

MEDALIST FOR 1981

For his brilliant design of a wide range of pace-setting, commercial, combat and reconnaissance aircraft, and for his innovative management techniques which developed these aircraft in record time at minimum cost.



CLARENCE L. (KELLY) JOHNSON

He is probably best known for making famous the term “SKUNK WORKS” which was the area where “hush-hush” projects were developed and worked to completion before being exposed to the industry.

Kelly Johnson has played a leading role in the development and design of 40 of the world’s leading aircraft—among them the P-38 of World War II; F-80, America’s first production jet aircraft; the high altitude U-2; the double sonic speed F-104 Starfighter; and the 2000mph YF-12A and SR-71.

Upon completion of his Master of Science degree from the University of Michigan, Johnson joined Lockheed as a tool designer in 1933. After assignments in areas related to research and development, he became Chief Research Engineer in 1938.

In 1952, he was named Chief Engineer, and advanced to Vice President of the newly commissioned Research and Development organization. Here, he initiated radical approaches for rapid documentation of new ideas into design; then design into prototype, and finally testing and proving of the product. The technique streamlined the processes without taking unknown risks. The result was a new approach to the development of new products; later used by all of industry as the methodology for development within the production environment.

In 1956 he became Vice President of Research and Development, followed by Vice President of Advanced Development Projects (ADP) in 1958. Johnson served on Lockheed's board of directors from 1964 to 1980, becoming a senior vice president in 1969. He officially retired from Lockheed in 1975 but continued as a consultant at the Skunk Works.

In June 1983, the Lockheed Rye Canyon Research facility was renamed Kelly Johnson Research and Development Center, Lockheed-California Company, in honor of Johnson's 50 years of service to the company.

Daniel Guggenheim Medal

Many honors and awards have been bestowed on Kelly Johnson, from the AIAA Lawrence Sperry Award in 1937 for “improvements in design of high-speed commercial aircraft”; to the Collier Trophy and Medal of Freedom by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the highest civil honor the President can bestow.

One of the most talented and prolific aircraft design engineers in the history of aviation died on December 21, 1990.