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Robert Schwanhausser's life has two big chapters: one as a man and now one as a woman

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Robert Schwanhausser's life was shrouded in mystery, but this was no secret. His three wives, two sons and countless colleagues knew that "Swany" roamed the globe on vaguely-defined missions. Between 1952 and 1984, he huddled frequently with Pentagon officials, Israeli generals, Iraqi bureaucrats.

Exactly what was promised is buried in classified reports, but everyone knew the subject: the military use of drones.

At San Diego's Ryan Aeronautical, Vice President Schwanhausser cut a dashing figure. He launched spy drones over China in the '50s; slipped in and out of Saigon; sipped champagne at the Paris Air Show; briefed generals and presidents

He led a team of the best and brightest, technical division. They are retired now, but they remember their chief as a beau ideal, the engineer as man of action.

"It was an exciting career," said Erich Oemcke, who came to work on Ryan drones in 1960. "Bob Schwanhausser made it possible."

Schwanhausser's own career was brilliant and turbulent. For Teledyne Ryan – the companies merged in 1970 – he led subsidiaries in Alabama and Ohio. He traveled a traditional executive career path, serving on local boards, joining the Navy League and the National Rifle Association, donating to Republican candidates.

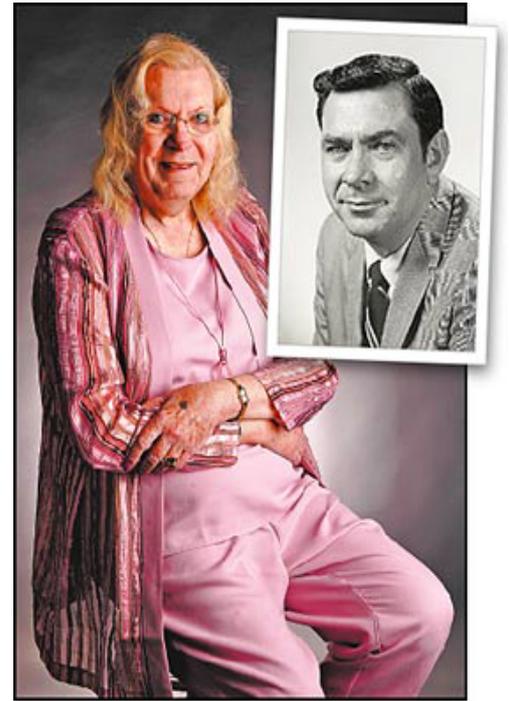
But he never rose to the presidency, for reasons that may have seemed obvious. There was the bruising clash with a well-connected superior. The womanizing. The boozing. Swany did little to hide any of this; he focused on containing other, more damaging, secrets.

When he lived alone, which was often, he would draw the curtains in his condo and slip on women's clothing.

In January 2003, he flew to Thailand for surgery. When the three-hour gender reassignment operation concluded, Robert Schwanhausser no longer existed. In his place was a woman, Bobbi Swan.

Schwanhausser's life never had been an open book; no one expected otherwise. But the woman who had been Schwanhausser recently decided to go public with her tale; few expected this chapter.

"We sort of lost him," Oemcke said of his former boss. "We don't know this person Bobbi Swan. I can't figure it out."



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune

Bobbi Swan today and, in inset, as Ryan Aeronautical Vice President Robert Schwanhausser.

"What an experience to have had two" genders, Swan said during a recent visit to San Diego. "That is remarkable. That is quite a gift."