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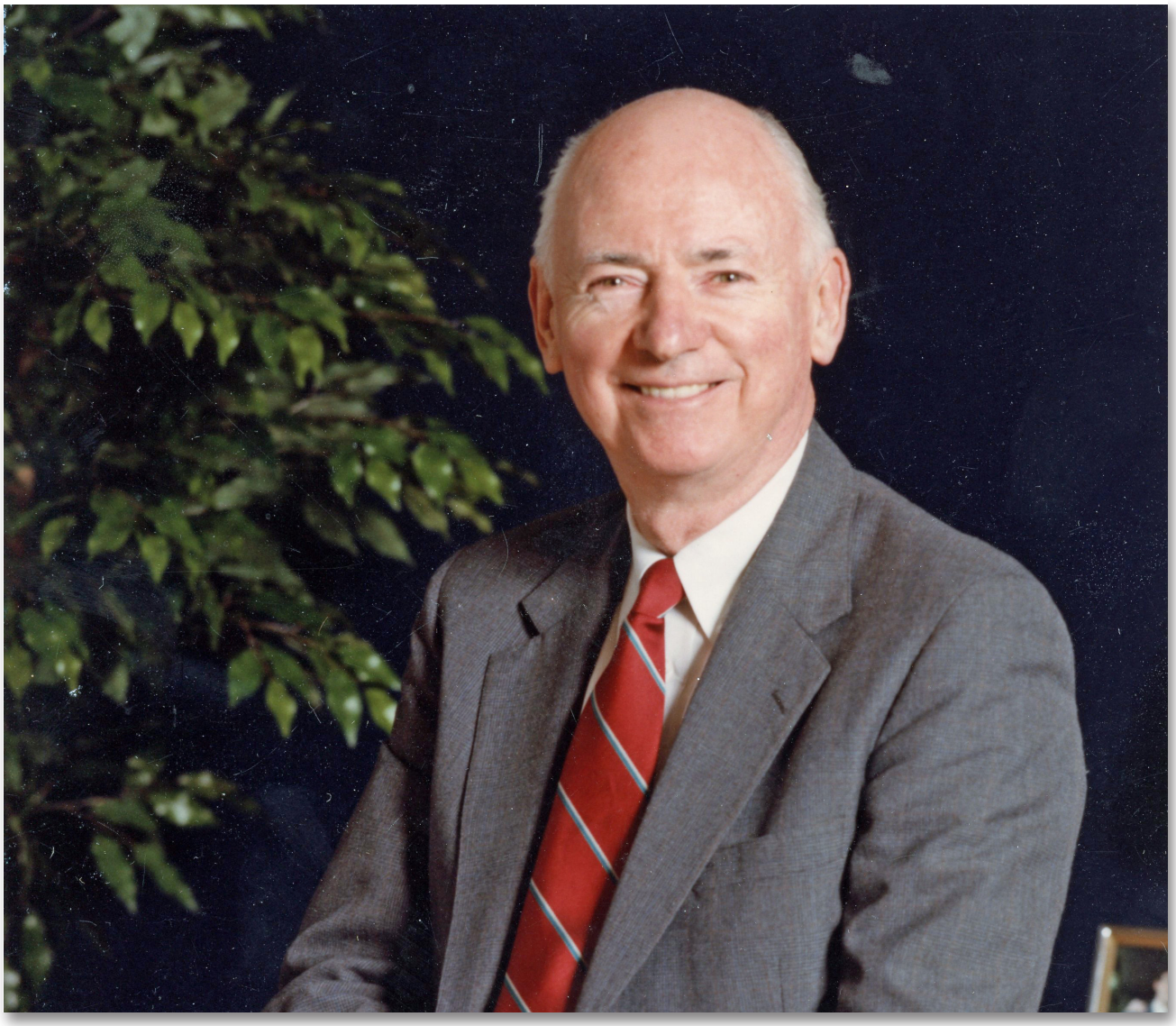
The Buckley Years — Making More Sikorsky Aircraft



Eugene Buckley was the 16th president of Sikorsky Aircraft, serving from July 1987 to August 1999.
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Eugene Buckley died at his Florida home on August 3, 2025. From the time he joined Sikorsky Aircraft in 1976 to mass-produce the Black Hawk until his retirement as president in 1999, Buckley oversaw delivery of some 3,200 helicopters. In that time, the company also introduced digital engineering, composite aerostructures, fly-by-wire flight controls, and total quality management disciplines central to its business today. “Gene was probably the most influential person in creating what became the modern Sikorsky,” said retired vice president of advanced programs Ken Rosen. “Gene’s leadership in helping us recreate the company – a company of team players – was unique. He made us all work together as never before.”

