



vertiflite Commentary

Remembering Our History As We Look to the Future

By Mike Hirschberg, Executive Director

As AHS International celebrates its 70th year of working to advance the state of the art of vertical flight technology, we can look back at an inspiring heritage of accomplishments by industry, academia and government – a proud legacy that we need to preserve and recognize, and build upon for the future of vertical flight.

On September 28, 2013, the birthplace of the first successful helicopter in America – what is now known as the Igor I. Sikorsky Memorial Airport in Bridgeport, Connecticut – was recognized as a Historic Aerospace Site. This commemoration by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) was supported and co-sponsored by AHS International.

Between 1938 and 1943, the airport (then known as the Bridgeport Municipal Airport) and the adjacent Vought-Sikorsky aircraft plant were the site of the development of the first practical helicopters flown in the United States. There, Igor Sikorsky and his team pioneered the VS-300 helicopter, which made its first hover on September 14, 1939. The VS-300 was developed into the XR-4, which was also completed, flown and tested there; the first flight was on January 14, 1942. The XR-4 was the first helicopter accepted by the U.S. military and the first helicopter to be mass-produced anywhere in the world.

These two adjacent sites witnessed the design, construction, testing and public demonstration of both helicopters, including the first world helicopter performance record set in the United States. The development of these two aircraft sparked a revolution in aeronautical design, as they established the conventional configuration of helicopters with a single main rotor and single auxiliary anti-torque tail rotor. They demonstrated that helicopters were not only practical, but were also viable civil



and military aircraft. The follow-on XR-5 and XR-6 helicopters were also designed here, although they were built and flown after the company moved to its current Bridgeport plant location.

It should also be noted that just a few weeks after Sikorsky Aircraft received the first production contract for the first American helicopter, the XR-4, the American Helicopter Society was also formed, with the founding meeting held at the Stratford High School in February 1943. AHS was born with the American helicopter industry and remains a central part of the global helicopter technical community today.

The ceremony at Sikorsky Airport featured comments by Dan Libertino, Igor I. Sikorsky Historical Archives; Nikolai Sikorsky (pictured), Igor Sikorsky's second son; Mark Hammond, Sikorsky Innovations; Dr. Ferdinand Grosveld, AIAA Board of Directors; and Stephen Ford, acting manager of the airport.

This recognition was one of several vertical flight historic sites that AIAA has recognized as a result of AHS support, including College Park Airport, Maryland; NASA Ames, California; Dunsfold Aerodrome, UK; Getafe Air Base, Spain; Bremen Airport, Germany; and Pitcairn Field, Pennsylvania. The recent Sikorsky

Airport event, however, was the last ceremony for the AIAA Historic Aerospace Sites Program, which has now been discontinued.

Consequently, we are pleased to announce the AHS Vertical Flight Heritage Site Recognition Program to “recognize and preserve noteworthy and significant contributions made in both the theory and practice of helicopter and other VTOL aircraft technology.” AHS hopes to promote the rich history of the international vertical flight community to the public through this program. Please go to www.vtol.org/heritage for more information.

As our first heritage site to be recognized, AHS will be holding a ceremony at Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – the site of the first international meeting on rotary-wing aircraft. The First Rotating Wing Aircraft Meeting was held by the Philadelphia Chapter of the Institute of Aeronautical Sciences (IAS, the forerunner of AIAA) at the Franklin Institute on October 27-29, 1938 and indirectly led to the foundation of AHS less than five years later.

AHS – with the American Helicopter Museum and Education Center, AIAA, and several other organizations – is hosting a special event marking the 75th anniversary of this historic gathering on October 27, 2013. Like the original meeting, this event will be focused on the future of vertical flight, and features speakers representing manufacturers, operators, regulators, legislators and innovators. A special ceremony will install the first AHS Vertical Flight Heritage Site commemorative plaque in the Franklin Institute's Aviation Hall, where it all began.

AHS International, as the world's premier professional vertical flight technical society, remembers and honors our history as we look to an even more exciting future.

