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Jack Knudsen Northrop: Aviation Pioneer and his Flying Wing

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Famed aviation pioneer Donald Douglas once said, "Every airplane flying today has some Jack Northrop in it." Northrop was an aviation genius who was more interested in developing new technology than selling airplanes or making a fortune. The Northrop story is the story of American aviation history; he worked with the Loughead brothers (who changed their name to Lockheed) and Donald Douglas, designing some of America's greatest airplanes from the Vega to the DC-3 and ultimately to the most controversial of all, the flying wing. He also helped redesign the Spirit of St. Louis, lopping off weight and making it possible for Charles Lindbergh to successfully solo the Atlantic. Northrop developed the revolutionary flying wing, a plane without a fuselage. The U.S. Army gave him a contract to build 30 craft. But when Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington assumed office he ordered the cancellation of Northrop's contract. He also ordered the destruction of all the flying wings in production--presumably to recover components though the cost of destruction was infinitely greater than the value of recovered components. Conspiracy theories abounded. The destruction of his beloved flying wing was a metaphor for Northrop's career--it ended sadly and prematurely. However, he lived just long enough to learn about the development of the Air Force's stealth B-2 bomber, a flying wing bearing a remarkable similarity to his vision. The Northrop story is a bittersweet tale of invention, success and politics in the best American tradition. [2,651-word Titans of Fortune article with timeline, bibliography and video links]

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