Langley inventor to be honored at White House

Dr. Richard T. Whitcomb, inventor of several award-winning aviation designs, will be honored with the National Medal of Science, presented at the White House next Wednesday.

The 52-year-old director of the eight-foot tunnels branch, high-speed aircraft division of NASA’s Langley Research Center, has been receiving prizes from his colleagues and country since 1955, when he was awarded the National Aeronautic Association’s Collier Trophy for the greatest achievement in aviation as shown by actual use.

Also that year, he received the Exceptional Service Award, the highest civilian prize given by the Air Force.

In 1956, Whitcomb was honored with the Distinguished Service Medal for his concept of area rule. Simply, the increase in aircraft speed (up to 25 per cent) without more power can be gained by trimming the mid-section of the plane.

The Sylvanus Albert Reed Award, which carries with it a $500 prize, was presented to Dr. Whitcomb in 1970, by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

His latest project, the airfoil (wing) section, will presumably help cut down on passenger and pilot discomfort due to turbulence.

Whitcomb Receives Award

Dr. Richard Travis Whitcomb, head of the 8-foot tunnels branch, high-speed aircraft division at NASA’s Langley Research Center, has been named a recipient of the National Medal of Science.

The medals, the government’s highest award for distinguished achievement in science, mathematics and engineering, will be presented at the White House next Wednesday.

Whitcomb’s award is “for his discoveries and inventions in aerodynamics which have provided, and will continue to provide, substantial improvements in the speed, range and payload of a major portion of high-performance aircraft produced throughout the country.”

He is probably best known as the inventor of the NASA supercritical wing, conceived at Langley during the 1960s as a result of wind tunnel studies.

The wing has been tested in flight at NASA’s Flight Research Center in Edwards, Calif., on a modified F-8 jet fighter aircraft.

If successfully applied to future aircraft—particularly commercial jet transports—NASA believes the wing offers the promise of improved performance and efficiency in cruise flight close to the speed of sound.

NASA anticipates that subsonic performance gains will be possible through use of the wing on supersonic military aircraft.

In 1952, Whitcomb discovered, and later experimentally verified a revolutionary aircraft design concept called the area rule.

This is a method of designing aircraft to reduce drag and increase speed without the addition of power. It is incorporated in every American supersonic airplane.

Whitcomb received the Collier Trophy in 1954 for that year’s “greatest achievement in aviation in America.”