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Whirlybirds: A History Of The U.S. Helicopter Pioneers



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Synopsis

No one person or group invented the helicopter. Basically unstable, filled with unreliable parts, and assailed by countless forces and vibrations, the helicopter presented its inventors with problems that were more complex than those faced by the Wright brothers four decades earlier. In the United States, four men became the pioneers who, working independently along parallel lines during the 1940s, solved the problems of technology and created the conditions for America to succeed in bringing this new machine to volume production. Russian-born Igor Sikorsky was a visionary whose pathbreaking experience spanned fixed-wing and rotary-wing aviation, thus linking the "earlybirds" to the "whirlybirds." Frank Piasecki's ideas and showmanship propelled his company (later to become Vertol and today Boeing Helicopter) to the forefront as the world's supplier of big helicopters. Arthur Young's invention of the Bell helicopter was part of his lifelong quest to reconcile mathematics, science, and fundamental philosophy in an integrated theory of how the universe operates. Stanley Hiller, Jr.'s company was the first to define and manufacture a civil helicopter to truly meet the needs of the marketplace, and he was the only pioneer to succeed in the absence of either military or corporate support.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I ordered the book for research as part of a restoration project involving an early model Bell helicopter. I found photos and text that was useful.

Bought the book as a gift for a friend, he loved it I haven’t read it yet as it was a Christmas present!

Spenser’s _Whirlybirds_ describes the evolution and development of the helicopter. Although Leonardo Da Vinci’s notes and several European refinements are discussed, the book primarily concentrates on the efforts of four Americans: Igor Sikorsky, Frank Piasecki, Arthur Young, and Stanley Hiller.Sikorsky, an immigrant from the Ukraine, is occasionally credited with inventing the helicopter. Although he did not invent the helicopter, he made many refinements. Sikorsky is still the first name in helicopters today.Piasecki built a small helicopter at a young age. His company eventually became Boeing Vertol.Young also got started with helicopters early in life. The company that he founded became Bell Helicopters, later Bell Helicopter Textron.Hiller was unique among the four helicopter pioneers in that he started out in California, not on the east coast. He was somewhat isolated from the centers of early helicopter development. Hiller Aircraft exists today as a manufacturer of light helicopters.Helicopters proved to be invaluable for the military, and served in wars from Korea onwards. Much of the onward development of these machines depended on continued military support. A number of commercial uses were developed too: crop spraying, aerial surveys and photography, air ambulances, etc.Although Piasecki and Hiller developed small helicopters for personal use (like an automobile), they proved to be unaffordable for the vast majority of people. Helicopter "airlines" flourished (with Federal subsidies) in the 1960’s, but fizzeled out about 10 years later due to high costs and accidents._Whirlybirds_ is long (almost 500 pages), but is well-written and easy to read. (It is helpful to have a nodding familiarity with aviation vocabulary such as "roll", "pitch", "yaw", etc.) I recommend this book for anyone interested in helicopters or aviation history.

This is a masterpiece on the four US helicopter pioneers -- Sikorsky, Bell (Arthur Young), Piasecki, and Stanley Hiller. Only faults to the book are (1) that it primarily focuses on the pioneers (hence the title), not the machines, and (2) he has nothing at all good to say about Hughes helicopters. In fact, it’s pretty well damning. I think it should’ve been a little more objective. Also doesn’t cover Charlie Kaman, who was also one of the early pioneers and still active today.

Whirlybirds is very well written account of the early history of the helicopter, and its pioneers. Filling a long needed gap in aviation history, this book tells how four men looked into the future of vertical flight, and turned it into a reality. This book is a must have. Jay Hendrickson

gift to a friend who is a pilot he really enjoyed it

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