The father of the helicopter achieved greatness without losing his humility

The "father of the helicopter," Igor Sikorsky, also shown at the controls of the VS-300, which became the first practical helicopter.

MY TRAVELS WITH Mr. Sikorsky

by JAMES R. PATTERSON

■■ He was small, diffident and almost Chaplinesque in the Homburg hat, brim uplifted fore and aft like a toy boat anchored securely above gentle blue eyes and wispy mustache. But he loomed 10 feet tall in the world of aviation where he was highly respected and fondly admired. He was Igor Ivanovich Sikorsky, the father of the helicopter.

The kindly Russian emigré, who died in 1972 at the age of 83, spent much of his later life repeatedly denying that he *invented* the helicopter, but he was credited universally with having developed the first practical one. Although many honors were bestowed upon him, his greatest pride and deepest satisfaction in giving mankind a practical rotary-winged aircraft was in the thousands of lives saved by the machine. Every helicopter rescue from a mountain peak, the deck of a sinking ship or the roof of a burning building warmed his humanitarian heart more than any medal or honorary degree.

While I had previously known Mr. Sikorsky slightly, it was not until 1955 that we became friends when he was on a trip to London to receive the James Watt International Medal from the Institution of Mechanical Engineers of Great Britain. At that time Mr. Sikorsky was engineering manager of the Sikorsky division of United Aircraft Corp. of East Hartford, Conn., while I was a public relations representative of the company based in London.

Upon his arrival the aviation pioneer appeared to be just another traveler toting his own luggage among the jostling crowd emerging from Customs inspection at London's Heathrow air-

port. He seemed faintly surprised but pleased to be met. I was to learn that he did not expect, or ever desired, any special treatment as an air traveler, although he was never ungracious if some courtesy was extended.

E. C. (Ted) Wheeldon, then managing director of Westland Aircraft, Ltd., the Sikorsky licensee in England, had joined me to welcome Mr. Sikorsky. The Westland director was almost pitifully eager to show the great man around the company's plant some distance from London, and had discussed with me how he might lure him to the facility. Thus, you can imagine Wheeldon's delighted astonishment, when shortly after settling back in the Westland chauffeur-driven limousine for the ride into the city, Mr. Sikorsky turned to his host and said, "Is it possible that I might have the pleasure of seeing a little something of your factory—if it is not too much trouble?"

My own surprise was hardly less when I took my leave of Mr. Sikorsky at the door of the inexpensive hotel room he had engaged. "Mr. Patterson," he said, "I would ask you, please, to give me instructions on what I should do while I am here."

And while I was still savoring this, he went on to say he would inform the hotel management that he would accept no calls and that all telephoned messages should be routed to me. It was like Joe Namath asking the water boy to send in the plays.

In the following week's round of dinners and receptions for the inventor and designer from Stratford, Conn., I had many opportunities to observe him in public and private situations. In general there were only two small difficulties, one being ever to maneuver him into taking precedence going in or out a door, and the other, to arrive first at any agreed meeting place. Mr. Sikorsky not only was prompt, but he preferred to be five minutes early to preclude the need for anyone to wait for him.

One incident I remember clearly. As Mr. Sikorsky was preparing to embark by helicopter from London's South Bank, a large delegation of reporters and cameramen was on hand to cover his departure. Unhurried and polite, he acceded to each request of the newsmen, the one calm figure in a milling crowd divided between dignitaries concerned about getting him airborne and those wanting just one more word or picture.

At length it was over and the television and newsreel people were gathering up their equipment, but Mr. Sikorsky had not finished.

"I want to thank you very much," he said, removing his hat and making a slight bow toward the assemblage, "and to say that I am very happy to be in London again." Even under the stress of such a situation, a gentleman did not forget that good manners were expected of a visitor and guest.

But while Mr. Sikorsky's demeanor might sometimes appear rather formally correct, his nature was warmly friendly. We had been together only a few days when I greeted him one morning in the lobby of his hotel. I was a few minutes ahead of the appointed time, but he was waiting for me.

"Good morning, Mr. Sikorsky," I said.

"Please," he lifted a hand in remonstrance, "I call you Jimmy, you call me Igor."

"Yes, Mr. Sikorsky."

"Igor," he smiled.

"Igor."

