SUPERSNOCIC FLIGHT PIONEER WELCOMED INTO FIRST FLIGHT SHRINE

HAMPTON, Va. – Aeronautics engineer Richard T. Whitcomb, whose legendary NASA research contributions made supersonic flight possible, will soon join other aerospace pioneers in the Paul E. Garber First Flight Shrine in North Carolina.

The First Flight Society will recognize Whitcomb’s achievements in ceremonies Dec. 17 near the site of the world's first powered flight. The shrine was established in 1966 in the visitor center at the Wright Brothers National Memorial in Kill Devil Hills, N.C. The portrait gallery, which includes Orville and Wilbur Wright, Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, John Glenn, Neil Armstrong and others, recognizes men and women who have made the most significant contributions to flight science and technology.

Richard Whitcomb may not be as much of a household name as others in the gallery, but aviation historians say his role in aeronautics research is virtually unmatched. "Dick Whitcomb's intellectual fingerprints are on virtually every commercial aircraft flying today," said Tom Crouch, noted aviation historian at the Smithsonian Institution.

Whitcomb spent his career at what is now NASA's Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va. Born in Evanston, Ill., in 1921 he graduated from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts in 1943. After college he joined the Transonic Aerodynamics Branch of NASA's predecessor, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), at Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory. Whitcomb retired from the Hampton facility in 1980.
Relatively early in his career, in 1952, the aeronautics engineer discovered and experimentally verified a revolutionary aircraft design principle that became known as the area rule. Whitcomb discovered if he narrowed the fuselage of an airplane so it's shaped more like an old-fashioned soda bottle, he could reduce drag and increase the speed of a transonic aircraft without the need to add additional power. The area rule has been applied to almost every U.S. supersonic aircraft designed since then. The achievement earned him the prestigious 1954 Collier Trophy for the most important aeronautical advance of the year.

If the area rule was Whitcomb's major accomplishment of the 1950s, his supercritical wing revolutionized the design of jet liners in the 1960s. The key was the development of a swept-back wing airfoil that delayed the onset of increased drag, increasing the fuel efficiency of aircraft flying close to the speed of sound.

In the 1970s Whitcomb came up with winglets, wingtip devices that reduce yet another type of drag and further improve aerodynamic efficiency. Many airliners and private jets currently sport wingtips that are angled up for better fuel performance.

"The First Flight Society is proud to honor Richard Whitcomb, a man who literally changed the shape of the airplane and altered the course of the history of flight in the process," said Bill Harris, president of the society.

In addition to the First Flight Society Shrine award and the Collier Trophy, Whitcomb is the recipient of the Air Force Exceptional Service Medal, the NACA Distinguished Service Medal and the NASA Scientific Achievement Medal.

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