Buckley effectively teamed Sikorsky engineering and operations, initially to deliver the S-70 to the US Army and ultimately to launch the multi-national S-92. Retired Black Hawk program manager and current Sikorsky Archives President John Bulakowski observed, “He was influential because of his extensive background in manufacturing and quality.” Bulakowski met Buckley in 1976 when the new manager of industrial engineering briefed a US Army Source Selection Advisory Council on Sikorsky plans for the Utility Tactical Transport Aircraft System (UTTAS). The UTTAS win that December saved the Sikorsky brand and began the continuing S-70 lineage. “Gene always respected Sikorsky history. The Sikorsky Historical Archives would not have been possible were it not for his support.”.

As Sikorsky manager-industrial engineering, Buckley briefed the Army Source Selection Advisory Council on UTTAS production in 1976.

At key points in Sikorsky history, Gene Buckley signed the first S-70/H-60 multi-year contract with the US Department of Defense, forged an enduring S-70 alliance with the government of Turkey, and broadened the global customer and manufacturing base for Sikorsky helicopters. Retired chief pilot John Dixson paraphrased Buckley’s Monday morning management council meetings: “The reason we’re all here is because people are trying to give us money. We have to give them the product. We’ve got to make more and better aircraft.”

As Sikorsky chief executive, Buckley mixed business drive with sincere devotion to his products. Former S-92 program director, now Lockheed Martin technical fellow, Nick Lappos reflected, “He showed what I would call a very great love of the helicopter. He had a love of aviation.” When Lappos piloted an energetic Pave Hawk demonstration in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Gene Buckley looked down at the Riyadh audience from his window seat. Lappos said, “You don’t leave stuff behind when you do those demonstrations – anything you don’t show, you can’t do. Gene was laughing the whole time.”

When the S-76 Fantail demonstrator for the Army’s Light Helicopter Experimental (LHX) returned to Stratford from the 1991 Paris airshow, Buckley had Lappos schedule executive flights. “He insisted that every one of his senior staff fly in the airplane so they could appreciate what we could do. He flew first with me. He was laughing and enjoying it, and it was rip-your-guts-out flying.”

More than engage executives, Buckley bonded with Sikorsky rank-and-file. At his factory farewell in Stratford on June 30, 1999, he publicly thanked his executive secretary Lynn Leach and security driver Chuck Gi-

The first production Black Hawk flew at Stratford in October 1978.

Gene Buckley showed the UH-60A cockpit to Army Black Hawk project manager Col. Richard Kenyon at the Stratford rollout ceremony in 1978.

bran. He told the crowd, "Great companies come from great people." After Buckley's passing, Leach observed, "He cared about people, and when he walked through the shop, he made a point of talking to people and making himself accessible."

Former Black Hawk vice president Art O'Leary explained that Buckley's factory floor presence provided important insight. "It was the hands-on management technique. He knew everybody. He wasn't the type to sit in the office and wait for problems to come to him. He was in the shop. He knew what was going on."

Nick Lappos noted, "Many senior people running the factory came off the factory floor." John Dixson respected Buckley's knowledge of Sikorsky people. "One of the things he was particularly good at was picking people. He had a knack for divining who had the leadership qualities to do things the way he wanted things to go. He made some surprising picks. His batting average picking people was damn near 100%."

Factory Floor, Executive Suite

Gene Buckley was born in 1930 and grew up in the Sheepshead Bay section of Brooklyn, New York. He served as an instructor and communicator in the US Air Force from 1951 to 1955 and entered industry in 1955 on the factory floor of Republic Aviation in Farmingdale, New York on Long Island. Buckley became supervisor of the industrial engineering department in the jet fighter factory.