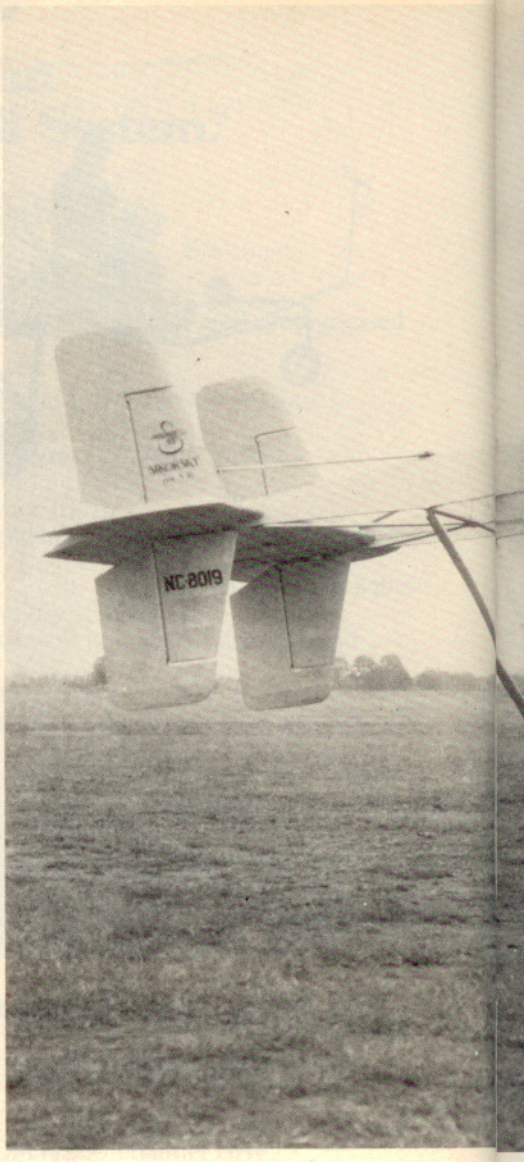
But never during the remainder of his London visit or in the following years that I was associated with him, did I ever address him as "Igor" if there were another person present.

The father of the helicopter, I learned, had a nice sense of humor and a fluent command of English although spiced with an accent that tended to stress the final syllable of words that ended in "ed." At a rollicking informal dinner of the Royal Aero Club he held his own with such talented speakers as Lord Brabazon of Tara and Sir Frederick Handley Page, and matched them laugh for laugh.

He told how, as a young man, he set about looking for an engine for his first helicopter in Paris. The engine he finally selected as the best, he said, was superior simply because it had fewer parts to go wrong. The completed aircraft, however, was not entirely a success.

"It was a very good helicopter," he said, "except that it wouldn't fly," and, after waiting for the laugh to end, added, "The greatest danger of aviation at this time was starvation."

