



## Smith DeFrance

### NASA Ames Hall of Fame

Someone has to be the pathfinder, the pioneer. At Ames, it was Smith DeFrance, the man who, as the Center's founding director, set the standard and style that would characterize Ames' next sixty years.

After starting his career as an engineer at Langley, DeFrance was placed in charge of getting the technical facilities up and running at NACA's newest facility, the Ames Aeronautical Research Laboratory. Using the vast experience he had gained directing wind tunnel research at Langley, DeFrance supervised the construction of Ames' own wind tunnel complex, and was soon named center director in 1940. He immediately set about establishing his particular leadership style. Insisting on the highest standards of safety and accountability, he nevertheless allowed the exceptional people who worked for him to take risks as they explored promising new areas of research.

Ames' personnel were initially the new kids on the NACA block and had to prove to their Langley counterparts that they could do solid work on their own. DeFrance assured that Ames' unique facilities, such as the huge 40 x 80 wind tunnel, were used to their fullest potential. With America fighting a global war, there was a great deal of important work to be done. DeFrance supervised Ames' wartime efforts in de-icing research and design improvements on a wide variety of military aircraft, including the P-38 and P-51 fighter planes. Under DeFrance's sure and steady hand, Ames quickly established a name for itself in aeronautical research.

DeFrance has sometimes been described as a benevolent dictator, but this is more a description of the manner in which he served as the face and voice of Ames to the outside world than of a particularly authoritarian management style. A natural leader, he protected Ames' research staff from the external politics, rivalries and distractions which he knew would hamper their work, providing an environment in which his scientists and engineers were free to experiment and innovate. And he knew his people, what they were doing and what they could be motivated to do, easing back on the reins when needed to let creativity flourish, keeping a tighter hold when guidance was needed to keep a project from wandering too far afield.

Perhaps the word used most often in describing Smith DeFrance is integrity. He was tough and demanding when necessary, but always scrupulously fair in all his dealings with those he led. An engineer might disagree with DeFrance, yet he could always be certain that DeFrance would give all dissenting opinions a thorough hearing before rendering a final decision.

Throughout his 25-year tenure as Ames Director, DeFrance provided a constant example of honest, conscientious leadership and challenged others to meet his own lofty standards. His success in this regard can best be measured by the accomplishments of the individuals who matured under his leadership, six of whom later became NASA Center Directors themselves, and many others who received countless awards in their later careers. All who followed Smith DeFrance, either as Ames Directors or as staff, owe a debt to him for setting the Ames standard.