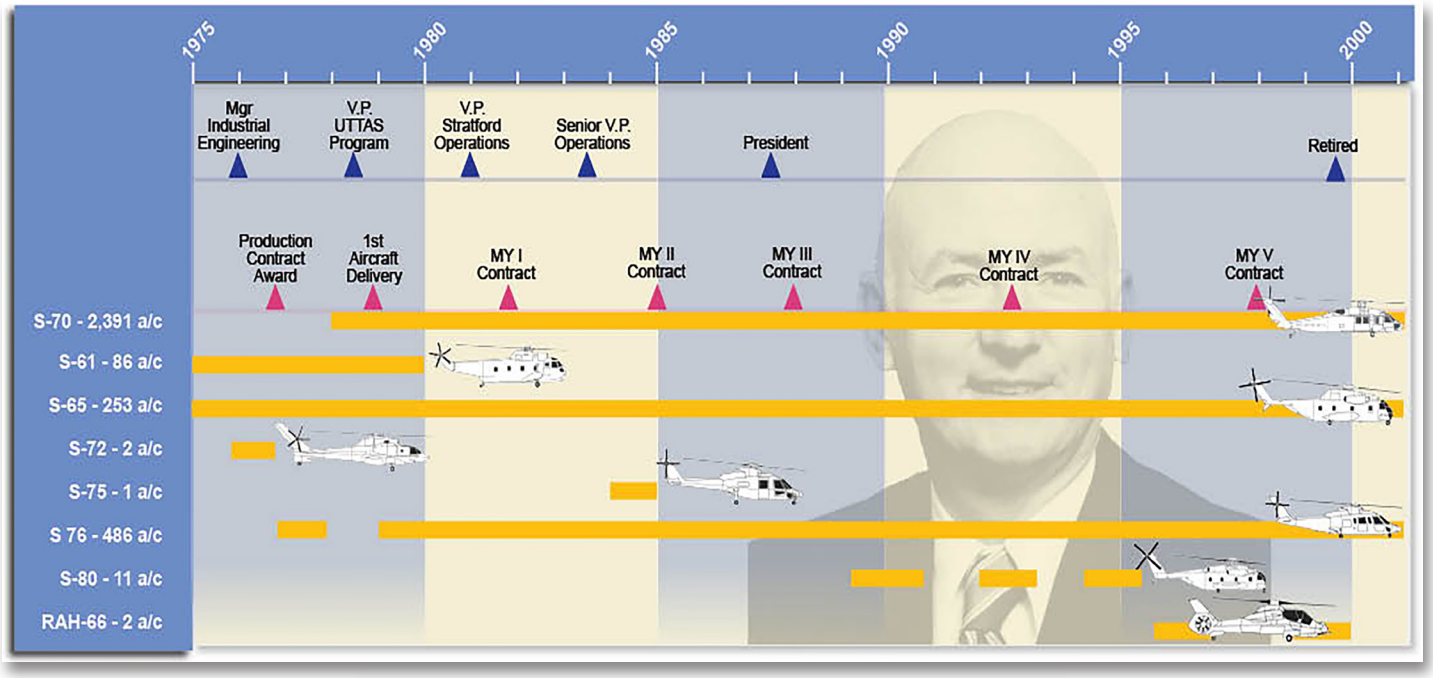
In 1963, Gene Buckley moved to naval aircraft manufacturer Grumman in Bethpage and rose to director of planning with a brutal personal schedule. Chuck Gibran said, "He was a shop floor guy who went to Brooklyn College every night, drove from Long Island and back home to five kids." Buckley took six years to earn his bachelor's degree in political science. Gibran recounted, "Every night, he'd stop at an ice cream stand, his gift to himself. When he graduated, he got a milkshake."

Gene Buckley joined aerostructures house Rohr Industries in San Diego, California in 1974 as corporate director of industrial engineering and control. He moved to Sikorsky Aircraft in 1976 as manager, industrial engineering at a critical point in the company's history.

