

Entry Date 5/2-93  
Data Base HDOCNDX  
Index # INS. 0206015

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

DATE OF DOCUMENT [Date of Interview] = 12 - 01 - 67  
OFFICE OF PRIME RESPONSIBILITY = JSC  
NUMBER ON DOCUMENT = 00  
TYPE OF DOCUMENT [Code for Interview] = 1  
PROGRAM [3-letter Program Archive code] = INS  
AUTHOR [Interviewee's Last Name] = JOHNSON  
LOCATION OF DOCUMENT [Numeric Shelf Address] = 091-2

SUBJECT OF DOCUMENT: [use relevant bold-face introductory terms]

Oral history interview with W. Kemble Johnson  
[full name of interviewee]

about Administrative Support at Langley  
[main focus of interview]  
Research Center and MSC

Title: 1962- Management Services  
[interviewee's current and/or former title and affiliation]

Interview conducted by Robert B. Merrifield, Staff  
[interviewer's name/position]

Historian at MSC  
[location of interview]

Transcript and tape(s). [for inventory only: # pages 10; # tapes 1]  
Master 1

## CONTENTS:

Biographical - [date/place of birth; family background] \_\_\_\_\_

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Education - \_\_\_\_\_

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Career Path - \_\_\_\_\_

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pre-STG  
work

### Topics -

~~early~~ at Langley; <sup>support</sup> liaison to STG; different opinions  
at Langley as to <sup>space programs</sup> future; AVRO (Canada)  
personnel to STG; STG <sup>officially</sup> under Goddard  
Research Center; over crowding at Langley;  
decision to relocate MSC; budget + staffing  
work; shortage of <sup>temporary</sup> space; relocation  
Supervisor; assistant to <sup>MSC</sup> technical and  
engineering <sup>services</sup> manager; 1962-64 w/  
Apollo Program Office; Apollo  
Prog. frustration with North Americans;  
discussion of turnover in Apollo <sup>prog.</sup> Office

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December 7, 1967

Kemble,

The transcript of your interview, edited to remove extraneous material, is attached.

If you will, please read the statement and mark those sentences with brackets [ ] that you would not want alluded to in a Center history for reasons of embarrassment to an individual or the Center. As I mentioned during our recording session, this interview is to be part of the source material for the history, and it is doubtful that I will quote from it verbatim. Therefore, please don't worry about a sentence here or there which might not be as polished as would be desirable were it to receive public scrutiny.

If you want to add information feel free to do so. Just tack it on at the end of the statement, unless you prefer that it be inserted into the text.

After you return the transcript to me, I'll send you a copy for your personal file.

Thanks,

DR  
© dictated as requested  
W. Kemble  
12/14/67

## INTERVIEW WITH W. KEMBLE JOHNSON

When it became evident with the first Sputnik shot that somebody in this country was going to have to devote a lot of effort to catch up with the Russians, then both at the laboratory level and Headquarters level there was quite a bit of discussion about how we retaylor the old NACA to become a space agency. Of course most of the work for that was done up at the Headquarters level, but at the same time we had groups of people at LRC like Max Faget who were thinking about what we should be doing in space, particularly manned space.

At the time, I was Administrative Management Officer at Langley and I was asked by Floyd Thompson, who was either Deputy Director<sup>at</sup> that time or Chief of Research,<sup>to</sup> give some thought as to how we should organize to support this space effort at Langley, and how we would provide it with accommodations. We gave a lot of thought to how could we house a big expanded group to undertake this man-in-space project, how we would provide them with all of the services they required, how we would get the staff to do the job, how much of it we could get done on the outside and how much of it we could get done by existing talents within the Langley Research Center. I worked a little bit at that time with Gilruth and showed him some of the thinking that I was developing on how we would support this organization. At that time, of course, Gilruth hadn't been designated head of the Space Task Group but he was the Langley representative on this NACA-wide team that was coming up with the first manned space flight program. At that time, we were thinking of it as being a Langley Research Center-oriented program and the determination had not been firmly made that if

