

Changing of the guard

Bill Parsons to lead Space Shuttle Program following Ron Dittimore's departure

By Kendra Ceule



Ron Dittimore

After four years as Manager of the Space Shuttle Program, Ron Dittimore has stepped down. The post is now filled by Bill Parsons, formerly the Director of Stennis Space Center (SSC) in Mississippi.

Dittimore is leaving what he calls "the job I've liked the most" – quite a statement considering his NASA career. He joined the Agency in 1977 as a propulsion systems engineer here at Johnson Space Center, gained experience in the Mission Control Center and became a Space Shuttle Flight Director in 1985. Subsequent positions have included Deputy Manager for the Space Shuttle Program Integration and Operations Office, as well as Manager of the Space Shuttle Vehicle Engineering Office.

He became Manager of the Space Shuttle Program in 1999, and says he is amazed at the changes he has seen over the past 26 years.

"In 1977, we didn't have a reusable space vehicle," he said. "Now, we've flown Shuttles 113 times. That's what we've accomplished over 20 years."

His awards include JSC's highest award, the Certificate of Commendation, as well as the NASA Outstanding Leadership Medal and the NASA Exceptional Service Medal.

His successor, Bill Parsons, has his own share of awards, including the Silver Snoopy, the NASA Exceptional Service Medal and the Commandant's Certificate of Commendation from the United States Marine Corps.

Parsons likens his time in the Marines to his NASA career, saying that he found the same pride and fulfillment with both organizations.

Before NASA, "I had good jobs," he said, "but I never had that pride of membership that I had in the Marine Corps. ... When I came to work for NASA, I found an organization that gave me pride and a sense of belonging to a really top-notch, world-class organization.

"It's been inspiring," he said.

Parsons' first job with the Agency was at Kennedy Space Center (KSC) in 1990, where he worked as a Launch Site Support Manager. He worked his way up the ladder to become Manager of KSC's Space Station Hardware Integration Office in 1996, then moved to SSC the following year to serve as Chief of Operations for the Propulsion Test Directorate.

Parsons began work at his third NASA center when he moved to JSC, where he eventually became the Center's Deputy Director. He went back to SSC in 2001 and became SSC's Director the next year, following the retirement of Roy Estess.

The next pair of shoes that Parsons filled were Dittimore's old ones.

"Bill Parsons is very talented," Dittimore said. "I have a lot of confidence in him."

"I welcome the opportunity to work with Bill," said Michael Kostelnik, Deputy Administrator for the International Space Station and Space Shuttle Programs at NASA Headquarters. "I know we've found a terrific leader to help guide the team through this difficult time."

Parsons called this "a challenging time for the program," but said that he is "proud to be a part of the Return to Flight effort."

As for the future of the Space Shuttle Program, Dittimore said he foresees a long life for the Shuttle fleet, as long as

the orbiters continue to receive the attention they need. "The Space Shuttles can serve the nation for as long as the nation desires it," he said. "They need TLC, but if we do our part, they'll continue to perform."

Dittimore, who has said his decision to leave NASA predated the Feb. 1 *Columbia* accident, said that "spaceflight is risky business. We have to be aware of and mitigate the risks."

When asked what he would miss most about his job, Dittimore did not hesitate.

"I'm going to miss the people," he said. "I'll miss the men and women of this program, and working side by side with some really good friends. I'll miss the camaraderie, the blood, sweat and tears it takes to make this thing happen, and the thrill and excitement of launches and missions."

Parsons has his own Shuttle launch memory: as a 28-year-old, he witnessed his first launch while on vacation with his family.

"When I saw that Shuttle take off at dusk, it was the most unbelievable experience," he said. "I got tears in my eyes; my heart pounded. I was proud to be an American, to see that we could do something that awesome."

A couple of decades later, Parsons is taking over the reins for the very program that inspired him back then.

As he makes room for his successor, Dittimore looks back warmly on his 26 years with NASA.

"I am one lucky person," he said, "to have fulfilled my dream of working at JSC and being involved with human spaceflight."

Some information in this story courtesy of the Public Affairs Office at Stennis Space Center



Bill Parsons explains details of the Space Shuttle orbiter to third-, fourth- and fifth-grade students in the East Hancock Elementary School's gifted program February 27.

DSCN1852 Photo by Stennis Space Center

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Ron Dittimore

Milt Heflin, Chief of the Flight Director Office, has worked with both Dittimore and Parsons. He shares his thoughts on each below.

Dittimore

"Ron and I have worked together in Mission Control as Flight Controllers and Flight Directors. Back then, as now, I have observed and admired his dedication, dignity and integrity. The manner in which he has stood up and carried out his duties as Program Manager since the accident, in a very unforgiving arena, has been without equal. Again, dignity and integrity come to mind. It appears that others will now have the opportunity to enjoy these special human traits that I see Ron having forever, no matter what he does. Our loss...their gain."

Parsons

"I have known Bill for a number of years. He has acquired a very wide range of experiences that will serve him quite well as Space Shuttle Program Manager. From what we are hearing coming out of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board, we will be looking at making some significant changes, both technically and in our preparation and operations processes. I see Bill as being very dedicated to seeing that we get right to it and get it done in a very positive and rigorous manner. He's in a really tough spot, and we all need to rally around him and his program team. Bill mentored some under Roy Estess at Stennis...it can't get much better than that."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

This 1989 picture shows the three STS-34 Flight Directors in Building 30's Flight Control Room #2. From left are Milt Heflin, Ron Dittimore and Bob Castle.

s89-43581 Photo by JSC Photography

Dittimore laughs as Dr. Neal Lane, Assistant to the President for Science and Technology and Director of the Office of Science and Technology, tries on a Launch and Entry Suit during a 2000 tour of JSC.

JSC2000-04969 Photo by Mark Sowa

Dittimore participates in a Space Shuttle planning meeting in Building 1.

JSC2000-0971 Photo by Robert Markowitz

Dittimore monitors console displays during STS-34.

s34(s)014 Photo by JSC Photography