

Surviving the Great Depression

In the summer of 1930, the Chance Vought Corporation faced more than just the death of its founder from septicemia (blood poisoning). The country was in the grip of the Great Depression, while Europe and Asia were suffering the first tensions of what would soon escalate into another worldwide war. But the troubles didn't slow the company's work or dilute Vought's legacy. For the next ten years, new designs flowed from Vought drafting boards more quickly than ever. By decade's end, as war burst over Europe and Asia, the company stood ready to build the planes that would be required for the Allies' victory.

Between 1930 and 1940, Vought engineers conceived more than 50 new Vought designs. The aircraft ranged from observation biplanes through the first combat monoplanes to something that looked very much like a flying saucer. During the same years, the company grew rapidly into a large-scale manufacturer, but without sacrificing Mr. Vought's own passion for personal commitment. When there was urgent work to be done, mechanics put up bunks so they could sleep near the assembly line. And one of the best loved of the tool-crib attendants had his grand piano nearby, to play classical music during lunch breaks.

The decade brought organizational changes, some of them large and a few unexpected. On Vought's death, Fred Rentschler served as interim president for a year until the election of Eugene Wilson in 1931. Wilson, a former Navy Commander, guided the company through the next six years of the Depression. In 1934, a political uproar caused Congress to legislate the separation of aircraft manufacturing companies from transportation services. This meant that United Aircraft and Transportation would be split to separate the users from the producers. The company separated into Boeing Aircraft, United Airlines, and United Aircraft Corporation. In 1935, Chance Vought (changed to Chance Vought Aircraft), Sikorsky, Pratt & Whitney, and Hamilton-Standard became subsidiaries of a new United Aircraft Corporation and the transport companies were combined into United Air Lines.

Even while the organizational charts were being written and rewritten, remarkable aircraft designs followed one after the other. The O3U Corsair II, an improved O2U, was the first aircraft produced at the new plant in East Hartford. Another in the line of Vought scouts, the O2U impressed the Navy first with its speed and then with its durability. Seven models were introduced between 1931 and 1935, and they were deployed immediately into Navy and Marine service around the world. Testing and experimentation expanded the use of Corsairs as dive bombers and fighters, in addition to their scout/observation role. The company produced a number of "V" designated Corsairs to demonstrate to foreign customers, resulting in several orders.

In 1934, Vought delivered the XSBU-1 for testing. This airplane was a prototype of a scout-bomber and was the first airplane of its type to exceed 200 mph. It featured a number of innovations, including adjustable cowling gills for better engine cooling. The Navy ordered more than a hundred of them. In the same year Vought proposed the XSB2U-1, a monoplane bomber with folding wings for carrier stowage. Operational tests in the spring of 1936 proved that the monoplane could indeed fly from a carrier deck and that it could out-fly any comparable biplane. This SB2U, which later became known as the Vindicator, was Vought's first monoplane and its first design with retractable landing gear.

By 1935, the U.S. Navy adopted a standard designation for aircraft and a letter designation for each contractor, assigning the letter "U" to Chance Vought aircraft. In general, all of the Vought models produced during the decade were used in fighter, observation, scout and dive bomber roles. The weight and performance figures used in the data sheets in this chapter are for the observation or scout configuration.

By 1935, plans were already on the boards for a revolutionary monoplane fighter. It became the F4U, the Corsair that would win the Pacific fighter war. In 1937, drawings were started for a new Navy scout plane. It entered service in 1940 as the OS2U Kingfisher.

At the end of the decade, in 1939, major organization changes were made once again. Vought was moved from East Hartford to Stratford, where it absorbed Sikorsky. This move eliminated concerns of other aircraft companies who did not feel that their designs were secure with Pratt & Whitney being in close proximity to Vought. Rensselaer W. Clark, who had managed the two divisions separately since 1937, continued as General Manager of the combined unit. For four years, some of Sikorsky's best known seaplanes were produced under the Vought-Sikorsky designation. Sikorsky himself made the first American helicopter flight in 1939 on what was officially the Vought-Sikorsky 300A. Growing interest in this helicopter led to the re-establishment of Sikorsky as a separate division of United Aircraft.

The 1939 move meant something more important for Vought than the brief alliance with Sikorsky. It meant that the company could prepare in earnest for the world war that was already sweeping Europe and Asia. The Stratford plant was enlarged several times over. Major manufacturing changes were introduced, including a conveyor line system and regular spot-welding, a speedy process that Vought was pioneering. At decade's end, the Depression was definitely history, and the future was clearly war.

During the decade the Corporation developed more than forty airplane designs of which 777 were produced from 1930 through 1939 and 1,327 were produced in the 1940's for a total of 2,104 airplanes.