35 and when NASA was created that this would be an organization totally out-  
 side of the context of the Langley Research Center. But one day, <sup>sharply</sup> ~~apparently~~  
 after our first administrator came on board, Thompson or Reed, I've for-  
 gotten which, drafted a memorandum which created the Space Task Group and  
 assigned people to staff ~~people to run it~~. I was asked by Thompson if I would be the Langley Re-  
 search Center interface on management and support matters with the Space  
 Task Group. I remained on the Langley payroll, and continued to report  
 to Floyd Thompson, but in effect I also reported directly to Donlan and  
 Gilruth and performed whatever services they wanted. The main thing I  
 did was work with the people at Langley to find enough space to house this  
 group and <sup>recruit the staff for</sup> ~~attempt to increase staffing in~~ the Group. Largely, my interest  
 was in supporting the group with the resources of the Langley Research Cen-  
 ter. We concocted plans to move <sup>from East Area facilities by modifying</sup> ~~Langley people around and expand Langley~~  
<sup>West Area building to accommodate the Langley staff</sup> ~~buildings~~. It was an objective at the time to try to get ~~as much of~~ the  
 STG work force <sup>housed in</sup> ~~over to~~ the East area of Langley Field. Thus Langley Re-  
 search Center proper would <sup>consolidate as much as practicable</sup> ~~be~~ in the West area and the Space Task Group  
 in the East area.

36 At that time there were people at Langley with several types of attitudes.  
 There were those that felt that the future of the organization lay in space  
 and by ~~God~~ they wanted to get with the <sup>go-go</sup> ~~going~~ organization, the Space Task  
 Group. The others felt that the space program was a side show. Those in-  
 terested in STG were quite often the best people that Langley had and IIRC  
 management was fearful of being reduced in capability by <sup>STG</sup> ~~us~~ grabbing off  
 38 all their best people and leaving them with the less aggressive personnel.



Of course <sup>STG</sup> we were looking for the aggressive and strong personnel to do  
 our job. We had quite a few fights about who we could <sup>interview for transfer</sup> see and under what  
 conditions we could see them. At one time, when we needed a fairly large  
 number of people, and had been generally unsuccessful in recruiting them, <sup>from industry</sup>  
 we asked Langley to allow us to talk to <sup>large numbers of their staff</sup> their people to see if we could  
 interest them in coming to work with us. Langley didn't go for this idea.  
 They apparently canvassed all their division chiefs and got a list of peo-  
 ple they were willing to let talk to us. Of course, they were primarily  
 the people they didn't want or people they would just as soon get rid of.  
 This wasn't always IRC's attitude though. When we went to Langley offi-  
 cials to recruit really key people for key jobs, they were very good about  
 letting us talk to people like Jack Kinzler, <sup>and Caldwell Johnson</sup> As a matter of fact they  
 recommended Jack as somebody who would be very strong for technical ser-  
 vices type of work. They also let us have Caldwell Johnson who was one of  
 their branch heads and a key man in the <sup>pilots</sup> aircraft <sup>design</sup> research area. ~~Many other~~  
~~people who were strong they let us have but~~ they didn't want us to go in  
 and recruit their people in any wholesale fashion, <sup>however.</sup>

We were not <sup>too</sup> successful in those days in recruiting from industry, as we  
 didn't get the right kind of applicants. ~~We got too many semi-qualified~~  
~~people.~~

I remember the day when Jim Chamberlin came down to the Center from Avro  
 Corporation in Canada. He came to propose that the Space Task Group grant  
 Avro a contract to do some major portion of the Mercury Program. We infor-  
 med him of course that we couldn't do that, so he made a second proposal  
 that he be allowed to solicit permission from his government to bring these

Avro people to Langley at Canada's expense to work with our group and support us. This also, we couldn't accept. I don't know if the Canadian government would really have offered it but Chamberlin was willing to make the try. After about a week or 10 days of discussions we were invited to Canada and more or less pick the "cream of the crop" of the Avro organization. Avro was in dire straits because a major ~~aircraft contract development contract for a~~ fighter had been cancelled, and American airplanes were to be purchased instead. Gilruth, Donlan, Faget, Mathews, Purser and I went to Canada. Chamberlin in the meantime had combed the personnel files of Avro and had lined up something like 200 people that he thought were the best people <sup>with experience in</sup> ~~and had~~ specialities which would fit the types of jobs that we had vacant in the Space Task Group. We got up there on a Friday night and Saturday morning we started interviews. We interviewed all day Saturday and talked to each of the 200. From this group we invited something like 30 people to join the STG at Langley. If I recall correctly around 25 or 26 of the 30 accepted the job offers we made. Chamberlin made it known that he would like to be included in the group as did a gentleman named Lintley <sup>by</sup> who I believe was Chamberlin's boss or if not his boss, had an equal status in the organization as Chief of Engineering or so some such similar title. Both he and Chamberlin were at salary levels in the Avro organization above grades that we could pay in the Space Task Group at the time, <sup>but both indicated a willingness to accept available salaries.</sup> ~~so we had to make a decision.~~ We decided that Chamberlin had been very aggressive in pursuing this business and we had him to thank for these wonderful people that we were getting from Avro. We agreed that we would take Jim. Lintley ended up with a top executive position in the McDonnell Company, ~~who was~~ the prime contractor on the Mer-

*Spacecraft.*  
cury Program.

