



Robert W. Sumner

## ROBERT W. RUMMEL

1915–2009

Elected in 1973

*“For contributions to the integration of design and airline operational considerations in the development of economic transport aircraft.”*

BY JOSEPH SUTTER

**R**OBERT W. RUMMEL, space expert and aerospace engineer, died October 17, 2009. He was 94 years old. He had the “vision to understand what is required to face the future.”

Bob was born in Dakota, Illinois, on August 4, 1915, to William Howard and Dora Elizabeth (Ely) Rummel. As a youth he became fascinated with aviation. He graduated from Mount Carroll High School and attended the Curtiss-Wright Technical Institute for Aeronautics in Glendale, California. He graduated in 1935 with a degree in aeronautical engineering and went to work for Hughes Aircraft Company as a stress analyst.

He worked for Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, Aero Engineering Corporation, National Aircraft Corporation, and Rearwin Aircraft, before starting as a senior engineer in 1943 with Trans World Airlines (TWA). He worked at TWA for 35 years and in 1969 was named vice president of technical development. While working at TWA, Bob was also a consultant on aviation affairs to Howard R. Hughes.

I first heard of Bob Rummel when I left the U.S. Navy in 1946. I was an aerodynamics engineer. Before the war, TWA bought the Boeing Stratoliner (the B307). These airplanes were called to war duty and were in the Air Transport Command. After the war they were given back to TWA. TWA made some

major modifications to them, and Boeing and TWA recertified them to Civil Aeronautics Administration requirements. (The CAA was the forerunner to today's Federal Aviation Administration.) The Boeing engineer was Jack Steimer, who kept us up to date on the testing. Bob Rummel was the leader of TWA's efforts.

TWA then became very involved with several reciprocating engine airplanes. TWA was the lead airline in the development of the Lockheed Constellation airplane. Howard Hughes was a major owner of TWA at that time. Bob Rummel was head of the TWA effort to define the airplane and was the principal go-between for Hughes and Lockheed.

TWA then got into turbine-powered airplanes—first the 707 and 727 at Boeing. TWA also helped develop such airplanes as the Convair 880 and 990. Bob was head of engineering at that time and made a major contribution in defining the characteristics required for safe commercial operation. I got to know him better when TWA purchased and operated the Boeing 747 airplane. Again as head of engineering, Bob's input was helpful in defining the airplane. I retired from Boeing in June of 1986.

After retiring from TWA, Bob founded his own consulting firm—Robert W. Rummel Associates—before retiring to devote his time to writing.

Bob was appointed to the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, serving on the operations subpanel. I headed the design panel for the commission. The commission made 14 recommendations, which President Reagan told the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to comply with. I believe Bob and I were very helpful in developing these recommendations. For instance, an astronaut would review the readiness of the vehicle for launch. When shuttle operations were restarted, astronaut Bob Crippen was assigned launch approval duty. A chief of safety was established who reported directly to the NASA administrator. He and the astronaut assigned to the launch had to approve the launch. Bob Rummel served his country well.

Being the go-between for TWA and Howard Hughes was a task Bob performed for many years. Life as an engineer requires knowledge, the ability to deal with many people who have many interests, and the vision to understand what is required to face the future. Bob had the necessary attributes that made him a great engineer. I would urge everyone to read the book *Howard Hughes and TWA* written by Robert Rummel (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

Bob was awarded the NASA Distinguished Public Service Medal in 1979. He was a fellow of both the Society of Automotive Engineers and the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, and he was elected a member of the National Academy of Engineering in 1973. He served on a number of NASA committees and as chairman of the Aeronautics and Space Engineering Board of the National Research Council.

Bob is survived by his children, Linda Kay Yarbrough, Sharon Lee Barnes, Marjorie Susan DuBois, Diana Beth Gillespie, and Robert Wiland Rummel, Jr.; 10 grandchildren; and 13 great-grandchildren. His wife, Marjorie B. Cox Rummel, predeceased him in 2003.