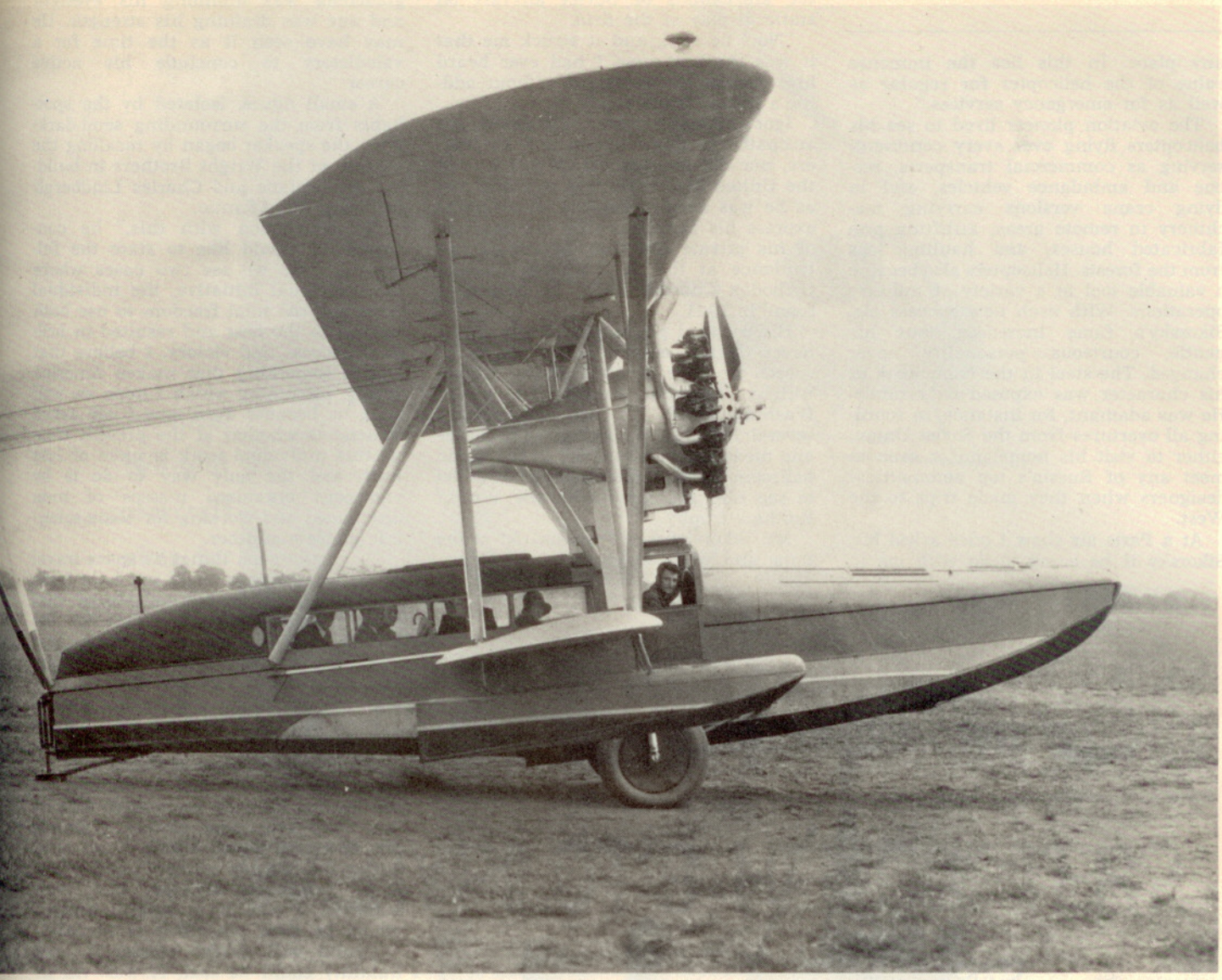
Despite Mr. Sikorsky's crowded week (Buckingham Palace had called twice as an aide to Prince Philip tried unsuccessfully to arrange a meeting between the two helicopter enthusiasts) the famous designer found time for a stroll into the past. He told me one noon as I arrived to escort him to a luncheon in his honor that earlier that morning he had retraced his steps of 37 years ago. Then he had been an almost penniless Russian refugee, speaking virtually no English when he arrived in London.



"It was like living again those old days," he said. "It was early in the spring of 1918 when my sister's husband and I escaped to Murmansk and boarded a small English boat. There was no first class, second class or third—we were all down in the hold—Russian refugees and some Italian refugees who carried knives. Sometimes we had fun."

Mr. Sikorsky paused and smiled so that the true meaning of his use of the word "fun" should not be missed. Then he continued, "We landed in Newcastle and took a train to London. Then we went to the Imperial Hotel here. After Russia, it looked the finest we had ever seen, but we could stay only a day or two until we could find a room in a private house."

Just a few months earlier, Mr. Sikor-



This S-38 amphibian was the first commercial success for Igor Sikorsky with 114 having been built.

sky had been a moderately wealthy and successful aeronautical engineer in Russia. As the son of a physician in Kiev (his mother also held a doctoral degree in medicine) young Igor grew up in an intellectual atmosphere that nurtured his interest in the natural sciences—particularly aviation. After graduating from the Petrograd Naval College, he studied engineering in Paris, which was then the aeronautical center of Europe.

Although his first attempt to build a helicopter failed, when he then turned to designing a fixed-wing aircraft he did so well that in 1912 he was made head of the aviation subsidiary of the Russian Baltic Railroad Car Works. It was while in that capacity that he designed and flew the world's first multi-engine airplane, the "Grand." Czar Nicholas II, the Emperor of Russia, personally inspected the aircraft and presented to the young inventor a gold watch as a memento of the occasion.