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 In the meantime STG had started developing some administrative services of its own but still relied largely on Langley. Sherwood Butler served as Contracting Officer for the Mercury contract. We used Langley supply and services generally and even used the Langley Personnel Office to process new personnel. We operated much as an LRC division even though we were not a part of Langley. ~~Of course~~ <sup>V</sup> very shortly after the Space Task Group was organized the decision was made that we would become a part of the Goddard Research Center and were put under Abe Silverstein. Abe began to assemble his staff and build Goddard. He brought in Mike Vaccaro as his <sup>director</sup> ~~chief~~ of the administration ~~or whatever the title was~~. Mike of course got very much interested in having the Space Task Group adopt his way of doing things so that eventually we could become an integral part of the Goddard Research Center. He participated in the selection of some additional administrative personnel like Burney Goodwin to be head of Personnel and Glenn Bailey to head up Procurement. Once we got these people aboard it was Vaccaro's purpose to get these people operating in the Space Task Group and more or less separate these functions from Langley as quickly as possible and stop relying upon Langley except for maintenance, custodial services and other miscellaneous services he didn't particularly want the Space Task Group to bring to Goddard, ~~when Goddard construction was complete~~. Separating some of this work from Langley at a time when Langley didn't think we were quite prepared to take them on, caused ill feeling from time to time, <sup>particularly in the</sup> ~~This condition characterized areas like~~ Procurement <sup>area</sup> where we wanted them to do a lot of our pick and shovel work but we wanted to ~~do~~ <sup>to handle the more exotic contracts.</sup>



what they called the paved work--such as serving as the contracting officer for the McDonnell-Mercury contract. We left Langley with the responsibility for keeping our day to day supplies and equipment and things of this type.

We continued to increase our staff and our buildings very quickly became ~~cramped~~ <sup>overcrowded</sup>. We had to remodel our facilities and convert them from shops to offices or laboratories to offices or in some cases shops to laboratories. Headquarters ~~did~~ <sup>had</sup> continue to make additional billets available to enable us to expand. Finally, it was clear that if we went to Goddard it would be something like the tail wagging the dog because the commitment of resources to the manned space program <sup>5</sup> would have to be large, ~~and at Goddard we would be such a large chunk that we should become a separate laboratory.~~ About that time, <sup>it was</sup> I decided that we had better start acquiring the people who were going to provide the administrative management talent needed for a new and separate laboratory. At that time, it had not been determined whether it would be co-located at Langley with the Langley Research Center or ~~be~~ a separate organization at a new site, ~~or integral with Langley, and continue to be a tenant with Langley continuing to support us with many many services.~~ We made some studies of the cost and the advantages of moving to one of several areas of the country, ~~and so forth.~~ Finally the decision was made. In the meantime, Hjernevik who had been ~~Stumans~~ <sup>director of administration</sup> deputy at Headquarters, came with MSC. He wanted some field experience as basically all of his prior experience was in staff and Headquarters jobs. He very rapidly began to recruit people of competence from other organizations and from within Headquarters itself. He brought <sup>in</sup> ~~A~~ Bingman and Whit-

beck fairly quickly and looked around the country for other people with ~~excellent ability and~~ ~~good reputations and good~~ backgrounds like Dave Lang and brought them into the organization. At that time a more complete administrative organization began to take form.

