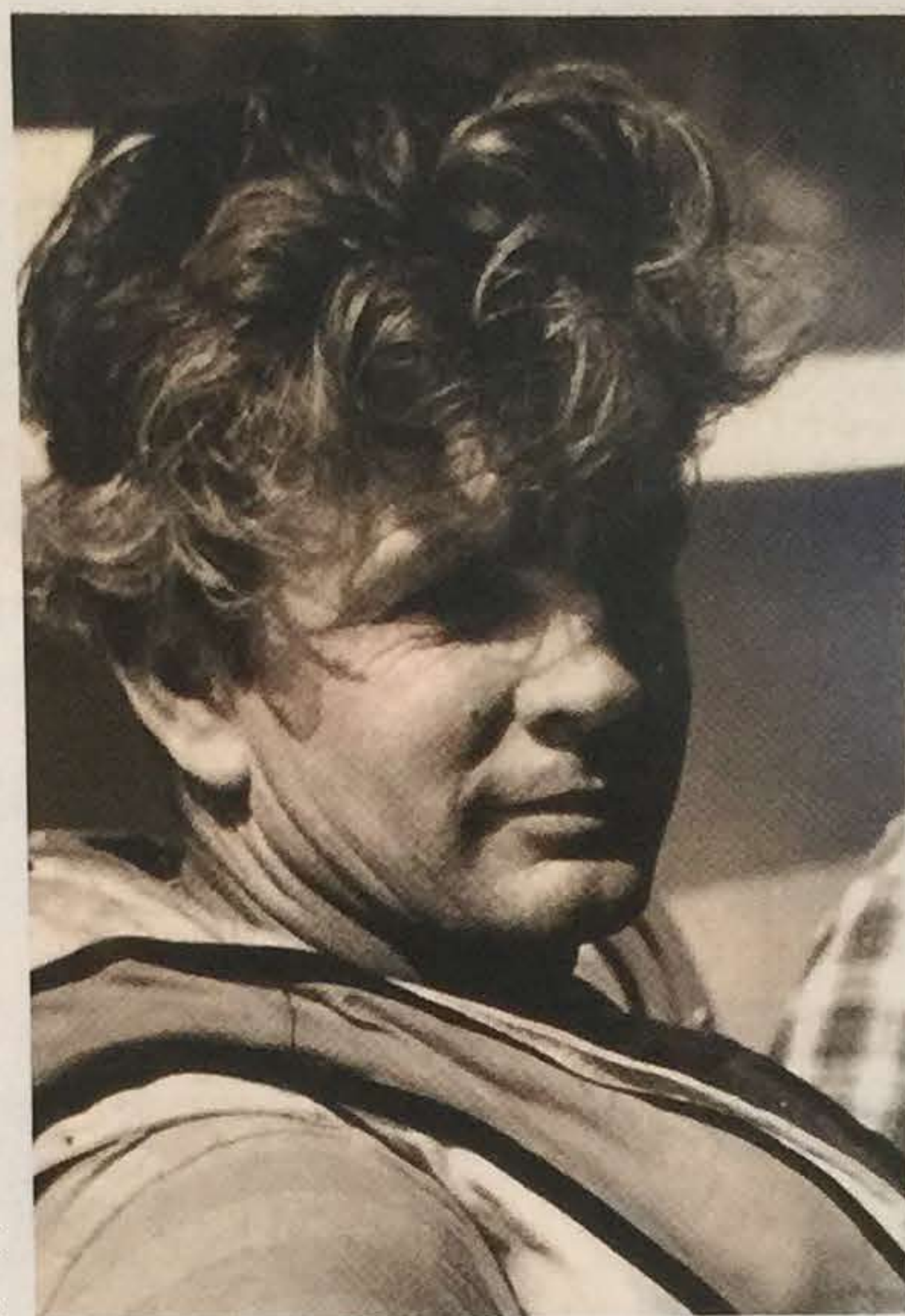


AFTER WORD

SECRET GOVERNMENT DESIGNS, RAW FEAR, AND AN UNQUENCHABLE NEED FOR SPEED.
BY SAMMY JAMES AS TOLD TO CAPT. BILL PIKE

Well, I was at Thunderbird in 1963 and Florida Marine Services before that. So I wanna say it was, like, 1962. Somethin' along those lines. And I was just concluding this little side project for the Carderock Division of Naval Surface Warfare Center. It was up there on the Susquehanna River and it'd gone pretty good so somebody asks me, "Hey, Sam, how'd you like to go out to Seattle and run a boat we're puttin' together with the guys at Boeing?"



