

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

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He left MIT in 1952, with a bachelor's degree and a second lieutenant's commission. With the Korean War winding down, Schwanhausser was deployed to an Air Force research command in Ohio.

One night, at a movie theater off base, he saw a newsreel account of Christine Jorgensen, an early subject of sex reassignment surgery. Schwanhausser's first reaction: "Oh, my."

But he feared that this was still a medical experiment. "It's possible, but what would you end up with? It's a crapshoot."

Priorities. To be a success, he'd be a man.

The ragged edge

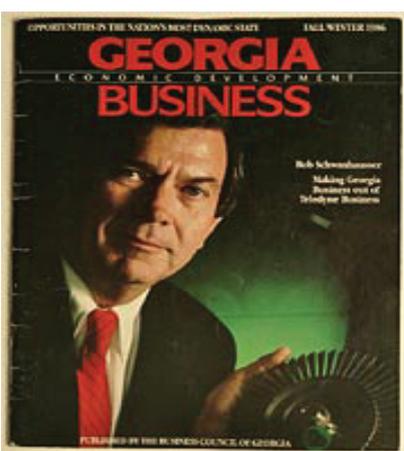
In the final days of the Eisenhower administration, Ryan Aeronautics established a "skunk works," a below-the-radar, unpublicized lab for research on unmanned aircraft. Schwanhausser, who came to Ryan after completing his Air Force duties in 1954, was tapped in January 1960 to oversee this hush-hush project.

He assembled a staff in covert fashion. Erich Oemcke was immersed in a mundane engineering task when an emissary from Schwanhausser sidled up and ordered him to an unmarked warehouse on Sports Arena Boulevard.

"Don't tell anyone where you are going, what you are doing," the messenger instructed. "Just disappear."

Oemcke did. Inside the skunk works, he met Lightning Bug, a drone that soon would be snapping photos over Vietnam. Bug's missions resembled those of the larger, costlier U-2 spy plane, with one exception: if shot down, the drone would fall to Earth without a pilot risking death or captivity.

Drone work could be dangerous, though. In 1964, Schwanhausser's team began working out of Bien Hoa airfield north of Saigon, overseeing drone missions over North Vietnam and Laos. Although they were civilians, the Ryan engineers usually wore uniforms, carried rifles and, at times, came under fire.



Schwanhausser spent as much time in the country as anyone from Ryan, looking after his men, fighting headquarters for additional "combat pay" and R&R breaks in Hawaii.

"He was a brilliant man and a fine man," said Cliff Smith, one of the drone engineers. "He should be getting more credit for the work he did."

By 1968, the long hours and tense conditions seemed to catch up to Schwanhausser. That December, he suffered a heart attack. Oemcke, who had become Swan's right-hand man, witnessed his boss' drinking accelerate in '69.

"It became a sort of sad situation," Oemcke said. "Many times I tried to protect him."

One woman's life as a man: Last year, a Michigan newspaper interviewed Swan about witnessing the first Super Bowl, which she did as Robert Schwanhausser; 20 years ago, a regional trade publication trumpeted Schwanhausser's leadership.