



Kendall Perkins

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1908–1987

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Kendall Perkins was a leader of aviation engineering for nearly fifty years. He retired after some thirty years as chief of engineering for the McDonnell Douglas Corporation. During that time, he and his team designed and produced McDonnell's many military and commercial aircraft and three U.S. spacecraft.

After graduating from the School of Engineering of Washington University in 1928 with a B.S. in electrical engineering, he joined the Curtiss-Roberston Airplane Manufacturing Company. For a decade, Mr. Perkins was involved in project engineering for its half-dozen aircraft that were produced in St. Louis, Missouri. Brief periods of employment followed with American Airlines and the U.S. Government Office of Production Management. In 1941 Kendall Perkins began an association, which would span nearly four decades, with the newly established McDonnell Aircraft Company. In the 1950s his yearlong study of manned spacecraft culminated in McDonnell's contract with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to produce the Mercury capsule that carried the first Americans into earth orbit. He became engineering vice-president in 1951 and corporate vice-president of engineering and research in 1967.

The following reviews Kendall Perkin's activities in slightly more detail. Upon graduating from Washington University, Ken Perkins went into the factory of the Curtiss-Robertson Airplane

Manufacturing Company. His first job was sawing steel tubing and other bench work in the shop, but in six months he was foreman of the fuselage department. After two years in the shop he assumed duties in the Engineering Department, which eventually led to the post of project engineer. In this capacity in the early 1930s, he worked on such famous airplanes as the Curtiss Kingbird, the Travelair, and the Curtiss Condor. Culmination of his twelve-year career with Curtiss was research, design, and finally responsibility as project engineer on the CW-20 Transport. This twin-engine airplane also became the Army Air Corp C-46 Commando, which saw cargo service throughout the world during the 1939–1945 war years and was subsequently used worldwide by many air cargo operators.

Early in 1940 Ken Perkins joined American Airlines as a research engineer. Based in New York, he served as a consultant to the vice-president of engineering and advised on transport aircraft design requirements and associated engineering problems. Later that year he took the position with the Office of Production Management in Washington, D.C., a predecessor to the War Production Board. As head of the Aircraft Scheduling Unit, he supervised scheduling of deliveries from manufacturers to the U.S. Army, the U.S. Navy, and the British.

He moved to the McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Company in St. Louis in late 1941. Ken started as a project engineer in advanced design and worked on the XP-67 twin-engine fighter. In 1942 he became an assistant chief engineer, and from 1943 to 1947 was responsible for the XFD-1, the U.S. Navy's first jet airplane, and its production version—the FH-1 Phantom, the first complete airplane designed and produced in quantity by McDonnell. The success of this program laid the groundwork for other jet fighters for the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force (USAF), which represented most of the subsequent business of the company. He was appointed assistant to the vice-president for engineering and contracts in September 1948 and subsequently became manager of engineering in July 1949. In April 1951 Ken was elevated to engineering vice-president, responsible for engineering work on aircraft, missiles, and spacecraft. Notable engineering work

included the F-2H Banshee and the F-3H Demon carrier-based fighters for the U.S. Navy; the F-101 Voodoo fighters for three Commands of the U.S. Air Force; and the F-4 Phantom II attack and fighter aircraft for the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Air Force, and a number of other nations. Unmanned vehicles included the GAM-72 Quail decoy and the Asset hypersonic test vehicle along with a variety of related electronic products. Manned space vehicles included the Mercury spacecraft and the Gemini spacecraft, which carried the first two Americans into orbit.

Kendall Perkins was elected a company director and a member of its board's Executive Committee in December 1952 and served through 1966. After the merger of McDonnell and Douglas in April 1967 that formed the McDonnell Douglas Corporation, he was made vice-president of engineering and a member of the board of directors of two of the component companies—McDonnell Aircraft Company and McDonnell Douglas Astronautics Company. Subsequently, in July 1968 he became corporate vice-president of engineering and research. Notable engineering work since the merger has included development of the DC-10 Commercial Transport, the USAF F-15 Fighter, the NASA Skylab, the Saturn S-IVB Stage, the Spartan Interceptor Missile, the Dragon Anti-Tank Missile, the Harpoon Anti-Ship Missile, and the EROS Collision Avoidance System.

In 1973 when he reached age sixty-five, Kendall Perkins retired from the corporation. He retained his position on the board of directors of five McDonnell Douglas corporate divisions and served as a consultant. In 1975 he was asked to return to his former position on an interim basis, finally retiring in August 1978.

Outside his realm of engineering employment, he served on the Board of Trustees of Washington University for a number of years and subsequently became a trustee emeritus. He received the university's Alumni Achievement Award in 1982.

Kendall Perkins was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1970. He was cited for his contributions to aerospace technology and to engineering management in the design of aircraft and spacecraft.

Ken held a representative number of patents and also authored publications on aircraft design and articles on technical management.

Kendall Perkins was born in St. Louis on February 23, 1908, the son of Robert Fulton Perkins and Florence Gleason Perkins. He married Elizabeth Dorothy MacIvor on October 16, 1934. Their children are John MacIvor Perkins (August 2, 1935) and Amy Doris Perkins Bethke (June 11, 1938). Following Elizabeth Perkin's death in 1980, he married Vera Autry on January 9, 1981. He died on August 8, 1987.