The Bolshevik Revolution ended all of that, and he experienced several lean years even after coming to the United States in 1919. When he could not find a job in aviation, he resorted to teaching in New York but, in 1923, he and a group of friends—mostly fellow emigres—pooled their meager resources to form the Sikorsky Aero Engineering Corp. The first aircraft built was the S-29-A (for America), a twin-engine, all-metal transport. Several designs followed including the twin-engine S-38 amphibian with which Pan American Airways opened routes to Central and South America.

In 1929 the struggling little firm was taken over by United Aircraft Corp. (now known as United Technologies Corp.) in a move that gave the gifted designer the operating capital and research facilities to develop a series of highly-successful flying boats that pioneered commercial flights cross the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

But Mr. Sikorsky never forgot his dream of building a practical helicopter. In the spring of 1939, after studying various possible designs for 10 years, he went to work on the VS-300, which flew on September 14 of that year. This bare, ungainly-looking rotorcraft, appearing not unlike some giant, prehistoric insect, spawned successive generations of helicopters that grew larger, sleeker and increasingly versatile. Mr. Sikorsky never tired of explaining why he viewed the helicopter as unique among all other forms of transportation.

"I believe the best way to visualize the qualifications of the helicopter," he would say, "is to compare it with what other vehicles can do. Now we know that every vehicle on the ground, from the pack animal to a wagon, automobile or railroad, needs a road from the point of departure to the point of arrival. A ship also needs a waterway deep enough and free from ice from one port to another, plus it needs ways and means to get passengers and merchandise from the country to the port.

Now the airplane, of course, is free to fly anywhere but it needs a long runway and needs a big airport. It can only travel from one airport to another airport. The helicopter is the only vehicle we know about that can take off from virtually any place and land at

any place. In this lies the immense value of the helicopter for regular as well as for emergency services."

The aviation pioneer lived to see his helicopters flying over every continent, serving as commercial transports, rescue and ambulance vehicles, and in flying crane versions carrying machinery to remote areas, airlifting prefabricated houses, and hauling logs from the forests. Helicopters also became a valuable tool in a variety of military operations. With each new success Mr. Sikorsky's fame increased, but his gentle, courteous personality never changed. The steel in the framework of his character was exposed only rarely. He was adamant, for instance, in scorning all overtures from the Soviet Union, either to visit his homeland or even to meet any of Russia's top aeronautical designers when they made trips to the West.

At a Paris air show I once asked Mr. Sikorsky if he cared to go with me to see an exhibit of Soviet aircraft on static display at the field.

"No," he said, and it struck me that it was the first time I had ever heard him decline an invitation without adding a polite "thank you."

Igor Sikorsky never discussed his antipathy to Communism and its leaders, nor did he ever parade his love of the United States. He was patriotic just as he was deeply religious, choosing to express his faith more by the example of his private life than by regular attendance at the St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, which he helped to found in 1941.

His political philosophy, I think, was never better enunciated than in a speech he gave in 1967 at the annual Wright Memorial Awards Dinner in Washington, D. C. An audience of several hundred, sparkling with jewels and medals, had assembled in the grand ballroom of the Sheraton Park Hotel to see him presented with the Wright Brothers trophy.

Mr. Sikorsky was 76 years old at the time, and while mentally keen as ever, glaucoma was dimming his eyesight and age was draining his strength. He may have seen it as the time for a valedictory to conclude his active career.

A small figure, isolated by the spotlights from the surrounding semi-darkness, the speaker began by recalling the success of the Wright Brothers in building an airplane and Charles Lindbergh in flying the Atlantic.

"In connection with this," he continued, "I would like to state the following: here we see two cases where the individual initiative, the individual work and the total freedom to use both worked to the best and resulted in brilliant success and victory. I believe that this is something that makes America strong, something which I hope we will stick to, because even now I am asked sometimes whether at the present time all this individual work is more or less over, and the only way to do is by enormous organized masses of men disciplined and working for some scientific problem or other.

"No doubt such things as space travel or nuclear engines could not have been realized otherwise, but outside of that there is still a wide field left for the initiative of an individual man, and therefore, it is my firm conviction, approaching the end of my life and having seen something and having worked myself, that still nothing can replace the free work of free men . . ."