Sikorsky built four YUH-60A prototypes to win the UTTAS competition, but the company would need to ramp-up production rates to meet contract requirements. According to John Bulakowski. "Aircraft production at Sikorsky was at an all-time low. Producing Black Hawks at a rate of 12 aircraft a month required the integration of engineering with the shop, parts control, other departments."

Lessons learned during the competition also showed the UTTAS helicopter required modifications. Ken Rosen served as Black Hawk engineering manager. "The guy who really managed me was Gene Buckley. Our job was to take an aircraft, the YUH-60 which won the competition, and turn it into the UH-60 and deliver that aircraft within two years -- no small task because the aircraft had a lot of problems." Rosen explained, "Over the course of those years, we put in something like 3,500 changes to the Black Hawk. We drove the aircraft into a state that was deliverable to the Army – the UH-60A delivered first in 1978. That just didn't happen easily. It happened largely because of the personality of Gene Buckley complementing the achievement of our engineering people, Bill Paul and Bob Zincone."

From prototype to production, the Black Hawk lost 700



In successive positions, Gene Buckley saw Sikorsky Aircraft deliver more than 3,200 helicopters from 1976 to 1999.

lb and exchanged an innovative fluidic stability augmentation system for a more reliable electronic system. When the Black Hawk propulsion system ground test bed suffered a major failure, Buckley exercised control. Rosen recalled, "I was distraught, and I remember sitting with him when he said, 'Ken as a leader, you have to remember everyone is looking at you. Be strong and be like ice and show them the way out.'"

Sikorsky delivered the first UH-60A Black Hawk to the Army in October 1978. In September 1980, company president Gerald Tobias named Buckley vice president of Stratford manufacturing responsible for factory operations and the manufacturing, planning, and engineering department. Stratford was then producing S-70 Black Hawks alongside S-61s, S-65s, and S-76s. In December 1981, Sikorsky and the Department of Defense signed the first H-60 multi-year procurement contract to give the helicopter maker and its suppliers steady work and the government cost savings. The tenth multi-year contract delivers Black Hawks and Naval Hawks to the US government and international buyers today.

Sikorsky News in April 1982 reported Gene Buckley had been named vice president, manufacturing operations, responsible for all manufacturing functions except assembly and completion of the S-76. In 1983, Buckley accepted the United Technologies Corporation (UTC) Arthur E. Smith Award on behalf of Sikorsky Aircraft for outstanding cost reduction and manufacturing productivity on the Black Hawk program. That same year, he helped bring the SH-60B Seahawk to production for the US Navy's Light Airborne Multipurpose System (LAMPS III) and began a succession of Naval Hawks still in demand.

In a November 1983 interview, Buckley told *Sikorsky News,* "People cannot work in narrow lines. Each individual person should be capable of doing many jobs, and we've started efforts to expand personal abilities -- craftsmanship so each person who works in our factories has many skills. As workloads change, these valued people can be shifted from one area to another, and we can retain our highly skilled manpower and our competitive edge. When the commercial market collapsed while we were building S-76s at 10-per-month, we shifted multi-skilled people into other meaningful jobs. We've recently done the same on the CH-53E line as it slowed to one-per-month."

Gene Buckley was promoted to Sikorsky Aircraft executive vice president in September 1985 and senior executive vice president in 1986 with an office next to company president Bob Zincone. Lynn Leach approached

Under Buckley's watch, Sikorsky introduced the UH-60L and pursued international sales of the Black Hawk.

Buckley for a job when her boss left Sikorsky for UTC. She recalled, "He said, 'I work differently from everybody else. I have my own ways of doing things.' I said, 'I'm very happy to learn how you work and work with you.' He shook my hand and said, 'It's a deal.'"

When Gene Buckley became the president of Sikorsky Aircraft in July 1987, he quickly departed from past chief executives. Leach noted, "When they re-did that executive suite, they built a glass and wooden wall that went in front of the secretary's desk on the way to president's office. You couldn't see the person, and it was kind of blocked off in the suite from the rest of the company. The day that Gene became president, the first thing he did was take that wall down. He didn't want to give the impression that that office wasn't accessible to every single person in that company."

