn't matter what you are having, I just want some of it. That will get you back to where you need to be. Now you have to go and pick and choose what you would like to have for lunch. That kind of made me smile when I went in there with my \$5 everyday at lunch. You know I will have one of those and it doesn't really matter what it is. I'll eat it.

The community, if you stay away from the beach, is starting to look pretty normal. A good bit of the debris in Bay St. Louis and Hancock County is starting to move away. There is still a lot of it out there but in most places they have made the 1st pass maybe the 2nd pass as far as the FEMA contract people or the Corp of Engineer contract people. They have come through and done that. They have done it 2 or 3 times on our street. Our street is pretty well cleaned up. The places in Waveland, I went there today and looked around Coleman Avenue. There is still debris. They are getting their Right of Entry forms lined up and they will bring the bulldozers in there and push all that out. There's not anything to recover there. So that will be just debris. If you haven't been there you should go down there and look at that. That is an impressive power that the storm had.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: It's been three months.

MICHAEL MCKINION: That's right. People still are really severely affected by it. They are kind of in their own little world. They will go do things they want to do and you invite them to come eat or come visit or whatever and they just won't come. They're just kind of huddled up and hunkered down still. Maybe they will lighten up here as time passes. It's fixing to be Christmas and everybody is really not in the Christmas spirit but that won't matter. It's fixing to be Christmas so you just kind of have to go with the flow there. We had a good Thanksgiving. We got our family together. I think we cooked in microwaves and crock pots. We were struggling with the gas system in Bay St. Louis. We didn't have an oven but we're doing a lot better now.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Those little things you take for granted.

PAUL FOERMAN: You stated basically you did dry runs in the EOC until now. Did this storm with it being a direct impact and as powerful as it was, does this change how you will plan for future hurricanes?

MICHAEL MCKINION: No, I think on the front side it won't change. I think we will have to add a back half to our plan. I think we will have a recovery section that we will have to come up with. I don't think we did a bad job like we did. We just didn't have a backup team or at least in my mind we didn't have a team to come and relieve the 1st team. When the 1st team has been there for 14 days, it's time to hand it off to someone and do something a little different there. That's the part of our plan that we may need to spend some time working on. The front half though as far as the planning for the shelters, the security people, the shelter managers, and all of those kinds of folks did a good job and everything worked real well. I don't know what kind of planning and I'm not real privy to how much planning do you want to have for people to stay here longer term. That was the thing we kind of had to play by ear. I don't know if you plan on having a thousand or two thousand people living here for a month, they'll certainly show up and take you up on that if you let them. *Laughter...* whether you have a bad storm or not.

PAUL FOERMAN: Any thoughts that you would like to share for someone years down the road that may have to experience something like this?

MICHAEL MCKINION: I thought and I thought about this today driving in. The closer I got to the hurricanes and I was very nervous about the hurricane season every year, the more so as time passed and we did more years of this, I just hoped that I wouldn't have to experience it. When it happened and I saw the Coleman Avenue video from the television and how flat everything was I said this would be one of those life experiences that you don't forget. As far as for people down the road, it's a shame that they won't get to see the beach. My wife and I in our little adventures riding around looking for restaurants, we drove up and down the beach 2 or 3 times a week and looked at the houses and everybody's homes and so forth. We had just started riding our bikes in town and I told her after the storm I knew we were having too much fun this summer. I don't know that I have anything in a nutshell for people down the road other than if the guy with the slosh model says it's going to flood you need to drive about 50 miles inland. That's for sure. That surprised a lot of people there the fact that it flooded like it did. I hope we don't

have to do it again soon. It's an experience. It's one of those life experiences that people won't forget and if you guys can get some more folks to come talk to you on the video that will probably be an O.K. thing too.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Good.

MICHAEL MCKINION: Anything else.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: No, we're good.

MICHAEL MCKINION: Good deal.

(End of Interview)