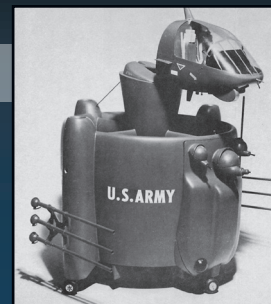


“REEL STUFF”

HOW TO FILM A WARBIRD THAT NEVER WAS... CONVAIR'S FORGOTTEN MODEL 49 SOON TO SOAR ON SCREEN
Story by **Ron Kaplan**



SUNDIATA COWELS, who aspired to movie making and was in the CAP as a youth, graduated with honors in film and video production. His first job was with Rebo Studio, an industry leader in High Definition camera and equipment development. He later spent over six years with the American Museum of Natural History, managing the audio-visual aspects of in-house exhibitions, and pioneering the use of DVDs as interactives for the museum.



He then founded Future Incite!, an initially successful industry web magazine that led to corporate video production gigs. Soon he realized he had to distinguish himself by making his own content, from start to finish, but the feature film route and its requisite time, manpower, and resources proved a challenge. Being aware that many professionals were strong in camera work but lacked 3D animation skills, Cowels recognized a niche he could service with his experience using computers to create digital 3D projects.

Cowels desired to render an animation demo project of personal interest - an aircraft - but saw that everyone was making animated aircraft; the gaming and cable TV industries were overflowing with P-51s, F-22s and such. With his ability to render ANY aircraft, he thought why not create one that never existed, like an experimental design that never made it into production but would be cool to see “fly” as if it had. Cowels’ research led him to the story of the Advanced Aerial Fire Support System contest (AAFSS), the U.S. Army’s mid-1960s industry competition to deliver a fast, armored, and heavily armed helicopter to supplement the escort/attack role.

The AAFSS race prompted a gaggle of innovative concepts from industry titans like Hughes, Bell, Boeing, Piasecki and Sikorsky, to name several of those in the hunt. Catching Cowels’ fancy was the General Dynamics/Convair entry, known simply as the “VTOL Model 49.” If Buck Rogers had a helicopter, this would be it. At first thinking it was a joke, Cowels soon fell in love with the revolutionary Model 49, believing the concept craft a good 5-10 minute “essay” subject for his demo.

The Model 49 proposed a shrouded-rotor VTOL vehicle, 23-feet in diameter and 30-feet tall, in which three Lycoming turboshaft engines powered contra-rotating variable pitch propellers. Housed in an articulating capsule, a crew of two would control its wide variety of weapons in hover mode, high speed forward flight, or sitting on the ground. Firepower could be anything from 7.62-mm machine guns to 30-mm cannon to TOW missiles to a 106-mm recoilless rifle, and more, in combination.

Cowels reasoned that such a unique yet overlooked concept like the Model 49 would make the ideal subject of a half-hour documentary, especially given what he saw as a dearth of original content seen on the historical channels. The realization that Convair’s engineers were not afraid to push boundaries or to fail inspired him further. He dove into the project with what he describes as passion combined with the “confidence of ignorance.”

“Unlike most documentaries that use computer generated imagery to re-create a historical event, I had to create a ‘life’ for this subject,” said Cowels of his new goal to fully create a believable visual reality around something that never existed. This meant not only hundreds of hours spent on aircraft but also rendering landscapes, skyscapes, trees, trucks — everything required to make it appear on screen that the Model 49 had actually been filmed by servicemen in the field.

Additionally, Cowels obtained assistance from the San Diego Air & Space Museum, the Army Aviation Museum at Fort Rucker, and the Igor I. Sikorsky Historical Association, among other sources. The as-yet-untitled Model 49 film also features interviews with former helicopter design engineers from Sikorsky and Boeing, and two Vietnam gunship veterans. After two years of intense focus, Cowels is now in post-production with a projected completion of Fall 2014, when he plans to premier the project as part of a museum speaking tour, while exploring his distribution options.

Ultimately, Lockheed won the AAFSS contest with its AH-56 “Cheyenne” helicopter, canceled in 1972 before any significant number were built.

For more information and updates visit www.futureincite.com 🌐

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