

James D. Eastham

1924 – 2016



James D. Eastham was born at home June 18, 1924, to James and Amma Eastham. The family made their home at 926 N. Main in El Dorado, Kansas. He has one brother, Renden “Blue” of El Dorado, and two sisters, Mrs. Avle Mehl and Mrs. June Travis. Another sister, Madge, is deceased. Following a former marriage, Jim has one adopted son, Skipper Eastham.

Having served as a pilot during World War II and the Korean Conflict, Jim went on to accomplish many record-breaking aviation feats, including being the first pilot to fly the YF-12A, second pilot to fly the SR-71 and third pilot to fly the A-12. He was the chief test pilot during the testing of the Convair YB-58A, and authored the YF-12 flight manual.

Eastham is a member of the Pi Tau Sigma, a mechanical engineering honorary fraternity, and served as its president; also he is a member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. He also has been a member of the Stennis Air Service “Skytyping” group for twenty years, which operated the SNJ-2 (AT-6). He holds a fellowship in the Society of Experimental Test Pilots. He has been inducted into the Blackbird Laurels Fraternity, an elite honor society founded by The Flight Test Historical Foundation.

Now retired, Eastham makes his home in Rancho Palos Verdes, California, a support city for NASA and nearby Edwards Air Force Base. He retired as a Major from the USAF Reserve.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

A native of El Dorado, Kansas, Eastham received his primary and secondary education in El Dorado. He is a graduate of El Dorado High School's class of 1942.

Jim's family came to El Dorado in 1919. His father supported the family working as a carpenter and contractor, and his mother worked in the home.

LEAVING THE AREA

In 1942, Eastham enlisted in the Army Air Corp reserve program, entering the CPT program under the sponsorship of the Civil Aviation Authority. He attended six different civilian flying schools, followed by the Army Air Corp's Central Instructors School in Randolph, TX. Following graduation from this latest school, he worked as the primary instructor at Mustang Field, located in El Reno, Oklahoma.

ACHIEVEMENTS

In 1944, Jim was called to active duty with the Army Air Corp. He attended and graduated from Mechanic's School at Keesler Field in Mississippi that same year.

Completing the pilot training program, he received his commission at Luke Field, Arizona. Graduation from engineering officers' school at Chanute Field in Illinois followed.

Assigned to the European command (USAFE), Eastham flew P-51s in the 55th and 31st Fighter Groups. He also served as a GCI controller in an early warning radar unit.

He flew C-47 aircraft with the 60th Troop Carrier Group and was one of the original pilots of the Berlin Airlift. He flew A-26, F-6 and B-17 aircraft with the 45th Reconnaissance Squadron, and also flew the P-47 with the 86th Fighter Group.

While still in Europe, he also checked out and flew the Avro Lancaster and Lincoln bombers with Britain's Royal Air Force. He joined the 36th Fighter Group in 1948, flying F-80s and TF-80Cs (T-33) until the end of his tour in Europe.

Returning to the United States, Eastham flew B-25s at Vance Air Force Base until released from active duty in 1950. He then entered the Georgia Institute of Technology to study mechanical engineering.

In 1950, his education was interrupted when he was recalled to active duty with the USAF during the Korean Conflict. He flew F-84s with the 31st Strategic Fighter Wing, from bases in the United States and Japan. Released from active duty in December of 1952, he re-entered

Georgia Tech. While there, he made the Dean's List every year. His special field of expertise was that of heat transfer.

Eastham continued flying in the Air Force Reserve. In September of 1953, he became a member of the "Caterpillar Club" after bailing out of a T-28 as it exploded. He flew F-84s as a member of Georgia's Air National Guard from 1954 to 1956.

Upon graduating in 1955, he began employment as an engineer with the McDonnell Aircraft Corporation in St. Louis, Missouri. Later he was a production test pilot on the F2H Banshee and the F3H Demon.

