

Spirit in the sky

McDonnell Aircraft's FH-1 Phantom propelled the U.S. Navy into the jet age
By Henry T. Brownlee Jr.



PHOTO: The XFD-1 takes off from the deck of the USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* July 21, 1946. BOEING ARCHIVES

PHOTO: A McDonnell FH-1 Phantom on display in the Jet Aviation gallery at the National Mall building in Washington, D.C. SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

PHOTO: The XFD-1 prototype, staged in front of the original McDonnell Aircraft Corp. facilities in St. Louis in 1945. BOEING ARCHIVES



It was a phone call that changed the course of naval aviation. On New Year's Eve, 1942, James S. McDonnell, founder and president of McDonnell Aircraft Corp., received the call from the U.S. Navy Bureau of Aeronautics offering McDonnell a contract to design and build the first American jet fighter capable of taking off from and landing on an aircraft carrier. McDonnell signed a letter of intent to develop the experimental, or "X," jet aircraft on Jan. 7, 1943. The Navy wanted a single-seat,



PHOTOS: (Left) An FH-1 takes off from the deck of the USS *Saipan* in 1948. (Above) Lt. Cdr. James T. Davidson with the XFD-1 before his historic July 21, 1946, flight. U.S. NAVY

jet-propelled, low-wing monoplane. McDonnell accepted the challenge and two years later, in January 1945, Woodward "Woody" Burke piloted the XFD-1 prototype on its first flight at Lambert Field in St. Louis. The XFD-1 was still in development when World War II ended, but the Navy decided that McDonnell Aircraft could continue developing the jet and move into the production phase. McDonnell named his new jet fighter "Phantom."

In an official interoffice correspondence a year later, McDonnell wrote: "So many airplanes have been named since 1903 that there are few fields from which such names have not been frequently drawn. One of these rare fields is the world of [animism] (the theory that life and mind are inherent in matter), and it is from this field that we will select our jet and rocket airplane names, subject to the approval by the customer." From a list of 19 entities from the spirit world, including Phantom, Banshee and Goblin, McDonnell chose Phantom. The XFD-1, he wrote, with a speed of 500 mph (800 kilometers per hour), would "appear and disappear like an apparition."

On the morning of July 21, 1946, the XFD-1 Phantom roared 400 feet (120 meters) down the deck of the USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, a then-recently commissioned U.S. Navy aircraft carrier. The Phantom's pilot, Lt. Cdr. James T. Davidson, climbed quickly portside, circled the carrier and then landed. It marked the first takeoff and landing of a jet-powered aircraft

from the deck of a U.S. aircraft carrier. Davidson made five takeoffs and landings and completed a successful wave-off at 95 mph (150 kilometers per hour). Later that day, he flew the Phantom to the Naval Air Test Center at Patuxent River, Md. The XFD-1, later re-designated the FH-1 Phantom, had demonstrated that jet-powered fighter aircraft were capable of performing both the high-speed takeoffs and low-speed landings necessary for aircraft carrier operations. It ushered in a new era of naval aviation.

McDonnell Aircraft Co. would produce 62 FH-1s. And it was the first in a long line of jet fighters designed and manufactured by McDonnell, later McDonnell Douglas and then Boeing, in its St. Louis plant. McDonnell subsequently designed and manufactured the F2H Banshee, the F3H Demon and the F-4 Phantom II for the U.S. Navy. This year marks the centennial of U.S. naval aviation. And The Boeing Company continues an enduring legacy of producing top-notch jet fighters for the Navy and other global customers with the F/A-18 Super Hornet and EA-18 Growler programs. ■

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PHANTOM FIRSTS

The **FH-1 Phantom** is credited with a number of naval aviation firsts:

- 1ST** all-jet airplane ordered into production by the U.S. Navy; the first U.S. Navy aircraft to operate at a speed of 500 mph (800 kph)
- 1ST** jet fighter to operate from the flight deck of a U.S. aircraft carrier
- 1ST** jet fighter selected by a U.S. Marine Corps fighter squadron
- 1ST** jet fighter to serve with both the U.S. Navy and Marines