



**JUDI
NEAL**

The Flight Of The Mystical Designer

Igor Sikorsky , His
Helicopters, And His Legend

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*Money Lost — Nothing Lost; Health Lost — Little Lost;
Spirit Lost — Everything Lost.*

— Igor Sikorsky

Perhaps it was because he came from a long line of priests in the Russian Orthodox Church. Perhaps it was because his father, Ivan, was the first to break with family tradition and became a psychology professor. Or perhaps it was his ability to listen to his own inner intuitive urgings and to passionately follow his calling.

Whatever the reasons, Igor Sikorsky, inventor of the helicopter and founder of Sikorsky Aircraft, was an Edgewalker before his time.

He learned early on to walk between the two worlds which he called the Material Universe and the Heavenly Universe. He learned how to navigate the visible and invisible realities. As a result, he was a highly successful businessman and leader who was loved by those who worked for him.

I learned about Igor Sikorsky when I taught an M.B.A. course at Sikorsky. None of the young engineers and managers had ever met Mr. Sikorsky. He died 30 years ago.

Yet when they spoke of him, their voices were filled with awe and a few had eyes that glistened with tears. You could feel a deep sense of love and respect for the man who had founded the company they work for.

One student told me: “I was not fortunate enough to have meet Mr. Sikorsky, but the old timers that knew him speak of him with the highest of esteem. He was a gentleman in the truest sense of the word. His vision was that the helicopter be used for humanitarian efforts. He’d be proud to see his dream as he envisioned it.”

What is it about him that has engendered this sense of awe?

Sergei, his oldest son (whose stories about his father made this column possible), says that his father was a deeply religious person, but in no way did he try to sell anyone on his beliefs. He quotes Igor as saying, “There is a great deal of wisdom in all the great religions in the world.” He believed that it was a sign of immaturity to say, “My religion is the only religion.”

Igor’s parents were a strong influence on him.

His father demonstrated a thirst for knowledge at a very early age. Sergei says that Ivan would walk three miles a day to school in Kiev, Russia, and then go to the library afterwards and make handwritten copies of the books that interested him. Igor’s mother, a doctor, was the one who gave him a deep love of science. She was deeply interested in the work of Leonardo da Vinci and described his work on flying machines to young Igor, igniting his imagination.

When he was 12 years old, Igor read a book by Jules Verne titled *The Clipper of the Clouds* (1887), about a flying machine with propellers on the top. He began to work with pieces of wood, rubber bands, and even whalebone stays that he would steal from his older sister’s corset in order to make models of propellers and helicopters.

At the age of 19 he began working in the field of aviation, and continued to attempt to design a helicopter that would fly. All the early experts in aviation told him that what he was trying to do was theoretically impossible, but he never believed them and never gave up the dream.

After two years of failure, he put his numerous helicopter designs temporarily on hold and began designing successful fixed-wing aircraft. He became fabulously wealthy, and then lost it all in the Bolshevik revolution.

When I asked Sergei if there had ever been a spiritual crisis in his father's life, he replied that the revolution turned his father's life upside-down. He had to leave his beloved Russia and lost everything. He eventually came to America as a poor immigrant and, after years of struggle, founded Sikorsky Aircraft.

He was called a "mystical designer" and was described as having "scientific intuition." Igor believed that the mind can travel through time into the future and bring back useful ideas.

Charles Lindbergh was one of his closest friends, and when Igor died, Charles wrote a note of condolence to his widow, saying:

When I start to write about Igor, it is hard to know where to begin for he was such a great man and his life covered such a broad expanse of the intellectual, material and spiritual worlds. I know of no man who so merged these worlds together or who could so move from one to the other to the benefit of all. His scientific designs gained from his spiritual awareness just as his spiritual awareness was enhanced by his scientific knowledge, and he understood as few men do the essential relationships involved.

As a leader, Igor is described as always polite and respectful. He never raised his voice, never got angry. He knew most of the people in Sikorsky Aircraft by name. He loved to walk around the shop and ask people to describe their work. Sometimes he would make gentle suggestions.

Once when a design engineer was working on a battery platform for aircraft in Greenland, Igor visited with him and said, "I presume you've already made allowance for the fact that whoever works on this will be doing so in the Greenland winter, and of course will be wearing gloves. So of course you've designed a bigger access door so that the workmen won't have to work in bare hands in the freezing cold." The engineer hadn't thought of it, but the suggestion was given with such caring that he was eager to make the design changes.

Today the many stories of Igor Sikorsky are easily found online; a good place to start to find out more about him is to log onto www.sikorskyarchives.com/part2.html, or go to: www.sikorsky.com/details/0,3036,CL11_DIV69_ETI570,00.html.

Even though he passed away 30 years ago, Igor Sikorsky's legacy and spirit are alive and well in the company, and he continues to inspire the people who work there.

We can learn a great deal from his life, his vision, and his values.



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