In October of 1956, Eastham joined the experimental flight test department of the Hughes Aircraft Co., as Project Test Pilot on the Falcon Missile Program at White Sands Missile Test Range. During the next four years, he flew approximately 800 test missions in the F-102, F-106, and B-58, firing 350 missiles, a record for the number of missiles fired by any one person. He also worked on development of various fire control and infrared systems, and automatic flight control systems for the F-101 and F0106 Interceptor aircraft.

Attending the Strategic Air Command's B-58 combat crew training school at Carswell Air Force Base in Texas, Jim graduated first in his class. He became Hughes' Project Test Pilot on the YB-58, used as the test vehicle in developing the ASG-18 Pulsed-Doppler Radar system and the GAR-9 (AIM-47A) missile. He flew the B-58 until the conclusion of that program in 1964.

In 1962, Eastham joined Lockheed-California, becoming involved in the Blackbird program. He was the third pilot to fly the A-12, the original version of the famed SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance aircraft. He was the second pilot to fly the SR-71.

Only 32 Blackbirds were built, all in the 1960s. They could sustain speed in excess of 2,100 mph, flying a range of about 2,300 miles. The 2-man crew, one sitting behind the other, wore full-pressure suits; without them, the flyers' blood would boil at 80,000 feet if cabin pressure were to fail. The Blackbird flew alone into hostile environments, so high that it was out of reach of an enemy's intercepting blow. The high resolution radar imaging system in the nose could survey 100,000 square miles per hour, flying so fast that it could enter and exit a location before anyone knew of its presence.

Eastham flew the YB-58, A-12, and YF-12A programs while working simultaneously for both Hughes and Lockheed. On August 7, 1963, Eastham was the first to fly the YF-12A, equipped with a streamlined camera pod mounted underneath each engine nacelle for photographing AIM-47 missile launches. Three of these aircraft were built. Jim was the Lockheed Project Test Pilot on all phases of this program.

In February of 1964, in a remote location over New Mexico, the A-12 reached the speed of Mach 3.3 at an altitude of 83,000 ft., sustaining the same speed for over 10 minutes by pilot James D. Eastham, setting a new world record. But as far as the rest of the world knew, it had

never happened. Although many models were proposed, this was the only reconnaissance version that ever made it to production.

On May 1, 1965, Eastham was instrumental in setting the world speed record by the YF-12A, the prototype interceptor version of the Blackbird, at Edwards Air Force Base in California. He was the first to fly speed courses perfecting the required techniques before the air force pilots set the records officially.

Jim Eastham accumulated approximately 10,000 hours of total flying time, with more than 4,000 hours spent in single and multi-engine jets. He has flown and flight-tested the F-2H "Banshee", F-3H "Demon", F-100, F-101, F-104, F-106, B-57, B-58, A-12, YF-12A, and SR-71.

He has flown the following civil turboprop, turbo-jet, and turbo-fan aircraft: Volpar Turboliner, Pilatus/Fairchild Porter, Turboprop-powered Comanche, Short Skyvan, Handley Page-137, Mitsubishi MU-2, Swearingen Merlin II & III, Aero Commander 690, Beech King Air, Piper Cheyenne, Cessna Conquest, Beech T-34C, DH-125, HS-800, Falcon 20, Falcon 10, Cessna Citation I, and both versions of the BD-5. He has also flown three Canards: the OMAC, the Avtech, and the "Quickey".

In 1966, Eastham joined the Garrett Corporation, involved in the sale of small gas turbine prime propulsion engines.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

In 1964, Jim became the recipient of the Ivan Kincheloe Award for his work on the YF12A (A-11) Lockheed Super-Secret Project. This award recognizes outstanding professional accomplishment in the conduct of flight testing. Established in 1958 by the Society of Experimental Test Pilots, it honors the memory of test pilot and Korean Conflict ace Ivan C. Kincheloe, USAF, who died during flight testing.

Eastham has been awarded the Blackbird Laurels Medallion after induction into the Blackbird Laurels Fraternity.

In 2002, he was inducted into the Kansas Aviation Hall of Fame. In 2003 came induction into the NASA Aerospace Walk of Honor, honoring aviation pioneers in Lancaster, California.

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