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Great

The Man Who Invented The Airplane

Would you believe that the man who invented the modern airplane has decided to get back into airships?

Nonsense, you say? Obviously no single man invented the modern airplane. Thousands of people contributed to its creation, not the least of whom were the Wright brothers who first got it off the ground.

But let's underline the word "modern" and eliminate everything made of bamboo, piano wire, linen and molded plywood. This brings us closer to today's 747s or one of those sleek new corporate jets.

If we look closely at one of these, we see light metal structures, jet power with a flush riveted, pressurized fuselage, all perched on a tricycle landing gear. In short, the modern jet. Yet each one of these parts was developed by the same man.

Does the name Vladimir Pavlecka ring a bell? Probably not. Even a careful student of aviation history could have missed him, but it's time to set the record straight.

One year younger than the Twentieth Century, Vladimir Pavlecka's first memory of aviation is the rumble of German Zeppelins flying over his village in Bohemia on their way to bomb the Eastern Front.

When he finally made it to the New World it wasn't exactly the case of the country boy coming to sit at the feet of the masters of aeronautical invention. Though the Wrights had been the first to fly, the second through the fifth were Europeans, and all lurched aloft on their own, ignorant of the Wrights' accomplishment.

So when young Vladimir, heading West across the continent, ran out of money in Detroit, we find a young man with fair English and marketable skills in thermodynamics, fluid dynamics and elastic fluid turbomachines. He found work at General Motors Research Corporation where in his first six months on the job, they let him design the first Buick Straight Eight, not a great engine, he admits, but not bad for a new kid.

His real interest was down the hall where a couple of young aviation enthusiasts named Ralph Upson and Carl Fritsche were designing an all-metal dirigible. That was where the action was and Pavlecka signed on.

Why a metal airship? It seemed like a good idea at the time. Such a good idea that Edsel Ford and GM's Charles F. Kettering put up the money and William B. Stout of the Stout Metal Airship Company and W.L. Gilmore, chief engineer of the Curtiss Aeroplane & Motor Company joined the engineering advisory staff.