Up until about two weeks after the announcement of the Houston site selection, I remained on the Langley payroll as a special assistant to Thompson ~~to serve~~ ~~and as~~ a liaison between LRC and the Space Task Group. However, during most of that period I really worked directly for ~~Gilruth~~ <sup>STG</sup> and more particularly as a staff assistant to Donlan. In that capacity I ran whatever administrative organization or personnel we had in the Space Task Group until Marty Byrnes was brought in by Walt Williams to be the Space Task Group head of administration. He was later superceeded by Hjernevik who came in over Marty. ~~Actually Marty came in as an Administrative Assistant to Walt Williams and never really became the effective head of the STG administrative organization. He might have carried that title at one time, but I don't think he really ever headed it up.~~

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I handled most of the budget work, particularly Personnel budget--staffing and organization--and worked closely with Gilruth and Donlan on construction of the organizational structure and on staffing requirements. There was quite a problem trying to get enough space for all our people. Langley's management was very generous in allocation of physical space; they practically broke their backs to give us all the facilities we needed to do our job. Later, when it became evident that we were going to have to have new and different facilities I did a lot of preliminary planning on what those facilities should be.

After we had announced the selection of the Houston site, I made the decision to ~~stick with the Group~~ <sup>transfer to MSC</sup>, as I'd been with them for about three or four years and was curious as to how the program <sup>would develop.</sup> ~~was going to go.~~ I talked to Hjernevik and he agreed to allow me to transfer to Houston with the Group. I became involved in acquisition of space and fitting people into our Houston facilities. I commuted between Langley and Houston about once every two weeks <sup>in connection with the</sup> ~~to keep an eye on the~~ acquisition of rental facilities, <sup>and housing problems of the MSC.</sup> At the same time, the Facilities Division had set up shop in Houston. Zbanek and Jim Baynes had begun the development of AE designs for our facilities here. ~~I tried to make sure that these people, who were not old line NASA people and who might not understand the requirements of our program offices and other organizational elements, included in their designs those things which would give us the flexibility that we needed.~~ As it became evident that we had enough facilities to move substantial numbers of people to Houston I was asked to be the relocation supervisor. ~~It was~~ <sup>I</sup> ~~up to me to identify~~ <sup>ed</sup> space requirements of each of the groups at Langley <sup>and developed</sup> ~~and to plan~~ to acquire and allocate the facilities at Houston for their use. ~~This is the reason I was back and forth as much as I was.~~ As time went on and practically everyone and everything was moved to Houston, I ended up the last man to move. I more or less handed the keys to the buildings back to Langley Research Center.

While I was back at Langley taking care of this last chore, I got a call from Charlie Frick in the Apollo Office asking me if I would be interested in becoming his executive assistant. I decided I would like to try it since I had been strictly in general administrative operations most of my



career, both in the old NACA organization and MSC. I stayed in the program office until Shea replaced Frick. I then decided I would be more comfortable in the area of general administration and more specifically *in the support area* technical ~~organizations~~ within the administrative directorate. ~~For that~~ reason I asked Wes Hjernevik if I could work with Joe Piland. This was an area in which I had my principal background, ~~engineering facilities, and photography and other types of support to serve a research center.~~ I became an assistant to Joe Piland, manager of the technical and engineering services area ~~here~~ at the Center.

The move from Langley was effectively completed on June 30, 1962. There were a few people who because of some commitments (I think Eggleston was one) stayed on at Langley for maybe another two or three weeks after everybody else had moved to Houston. I went in the Apollo Office immediately after I returned to Houston early in July, 1962 and I stayed with the Apollo Office until around March or April, 1964.

During the period I was in the Apollo Program, I got the impression ~~(and it was stated to me as a matter of fact by the program office people)~~ that we couldn't manage North American. We could scream and holler and do whatever we wanted to but North American was going to go through with any course of action it wished to undertake without us being able to perturbate the situation very much. To many of the people in the program office this was very frustrating. It was basically a tough job to try to manage NAA with the few people we had in the program office considering the tremendous scope of the contractor's responsibility under the contract.

Dr. Merrifield: You think that the reason that so many key ASPO people left was this frustration?

No, not really. While I was in the Program Office, Frick left, and I believe he left (although I don't know this for a fact) because he was not getting the support that he thought he should from Center management. Also, I think he was somewhat frustrated by the role that Shea's office at Headquarters was taking with regard to the Apollo Program. (They were looking over our shoulder and second guessing the action<sup>s</sup> being taken by the Apollo Program Office.) Dave Hammock came in and left, Caldwell Johnson left, <sup>and</sup> Jim Decker, program manager for the LEM ~~was asked to resign~~<sup>ed</sup>. ~~because he wasn't cutting the ice.~~ But <sup>very</sup> few other people left ASPO during this period.