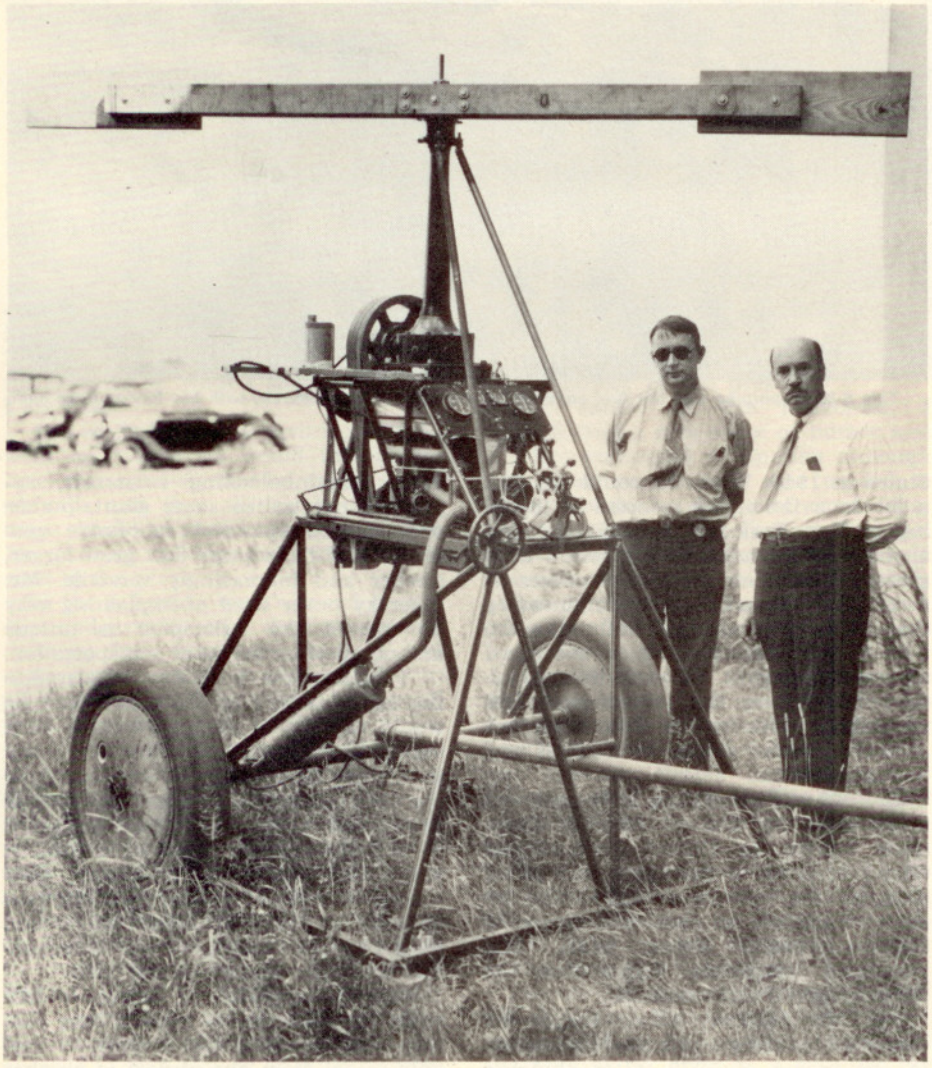
The audience arose applauding to acclaim Mr. Sikorsky and to endorse his sentiments. He then went on to express "my deep and most sincere gratitude for the great honor which I am most happy to humbly accept," and added that "whatever success has been achieved, I owe it to several others," whom he then proceeded to identify.

Cynics well might wonder if such humility could be real. It was. An incident a few years earlier had convinced me.

I had driven Mr. Sikorsky from London to the Farnborough Air Show, which was sponsored by the British aircraft industry, to see the static exhibits and the flying displays. When he arrived at the airfield near mid-morning Mr. Sikorsky got out with his camera (he was an avid photographer) and announced he would "wander about a bit." A short time later I learned that Lord Hives, then the head of Rolls-Royce, wanted Mr. Sikorsky to be his guest at lunch in the governor's pavilion.

It was nearly noon before I found my friend in the large crowd attending the show. He was standing before a helicopter exhibit listening attentively to a young salesman explaining the fundamentals of rotary aircraft. Mr. Sikorsky nodded from time to time as he followed the words of the speaker. Then as he noted my approach, he hurriedly extended his hand to the salesman and said, "Thank you very much. You have been most interesting."

"Come back anytime, old chap," the young man called after him. "I'll tell you anything more you want to know about helicopters." □



The first rotor test stand used in the development of the Sikorsky VS-300. Builder is standing to the right.