Chasing the Sound Barrier: The Legacy of Chalmers "Slick" Goodlin

By Alex Crocco, for Aerium

Long before Chuck Yeager became a household name for breaking the sound barrier, a young pilot from Greensburg, Pennsylvania, sat in the cockpit of the very aircraft that would make that achievement possible. His name was Chalmers Hubert "Slick" Goodlin, and though history handed the final glory to someone else, his fingerprints are all over one of aviation's defining moments.

The bright orange Bell X-1 rocket plane. Source: U.S. Air Force / NASA, public domain.

A Pennsylvania boy who loved to fly

Goodlin was born on January 2, 1923, in New Alexandria, Pennsylvania, the son of William B. and Susan Ramaley Goodlin. He caught the flying bug early, taking his first lessons at age 15 at the New Alexandria Airport in the late 1930s. By 17 he had soloed in a number of different aircraft.

"He started out as a young kid, 14–15, just wanting to fly. He just loved it," his niece Susan Ludwig recalled. "He just knew so much. He was a real resource for people about flying and designing, so it was just his life's passion."

That passion pulled him into the war effort before his own country had even entered the fight. On his 18th birthday in 1941, Goodlin traveled to Canada and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, drawn by accounts of the great air battles being fought over the English Channel. He became the youngest commissioned officer in the RCAF and reached the European theater in 1942, and it was in the RCAF that he earned the nickname that stuck for life: "Slick." By December 1942 the U.S. Navy had requested his transfer home, where he trained as a Navy test pilot.

The X-1 years

In December 1943, Goodlin joined Bell Aircraft as a test pilot, and in September 1946 he was selected to fly the second aircraft in the Bell X-1 program, the rocket-powered plane built specifically to break the sound barrier. His first unpowered glide flight came on October 11, 1946, at Muroc Army Air Field in California. On December 9, 1946, he became the first pilot to take the X-1 into powered flight.

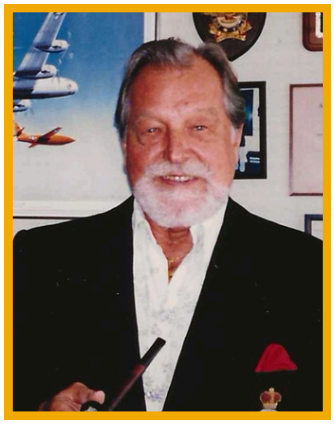
All told, Goodlin flew the X-1 26 times, methodically pushing the rocket plane closer and closer to Mach 1 and gathering the data that proved supersonic flight was survivable. The work was dangerous: he qualified for the "Caterpillar Club," three times, the informal fraternity of pilots who have saved their lives by parachute.

Then came the dispute that rewrote the ending. In mid-1947 the X-1 program was taken over by the U.S. Air Force, and the assignment to make the first supersonic flight went to a man in uniform: Captain Chuck Yeager, who broke the barrier in October 1947. The foundation Goodlin laid was real. Chuck Yeager climbed into a machine that Goodlin had already proven could fly.

The X-1 was air-launched from a converted B-29 bomber.
Source: U.S. Air Force, public domain.

Three flags, one humanitarian heart

Goodlin's flying did not stop with the X-1. In 1948 he volunteered for the fledgling Israeli Air Force, flying as a "Machal" volunteer during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and becoming Israel's first Chief test pilot. That service gave him the rare distinction of having flown for three nations' militaries: Canada, the United States, and Israel. He later transported Jewish refugees to Israel during humanitarian missions, and in 1969 received a commendation from the American Red Cross for relief work during the Biafra crisis in Nigeria.



Chalmers in his later years.
Source: Susan Ludwig

In 1955, Chalmers founded the NY Boreas Corporation, a company that sold aircraft and airline parts internationally. In his later career he became a champion of the "lifting fuselage" designs of inventor Vincent Burnelli, eventually serving as chairman and CEO of the Burnelli Company in London before moving to Florida and founding his own aircraft-leasing firm, the Boreas Corporation. He was inducted into the Florida Aviation Hall of Fame and the Niagara Frontier Aviation Hall of Fame. Goodlin died of cancer on October 20, 2005, at his West Palm Beach home. He was 82.

In 2023, the Westmoreland County Airport Authority honored him with a display case of memorabilia at Arnold Palmer Regional Airport in Latrobe, a homecoming of sorts for the local boy whose story, as one authority member put it, had been "hidden by the military."

The Chalmers Goodlin display case at Arnold Palmer Regional Airport.
Source: Westmoreland County Airport Authority.

The family thread reaches Aerium

Goodlin's legacy is not only preserved in museums and hall-of-fame plaques. It lives on in the family he inspired. Brianna Pavkovich, Director of the Aviation Maintenance Technician program at Saint Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania, is Goodlin's grand-cousin: Slick was her grandfather's cousin.

Brianna Pavkovich, Director of the Maintenance Technician Program, Saint Francis University

"A lot of my inspiration comes from my family history," Pavkovich said. "My grandfather's cousin was Chalmers 'Slick' Goodlin, so aviation has always been part of the story in my family. My pap used to tell me stories about 'Slick' flying over the family farm and everyone chasing the plane trying to jump up and touch the wheels as he passed overhead."

That image, children sprinting across a Pennsylvania farm field, reaching skyward for a low-flying plane, captures something essential about how aviation passes from one generation to the next. Today, as a key part of the Aerium ecosystem training the next generation of aviation professionals, Pavkovich carries forward the same spirit of innovation and daring that defined her famous relative. Slick Goodlin may never have crossed Mach 1 himself, but the runway he built stretches far beyond a single flight.

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Sources: NASA History Office; Wikipedia; Tribune-Review / TribLIVE; Palm Beach Post; AviationPros; 101 Squadron historical archive; and family interviews originally conducted by Alex Crocco. Aerium "Pennsylvania Aerospace Career Pathways" guide, May 2025.