

Test Flying the World's Fastest Airplanes

Bob Gilliland

USAF Test Pilot, Retired

Bob Gilliland will discuss the inception, design, and technical operations and political aspects of the SR-71 Blackbird, which currently holds the high-altitude world speed record. He will also discuss the F-104 Starfighter which holds the low-altitude world speed record and the F117-Stealth and the ATF (YF-22).





During WWII, at the age of 17, Bob volunteered for the US Navy and was training to go into submarines when he was accepted into the US Naval Academy at the war's end. As a midshipman he served on various warships. Including a heavy cruiser, destroyer, carrier, and the battleship USS North Carolina in which his GQ station was the 16" gun turrets. He graduated from Annapolis in 1949 with a degree in engineering. Just prior to graduation he volunteered to enter the USAF in the first class to be offered the opportunity. He did advanced training at Chandler, AZ, flying the F-80 Shooting Star. In 1952 Bob volunteered for a combat tour in Korea flying the F-84 in a fighter-bomber unit at K-2 airport, Taegu, Korea. In 1953 he returned to Ramstein AFB, Germany, flying the F86F Sabre jet. Later that year he was assigned to Eglin AFB, FL. While at Eglin he had the opportunity to fly most of the aircraft in the USAF inventory.

He left active service the following year and returned to his hometown, Memphis, where he joined the Tennessee Air National Guard. There he flew the P-51, B-26, RF-80, RF-84, and the F-104A Starfighter. He also checked out some of the world's leading pilots such as the Luftwaffe's Gunther Rall and Johannes Steinhoff, Canada's Wing Commander Kenneth Lett, and USAF General John Dunning. Bob worked closely with the Air Force's of the Republic of China (Taiwan), Canada, Japan, Germany, and Italy. In 1962 Bob went on to test the fastest and highest flying airplanes ever built including the A-11, A-12, YF-12A, and the SR-71.

Bob Gilliland has logged more experimental supersonic flight test time above Mach 2 and Mach 3 than any other pilot. He helped introduce the first American jets to Europe. As project test pilot for the Lockheed SR-71, he was the first to fly the aircraft. It roared skyward amid purple-orange blast of maximum afterburner on its maiden flight December 22, 1964. Working with Kelly Johnson, the Skunk Works founder and his small group of engineers, Bob was the first to achieve full envelope expansion of speed and altitude in the SR-71A and SR-71B. He holds the Kincheloe Award as top test pilot by the Society of Experimental Test Pilots and is currently a trustee of the Association of National Aviation.