I checked it out first. Called out there a couple of times. Scott Crossfield—you know the test-pilot who flew the rocket-powered X-15, the guy who was the first to go twice the speed of sound—he was a friend of mine from way back and he was out there at Boeing doing a lot of their wind-tunnel work. Heck, when I talked with him about the project, he'd never heard of it, which indicates just how top secret it was I guess.

But hell! Out I goes to Seattle anyway—I guess I was sorta intrigued—and you shoulda seen this thing, Bill. It reminded me of what they used to call a "batter box." You know, where you have a couple of two-by-twelves for sides, put an upwards angle at both ends, nail some sheet metal for the bottom, seal everything with tar, and use it to mix cement?

Yeah, that's what the thing reminded me of—a batter box that was about 8 foot wide and right at 20 foot long. They put a flat transom on it and they stuck two big pontoons or skis out in front. The designers had apparently begun with an overall length of 18 foot, as I recall, but they had to bump 'er up to 20 foot to keep the thing floatin'. The engine was a jet engine: no propeller, just blowin' hot as heck out the back. And it was heavy. I mean, really heavy.

They were nice enough guys, though. But they weren't boat people, those engineers. Not even close. They seemed more like kids who'd just graduated from some university some place and this was their first engineering job at Boeing. And the government was paying the tab, but maybe not a lot of money was involved, so Boeing was kinda givin' them their first shot. And I gotta say—that boat, when I first laid eyes on it—it looked freakin' scary.

It was sorta like an aerodynamicist had designed something he figured would look neat. And my God, it's hard to believe—but the thing had cable steering. You know, like most all the boats did back then. And the cables ran back through sheaves to two sets of rudders. One set was aeronautical, like you'd see on an airplane. And the other set was under the water, like you'd see on a boat.

And the throttle had a little C-clamp on it so these guys could lock it—keep me from goin' over a certain velocity. The idea was I'd take the boat out on Lake Washington, run it, come back, and they'd move the C-clamp, which would give me a higher percentage

of throttle. Then I'd go again and we'd work our way to higher and higher speeds like this. You know—safety first and all that crap.

So that first day, out on the lake, I got in and took her across the lake and she performed pretty good. There was no speedometer but I felt like I was doin' maybe 70 mile an hour, something like that. But hell, they said when I got back that I'd been doing 125 mile an hour. They were using radar guns and were confident of their numbers. First time I ever saw a radar gun, to tell the truth.

But things went all right, I guess. By the end of that first day, we were doin' a little over 200 mile an hour which I was happy with—the boat actually didn't feel too damn bad to drive at that speed, you know. I ran back and forth across the lake to get two-way averages—can't remember how many runs. And not even a hint o' squirreliness, like she was gonna blow over or somethin'—lemme tell ya, if you blowed over in that boat you were up Sh-t's Creek. But hey, by the time I'd had a few beers that evenin', I was ready to do 'er all over again.

Next morning we got to the lake early. And there wasn't a ripple on the water. And we did a bunch of runs, each time with a little more throttle, and a little more speed, but finally I just got disgusted with playin' around and took the C-clamp off, threw it in the bottom of the boat, and firewalled 'er. I ran a two-way-average speed of 276 mile an hour, that's what they said.

But get this now. I wanted 'em to apply for the world speed record. I wanted to do it. I wanted to drive the boat. But if you go for a record like that, you gotta get the UIM (Union Internationale Motonautique) involved, get the proper timers and other stuff, and they weren't into it. Not Boeing, or the government. In fact, they said I couldn't even talk about the whole deal for seven years, it was supposedly so top secret.

Nobody ever ran the boat again, at least to my knowledge. But afterwards, I started playin' with a concept for a kind of a similar boat with four sponsons, two in front and two in back. I was lookin' for 500 mile an hour, more or less. Scotty Crossfield wanted to put a rocket in it—you know he was the big rocket guy at the time. But I finally let 'er slide—somehow sittin' in a boat, right in front of a freakin' rocket, just didn't seem all that safe to me. □

Sammy James headed up Bertram Racing during the 1970s and '80s. Among other events, he won the Key West World Championship in 1974, completing the race in a boat that finished with a broken deck and holed hullsides courtesy of a racecourse reportedly fraught with 18-foot seas. These days, his James Aircraft (www.jamesaircraft.com) sells speed-enhancing parts and equipment for airplanes.