INTEREST RISES IN LIGHTER SIDE OF AIR TRAVEL

BY CHARLES HILLINGER
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Will giant airships return again to the skies?

Vladimir H. Pavlecka, 78, chief scientist for the Tustin-based Airships International, Inc., is convinced they will.

"I feel it. I sense it now more than at any time since the giant airships were swept into oblivion in the 1930s," says Pavlecka.

"What with the cost of fuel escalating astronomically and oil sources diminishing, airships must be considered as energy conserving, nonpolluting alternatives."

Pavlecka has excellent credentials in the world of lighter-than-air.

"Vladimir Pavlecka is undoubtedly

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Experts Have Soaring Hopes for the Airship

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the leading airship designer in the world today," Adm. Carl J. Seiberlich says. Seiberlich, the Navy's airship expert, is chairman of the lighter-than-air committee of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

Pavlecka was one of three and the only surviving designer of the world's first and only operational metalclad airship, the Navy's ZMC2, completed in 1929 and successfully flown without a mishap for 12 years before it was decommissioned in 1942.

He advocates using aluminum alloy as an outer covering for airships rather than conventional fabric.

"A metalclad airship is much stronger, much safer and travels at faster speeds than a fabric airship," says Pavelecka.

For 50 years ever since the completion of the ZMC2, nicknamed the "Tin Bubble" because of its aluminum bag, Pavlecka has been spending nearly all of his free time at the drawing board improving his designs of metalclad airships.

"All through the years I have been designing airships alone in the seclusion of my home. To work on an airship during this period was considered a waste of time. People would say no one with a sound mind would fool around with an airship. Airships, they said, had no future."

It wasn't until just recently, Pavlecka confided, that he would dare talk about what he was doing for fear of being ridiculed.

As for his regular work the past half century, Pavlecka has been a highly respected inventor, designer and researcher for several Southern California aerospace companies.

He was chief of structural research at the Douglas Aircraft Co. and chief of research at Northrop. He was the prime mover in the development of the turbojet engine in this country.

But he stuck with his conviction that giant airships would someday make a comeback.

In May, 1977, a group of 20 scientists and engineers from several Southern California aerospace firms who believed in Pavlecka's concepts formed Airships International for the purpose of creating an airship industry.

AIRSHIP PIONEER—Vladimir H. Pavlecka, 78, with a model of one of metal-clad airships he hopes to begin manufacturing soon.
Times photo by Bill Varie

"We are not romanticists. We're hardheaded aerodynamicists, mathematicians and cost accounting experts who are convinced Pavlecka's time has come," said Dr. Earl Kiernan, 54, a senior Air Force flight surgeon who for 30 years has been involved in the physiology of flight.

Kiernan is president of Airships International, which has raised $100,000 so far among its members to apply modern principles and update technology based on Pavlecka's concepts.

The hope of the group is that the U.S. government or private sources will provide funding for the production of a prototype Pavlecka metal clad airship.

"There is a great surge of interest in airships in Japan, England, France, Germany, the Scandanavian countries, Canada and Brazil," said Kiernan.

"Our desire is to keep Pavlecka' s engineering techniques here in America, to create a new national industry. But if there is no interest here then we will go elsewhere."

Pavlecka and representatives of Airships International delivered a presentation at an airship symposium last March in Paris. The U.S. team gave a similar presentation to representatives of the Scandinavian governments.

The U.S. Coast Guard is looking into the possibility of using airships for offshore patrol work. The U.S. Forest Service is studying the use of airships in timbering operations.

"During the last couple of years the Coast Guard has spent $200,000 in a study to determine the feasibility of employing airships for offshore patrol of the 200-mile limit," Coast Guard Adm. Alfred Manning says.

"We could put airships 100 miles out to sea, equip them with radar and have them sit out there for days using very little fuel keeping track of everything going on over a vast area of the ocean."

"A major area for us would be the use of airships as freighters in the sky," explains Kiernan.

"We did a study that indicates a metalclad airship would use ⅓ to ½ the fuel of a 747 carrying an equivalent payload from Los Angeles to New York.

"It would take the airship 25½ hours to make the trip compared to 4½ hours for the 747. The airship, however, would save an enormous amount of fuel and be a lot faster than a truck or train."