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You Can Catch a Ride on a Helicopter: Technology First Flown in Connecticut: Cameron on Transportation

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Have you ever flown in a helicopter? They seem such a glamorous (if expensive) way to travel, bypassing the traffic en route to the airport or sightseeing over rugged terrain.

But do you know the helicopter had its first flight ever right here in Connecticut. It was the creation of Russian immigrant and inventor Igor Sikorsky, 80 years ago.

Sure, Leonardo da Vinci made early drawings of a vertical flying machine, but that was in the 1480s. And

kids had been playing with hand-turned, propeller-driven toys for centuries before that.

Sikorsky drew his earliest concept drawings of a helicopter years before the Wright brothers ever flew at Kitty Hawk. But when he fled Russia with his family, it was a fixed-wing aircraft that gave Sikorsky his start in aviation.

At the age of 21, he designed his first airplane, the S-1, a single-engine pusher biplane. Twenty-three designs later, he built the [S-42 flying boat](#), made famous by Pan American as “The Flying Clipper.” The four-engined craft had a range of 1,200 miles carrying 37 passengers by day or 14 by night in berths, cruising at 170 mph.

Even as Pan Am was opening overseas markets, Sikorsky was still working on his dreams of a helicopter. At his plant in Stratford, his [VS-300](#) made its first flight, albeit tied to the ground, in September 1939.

A 1942 version, the [Sikorsky R-4](#), became the first mass-produced helicopter, quickly adopted by the armed forces of the U.S. and UK. It had only one crew member, could only carry 500 pounds, but had a range of 130 miles flying 65 mph at up to 8,000 feet.

Flash forward to the present and Sikorsky’s old company, now part of Lockheed Martin, still produces helicopters. Sikorsky’s successor companies, then part of United Aircraft Corp., even designed the short-lived (1968 to 1976) [Turbotrain](#), powered by a Pratt & Whitney turbine “jet engine.” The train could make the 230-mile New York-to-Boston run in 3 hours, 39 minutes. Today’s Acela can do the same run in no less than 3 hours, 55 minutes.

In a competition with the electric-powered Metroliner in 1967, the Turbotrain hit 170 mph, a land speed record for a gas turbine-powered rail vehicle. Acela does no better than 145 mph.

Today’s modern helicopters come in all sizes and speeds — from the beefy [Seahawk SH-3 “Sea King.”](#) which can carry 5 tons over 600 miles at 166 mph to personal helicopters for one person flying 60 miles at 80 mph.

For helicopter fans, New York’s East Side heliports at Wall Street and 34th Street offer the chance to see luxury craft in action, some privately owned, others offering passenger service. [BLADE Helicopters](#) will get you to the Hamptons from midtown in 33 minutes starting at \$695 one-way.

Or a new startup, [Gotham Air](#), will soon fly you to JFK for \$99.

In the 1960s, NY Helicopter flew from the New York airports to the top of the Pan Am building. I took that flight once, transferred to an elevator and walked onto a train in Grand Central. For awhile, they even choppered to [Stamford’s heliport](#) on Canal Street in the South End.

Much has changed in aviation in the last 80 years since Sikorsky’s first helicopter took to the air. And to

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think, it all started here in Connecticut.