Presidential Powers

Chuck Gibran met Gene Buckley in 1986 when the senior executive vice president needed a security driver. "My first impression of Gene was he seemed like a tough master but with common sense, a real person." Buckley usually drove himself to the office, arriving on most days around 7:45 AM, eating lunch at his desk, and leaving around 6:30 PM unless he needed a driver to an evening event or security on overseas travel.

Gibran remarked, "Gene had a knack of spotting things in people you wouldn't see yourself. My job turned from security to, for lack of a better term, a traveling assistant . . . He had Lynn and me doing most of that stuff." Gibran added, "He loved to travel. He loved the interaction with other cultures. He loved bringing business to the people of Sikorsky." Gibran was with the Sikorsky president for elegant dinners in Jordan and tough deals in Turkey. "Truly, the only time I saw him ticked-off was in a negotiation in Turkey."

Buckley oversaw the roll-out ceremony for the first Australian Black Hawk in July 1987. Lynn Leach noted, "During the time I worked for him, there was a big transition from concentrating on US government business to international . . .My job was to keep things going at the office when he wasn't there." She added, "He was very good at empowering people to make decisions and do what they did well to keep things going and not delay things."

International programs broadened Sikorsky integration expertise. While Spain and Japan received Seahawks much like US Navy SH-60B, the Royal Australian Navy ordered the very different S-70B-2 Role Adaptive Weapons System. Ken Rosen remembered Buckley's frustration with the costly program. "The marketing guys had originally oversold the project to put a whole bunch of advanced systems on the Seahawk. . . He was mad at a lot of people." Australia nevertheless flies Sikorsky Naval Hawks today, and the tough Turkish deal for S-70s started the integrated cockpit in the modern Black Hawk.

Buckley involved himself in complex programs. "His primary tool was the 5 o'clock meeting," said Art O'Leary. "Down in the operations conference room every night at 5 o'clock, Gene was there with all the department heads – engineering, quality, product support, each program with their supporting casts." Leaders were polled on progress and problems. "Gene would say, tomorrow night, bring the people who know what's going on." Failing to be ready for the meeting drew fire. "His criticism was pro-

fessional, not personal," noted O'Leary. "He was as quick with praise as he was with criticism. If you were doing the right thing, you got credit for it. If it wasn't', you caught hell for it."

The Sikorsky product line and customer list grew. The Navy's sonar-dipping SH-60F flew at Stratford in 1987, the HH-60H rescue helicopter in 1988, and the Coast Guard HH-60J in 1989. Buckley presented the first VH-60N presidential White Hawk to the US Marine Corps in 1989 and that same year turned over the logbook for the first Japanese S-80M-1 minesweeper to Sikorsky agent Mitsubishi International Corp. Also in 1989, Buckley celebrated the sale of S-76A-I helicopters to Hong Kong and told *Sikorsky News.* "We were in a severe competition with the French, and with other American producers, and we beat them hands-down, thanks to every one of our 13,000 people."

Gene Buckley's investment in Sikorsky helicopters was heartfelt. When a Special Operations Black Hawk was shot down in Somalia in October 1993, lives were lost and a pilot captured. Art O'Leary was summoned to the president's office after a call from Special Operations Command chief General Wayne Downing. "Wayne had called Gene to thank him for making the best helicopter in the world. Although one went down, a lot of other aircraft made it home after taking substantial damage." O'Leary recalled, "Gene was walking on clouds. He was ecstatic. He had just been paid the highest compliment he could ever receive and wanted to share it with me. He was practically in tears."

Buckley presented the first S-70A-9 to Australian defense officials at Stratford in 1987 prior to Black Hawk series assembly in-country.

Lynn Leach said, "I think he was happiest when he saw the successes of deliveries and when he saw things that would bring the company forward and keep people working. I think the thing that would disappoint him most was to lay anybody off." Chuck Gibran overheard Buckley in a fierce telephone argument with UTC chairman George David over building aircraft on speculation to keep people employed. "He hated letting people go. Gene came from nothing – abject poverty."

