



James C Elms

JAMES CORNELIUS ELMS

1916–1993

BY MAX FAGET

JAMES CORNELIUS ELMS IV, a consultant and a retired electronics and aerospace executive, died on May 7, 1993.

Mr. Elms was born in East Orange, New Jersey, May 16, 1916. He received a B.S. degree in physics from the California Institute of Technology in 1948 and an M.A. in physics from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1950.

Jim Elms developed an early interest in aviation and learned to fly as a teenager. He started his career as a stress analyst at Consolidated Aircraft Company of San Diego in 1940, then served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. As an engineering officer, he developed and patented a simple improvement to the firing mechanism of a machine gun, which improved both reliability and the rate of fire. Subsequently and sequentially he was chief development engineer at G. M. Giannini and Company, Pasadena, California; research associate in geophysics at UCLA; manager of the Armament Systems Department at the Autonetics Division of the North American Aviation Company, Downey, California; assistant chief engineer at Martin Company, Denver, Colorado; executive vice-president of the Crosley Division, AVCO Corporation, Cincinnati, Ohio; and general operations manager of the Aeronautic Division of Ford Motor Company, Newport Beach, California.

In 1963 Jim Elms was recruited into the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to become the deputy

director of the Manned Spacecraft Center (now Johnson Space Center). This was at a time of the center's most chaotic activity. The Mercury Program was in full operation. Both the Gemini and Apollo were in a period of intense early development and personnel buildup. The population of the center was doubling every half year while being housed in temporary leased quarters scattered throughout Houston. Not incidentally, a sizeable effort was also being devoted to the design of the various technical facilities, which were in various stages of construction at the permanent site for the center, approximately twenty-five miles south of Houston proper. Robert Gilruth, the center director, was in charge of the nation's most prestigious and visible programs. As a consequence he had to concentrate on flight safety and program execution, and he needed help. As might be expected, there were numerous unnecessary conflicts between the major center organizations. Jim Elms, with his working knowledge and experience in numerous and diverse technical organizations, showed up at the right time. Only very minor organizational changes were made—but each organization more clearly understood its role and responsibility and how to work effectively with the others. This was my first contact with Jim Elms, and, as head of the engineering organization, I was amazed at his direct and simple approach to solving interorganizational problems. I soon came to consider him a valued friend whom I admired. I have often sought his advice and counsel.

Mr. Elms transferred to NASA Headquarters as deputy to the administrator for manned spaceflight. In 1966 he was appointed director of the NASA Electronic Research Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Because of agency budget cutbacks, NASA elected to close the Electronic Research Center. This decision was announced in December 1969, between Christmas and New Year's Day. This was at a time when the center was still growing and was in fact moving into recently completed facilities with further construction being planned. Jim Elms requested and obtained approval to delay the closing until June 30, 1970. He also set in motion various activities to place the center's employees. Most important, he was determined to find another use for the center. This effort culminated on March 25 with

the Secretary of Transportation John Volpe's announcement that the facility would be transformed into Department of Transportation offices. The transfer not only saved a number of jobs but also avoided the loss of a national asset. The center is now called the Volpe National Transportation Systems Center and is still serving a vital role for the Department of Transportation.

Jim Elms retired from full-time employment in 1974 to become a consultant to aerospace and energy companies. He subsequently became a consultant and adviser to the administrator of the Energy Research and Development Agency, the administrator of NASA, and the director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization. He always maintained a keen interest in the national space program and sought every possible opportunity to help NASA improve its programs.

Jim Elms was very proud of the following awards conferred for his service to the U.S. government. He received a NASA special award in 1964, NASA's Exceptional Service Medal in 1969, the NASA Outstanding Leadership Medal in 1970, and the Department of Transportation's Meritorious Service Award, which was presented by the secretary of transportation in 1974.

Mr. Elms was a member of the National Academy of Engineering, a fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, a fellow of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, a member of the American Physical Society, a member of the Explorers Club, a member of the Air Force Association, and an associate of the California Institute of Technology. He held patents in instrumentation, computers, radar, and mechanisms. He was an avid and proficient glider pilot and skier and was active in both these sports up until his final illness.

Jim Elms was a man of indomitable spirit, and in spite of encountering a series of physical problems or illnesses during his last two decades, he managed to lead a full life. This included participation in his chosen sports and in providing valuable advice and counsel to friends and professional associates. He was fortunate to have a wonderful and loving wife, the former Patricia Pafford, as a partner for more than fifty years. He also took great pride in the four children of their marriage.