



*Frank W. Davis*

## FRANK W. DAVIS

1914–2001

Elected in 1967

*“For design, development, and testing of supersonic aircraft and missile systems.”*

BY ROBERT J. PATTON

**F**RANK WILBUR DAVIS, a former test pilot and executive with Convair and General Dynamics, died on July 15, 2001, at the age of 86.

Frank W. Davis was born on December 6, 1914, in Charleston, West Virginia. Raised in Charleston, he was an excellent student. He was also mechanically inclined and wanted to become an engineer. He applied for admission to and was accepted at the California Institute of Technology. He graduated with a B.S. degree in mechanical engineering in 1936.

After graduation he joined the U.S. Navy as an aviation cadet, so that he could learn to fly an airplane. Davis received his wings in 1937 and joined the U.S. Marine Corps. In 1940 he resigned from the Corps and became a test pilot for Vultee Aircraft. On March 15, 1941, he married Frances Pfeiffer in San Marino, California. In 1945 he was promoted to chief of aerodynamics and flight test at Vultee Aircraft.

Vultee Aircraft became Consolidated Vultee Aircraft, and Frank became assistant chief engineer in 1950 and assistant vice president of engineering in 1952. During this time he was instrumental in the development of the first U.S. turboprop fighter, the XP-81, and the first delta wing supersonic fighter, the XF-92A. Under his guidance the company developed the first vertical takeoff fighter, the XFY-1, in 1954. Frank also had

an important role in America's first intercontinental missile—Atlas.

In 1954, Frank Davis was named chief engineer of the Fort Worth Division of what was then called Convair (the name had been changed from Consolidated Vultee Aircraft). He and Fran moved to Fort Worth, where Frank supervised development of the B-58 supersonic bomber, which first flew near the end of that year. The B-58 was a successful bomber, but it was ahead of its time for maintainability. Over 100 were built and flown by the U.S. Air Force.

The next major aircraft program starting in the 1960s was the Tactical Fighter Experimental, or TFX. Davis was promoted to have full responsibility for the complete Fort Worth Division (including the TFX proposal) in 1959. The competition dragged on for several years, but his division finally won the F-111, as it was then called in 1962. Development went well, and over 600 were built.

In 1970 the company was reorganized, and Davis became president of the Convair Aerospace Division, which included the Convair Division in San Diego, the Fort Worth Division, and the Astronautics Division in San Diego. During this period he and Fran moved back to San Diego.

Back in the 1960s Convair had purchased Canadair, Ltd., a Canadian airplane manufacturer located in Montreal. Frank Davis was made a member of the Board of Directors in 1963 and continued until his retirement from the company in 1975.

In 1960, Frank was honored by the University of West Virginia with a doctor of science degree. Shortly thereafter he was elected a fellow of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics. Then in 1967 he was elected to membership in the National Academy of Engineering. Davis received the California Institute of Technology Alumni Award in 1968. He was also elected an honorary fellow of the Society of Experimental Test Pilots.

Frank continued to be active professionally after his retirement. He continued as a consultant to Canadair and was a director of Convair, Langley Corporation, VAI Computer, Inc., and Kanawha Manufacturing Company.

While in Fort Worth, Davis was active in many local activities. He was named Engineer of the Year by the Fort Worth Society of Professional Engineers. He was one of the organizers of and on the board of the Fort Worth International Science Fair Committee in 1969. The Fort Worth Exchange Club named him Outstanding Citizen of the Year for 1970.

When Frank and Fran moved back to California, they settled in La Jolla in an apartment with a beautiful view of the Pacific Ocean. They located near the La Jolla Country Club because Frank loved to play golf. He played regularly and in 1994 managed to score below 80 (his age) and was very proud of the accomplishment. During the mid-1970s, Fran Davis suffered from throat cancer, which reduced her activities. She died about 1992. Frank continued to play golf regularly and socialized with old friends. In the late 1990s his health deteriorated, and he died in 2001.

Frank Davis was a wonderful engineer as well as a great person. He had a keen interest in everything mechanical. He was also a friendly, religious man who is much missed.