Ken Rosen was called to Gene Buckley's office in April 1991 when the Army's Light Helicopter competition became the Sikorsky RAH-66 Comanche. "We got a call from Senator Dodd that we had won the Comanche. We walked out into the shop to cheers. Many of the people we knew knew their jobs depended on our winning. Gene always thought about the working people of Connecticut."

Buckley championed development of the mid-sized S-92 before a skeptical UTC board. "Many of us felt that the Black Hawk ought to be turned into a commercial aircraft," said Ken Rosen. "We couldn't just stretch the Black Hawk and turn it into a commercial machine like we'd done on the S-61 20 years earlier." New certification standards for flaw- and damage-tolerance and crashworthiness called for a new helicopter.

Sikorsky vice president of engineering Don Gover and chief engineer Bill Gallagher took the idea of the S-92 to Buckley. Nick Lappos recalled, "Part of what Gene did

Buckley turned over the first S-80M-1 to Sikorsky sales agent Mitsubishi International Corp. in 1989 for the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force.

was to ask his team to make the '92 as far advanced in technology as it could be. It gave us a chance to leap into the future. The change in the basic airframe was so extensive that our competition couldn't follow us."

Buckley and his engineers initially used internal research and development money, promising S-92 advances applicable to the Black Hawk. The Sikorsky president also proposed to fund S-92 development with risk-sharing international partners. John Bulakowski noted, "His demonstrated achievements enabled him to approach corporation-level management more easily -- there's nothing like success to make yourself more believable."

Buckley's vision resulted in a safe, modern helicopter today used by 13 heads of state. It also advanced digital engineering tools used across Sikorsky. "I know he was absolutely adamant about maintaining a CATIA file and 3-dimensional computer prints on everything," said Nick Lappos. "Everything designed on his watch went to the most advanced tools. That meant training to use them. . . He made sure people worked together."

Gene Buckley implemented Sikorsky higher education incentives that spread across UTC. "He hammered me about school," remembered Chuck Gibran. "I came from the police department to Sikorsky. I had taken some college courses, but he kept saying to me, 'Chuck, keep going to school. Chuck, you gotta go to school.' I went back to school, got a degree in four years working full-time in an accelerated program in business management." Gibran added, "After he retired, I'd send him my report cards, and I sent him my diploma. I graduated magna cum laude, and he was very proud of me."

Gene Buckley and his wife Ann finished his Stratford-retirement ceremony with a plant walk notable for the traditional Banging Out – a noisy, enthusiastic salute from factory workers pounding tools, pipes and empty drums. Art O'Leary observed, "Getting 'banged out' was the shop's raucous way of recognizing the departure of hourly co-workers after many years of service. It was not used for salaried folks, but they did it for Gene because he was one of them, one of the guys on the line."

Gene and Ann Buckley received the ceremonial Banging Out from Sikorsky production workers on June 30, 1999.

Sergei Sikorsky — 1925-2025

Sergei Sikorsky, the eldest son of aviation pioneer Igor Sikorsky and a unique witness and contributor to the helicopter industry, passed away at the age of 100.

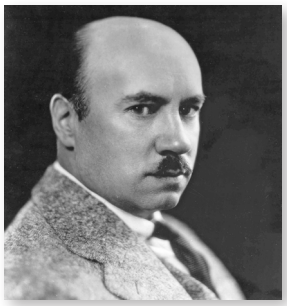
Sergei served with the US Coast Guard's experimental helicopter squadron in World War II. In 1942 he joined his father's VS-300 helicopter team.

Sergei was a pilot, a diplomat, and a businessman. He launched Sikorsky helicopter production in Germany and represented Sikorsky Aircraft at venues around the world.

By the time he retired in 1992 as vice president of special projects, Sergei had seen the helicopter grow from a fragile experiment to the powerful life-savers we make today.

Sergei was articulate, insightful, and our friend. He was an original founder of the Igor I. Sikorsky Historical Archives 30 years ago.

We cherish his memory and honor the company that bears his family name.



"The designer dreams about and designs a certain product but it would remain just a dream if it were not for men and women like you whose skill and loyal work transform a dream into reality."

Igor Sikorsky's last address to the *Sikorsky Quarter Century Club*, Bridgeport, Connecticut, Oct. 26, 1972

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