

Igor Sikorsky Biography

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Biography

As a child in Kiev, Russia, Igor Sikorsky studied and dreamed about flying. First studying the designs of Leonardo da Vinci and later the work of Louis Blériot and Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, he designed and built his first helicopter in 1909 at the age of twenty. After some setbacks, he realized that several problems had to be overcome: inadequate lift, destructive vibration, and the need for better, lighter materials. He temporarily abandoned helicopters to become Russia's chief aircraft designer in World War I, but he left the country following the Bolshevik Revolution.

He settled in the United States and started his aircraft company, Sikorsky Aero Engineering Company, in 1923. Airplane designs took up most of his time, but he still dreamed of successful helicopter flights. He patented the basic configuration: a single lifting rotor with a small vertical rotor at the tail to offset torque. In 1939, he built the VS-300 helicopter. It was flimsy-looking, with a skeleton of metal tubes and no enclosed space for the pilot. After many trials and errors, he re-designed it by putting two small horizontal rotors at the tail to help with stability.

On May 13, 1940 the revamped VS-300 flew free. It stayed up for fifteen minutes, but had trouble flying straight ahead. Eventually, he gave up on the extra rotors at the rear and settled for the one main rotor on top and one rotor to the rear. Sikorsky took the lead in helicopter design and manufacturing, and by the end of World War II, more than 400 of his helicopters came off the assembly lines. Sikorsky's major contribution to practical helicopter flight was his tail rotor configuration. His idea of using a small tail rotor at the end of a long tail boom proved successful and is still the most popular design for all types of helicopters.