

This Day in History... May 24, 1940

First Successful Single-Rotor Helicopter Flight

On May 24, 1940, Igor Sikorsky successfully flew the first single-rotor helicopter.

Born in Kiev, Russia (now Ukraine) Sikorsky developed an interest in flight at the age of 11, and created a small rubber band powered helicopter by the time he was 12.

Sikorsky attended the St. Petersburg Imperial Russian Naval Academy for three years and later a mechanical college. However, in 1908 he learned of the Wright Brothers' Flyer and Ferdinand von Zeppelin's dirigible. He later claimed that, "within 24 hours, I decided to change my life's work. I would study aviation."



The Wright brothers were a major influence on Sikorsky, inspiring him to commit his life to aviation.

By May 1909, Sikorsky began designing his first helicopter. However, by that October he realized that with only the parts and knowledge he currently had, it would never fly. Sikorsky then began designing fixed-wing airplanes. After his design won a Russian Army aircraft exhibition, Sikorsky became Chief Engineer of the aircraft division for the Russian Baltic Railroad Car Works. In that role he designed the first four-engine aircraft, the S-21 *Russky Vityaz*, which he test piloted on May 13, 1913. At the outbreak of World War I, Sikorsky designed the first four-engine bomber.

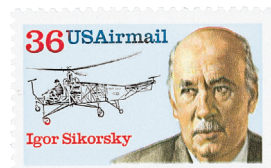
After the war, Sikorsky believed he'd have more opportunities in America and moved there in March 1919. After working as a teacher and lecturer, he established the Sikorsky Manufacturing Company. With financial backing from composer Sergei Rachmaninoff and others, Sikorsky created one of America's first twin-engine aircraft. His company then became part of United Aircraft and Transport Corporation (now United Technologies Corporation). With that company, Sikorsky designed and built "flying boats" including the S-42 Clipper that was used for Pan Am transatlantic flights.

Through all this, Sikorsky was still interested in helicopters. In 1931 he filed a patent for a "direct lift aircraft," which he received four years later. He built his single-engine helicopter, the VS-300, and staged its first tethered flight on September 14, 1939. After that success, he was ready to complete its first free flight on May 24, 1940.

Some mechanics didn't believe Sikorsky's helicopter would fly and dubbed it "Igor's nightmare." However, during that test flight it successfully flew up to 20 feet off the ground, traveled about 200 feet, backed up, and then landed.



Since 1961, Sikorsky has provided presidents with 23 helicopters to serve as Marine One.



Airmail Stamp pictures Sikorsky with his VS-300.



Sikorsky made one of the first US helicopters to be used in WWII.

Sikorsky then took what he learned from the VS-300 to design the R-4, which impressed military officials, who ordered 100 of them. In fact, the R-4 was world's first mass-produced helicopter and one of the first American helicopters used in World War II. It was used to rescue troops in Burma, Alaska, and other areas with challenging terrain. Sikorsky went on to design subsequent models – the R-4 through R-6 – producing over 400 helicopters before the war's end.

The helicopters Sikorsky's company went on to produce were even more widely used in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In fact, Sikorsky helicopters are still used today, including the UH-60 Black Hawk and the Marine One Fleet that transports the president.

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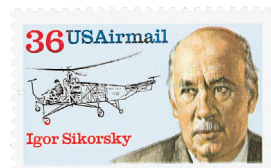
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