



Igor Sikorsky, the father of the helicopter, congratulates Majors Herbert R. Zehnder (left) and Donald B. Maurras on completion of their nonstop crossing of the Atlantic by helicopter.

Commanders of the Copter Crossing

By Frank McClung

TWO Air Force/Sikorsky HH-3E rescue helicopters — Jolly Green Giants, as they are popularly known in Vietnam — landed at Le Bourget Field in Paris June 1 to complete an historic, nonstop flight across the Atlantic. The crossing covered 4,270 miles. The copters, each with a crew of five, were refueled in flight by Lockheed C-130 tanker-transport.

One helicopter arrived at Le Bourget 30 hours and 46 minutes after leaving Floyd Bennett Naval Air Station in Brooklyn. The other reached London's Heathrow Airport 29 hours, 13 minutes after takeoff before proceeding to Paris. Both performances were claimed as international helicopter speed records.

The commander of the New York-to-Paris flight was Major Herbert R. Zehnder; the commander of the HH-3E that set the New York-to-London record was Major Donald B. Maurras.



Major Zehnder

For Major Herbert R. Zehnder, the big thrill of the flight was meeting Igor Sikorsky, the father of the helicopter and founder of the United Aircraft division that built the ocean-crossing HH-3Es. "We got out of the aircraft at Le Bourget, and there was Mr. Sikorsky waiting for us," the major said the other day. "He was smiling and excited, like a young man, and his blue eyes sparkled. Someone said later there were tears in his eyes."

Major Zehnder is a dark-complexioned, intense man of 43, dedicated to his family, his country, and the Air Force, in which he has served for 23 years. He doesn't joke about these things. On the flight from New York to Paris, he carried a medallion, a replica of Dürer's famous woodcut of the praying hands. It was a gift from his wife.

"Over Nova Scotia," he said, "we were concerned about the weather. A low-pressure area was pushing across Canada, and we had penetrated it for the first time. We flew through rain and clouds, but over Newfoundland I caught a nostalgic glimpse of Harmon Air Force Base, where I'd served 20 years before."

The weather cleared as the HH-3Es approached Greenland. "We flew south of Greenland, and I could see Cape Farewell in the distance," Zehnder said. "There were blue-white icebergs in the water. It was a beautiful sight."

When Zehnder's HH-3E arrived at Le Bourget, he was surprised at the number of people there. "I was told when we came into sight there was a minute of silence, then a roar of applause. We never expected the reception we got."

Major Zehnder has been flying helicopters since 1951, beginning with Sikorsky S-51s, with their wooden rotor blades and cruising speed of 80 miles an hour. Of his 5,500 hours in the air, more than 3,000 are helicopter hours. He spent a year in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966, flying Sikorsky CH-3C helicopters. For six months he flew men and supplies, moved 105-millimeter howitzers and ammunition for the Marines at Da Nang, and flew an occasional rescue mission. For another six months he was engaged in counter-insurgency work.

Back in the United States, he was sent to the 48th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Eglin



Air Force Base in Florida as an instructor, working with combat crews on their way to Vietnam.

Early this year he was selected for the transatlantic flight. Why? "I haven't the slightest idea," he says. "Maybe because I knew something about refueling — and I was available." He admits he was anxious before the takeoff at 1:05 a.m. May 31.

"By 2:30 p.m. the day before, we were keyed up. We took sleeping pills and tried to rest, but none of us got much sleep. On the flight itself, we alternated, four hours at the controls, two off, but there wasn't much sleep aboard the aircraft either."

He was impressed by ground control assistance all along the way. "Traffic was held at La Guardia when we took off," he said. "At Boston, the ground station was puzzled over the helicopter — they couldn't quite believe it was going to fly the Atlantic — but they cleared the way." Over Scotland, an unidentified voice came over the static in Zehnder's earphones. "God-speed," it said.

"We flew in darkness only six hours," Zehnder said. "Two of our refuelings were done at night, but it was the twi-night of the far north. Navigation was easy, night and day, though it took a little more skill at night. Our only problem was ice. About 175 miles east of Greenland we picked up clear ice; we went down to 100 feet but that didn't seem to help. We climbed again and the ice soon disappeared. Refuelings were routine at altitudes from 1,000 to 9,000 feet. The tanker planes were right there, on the second, when we needed them."

Major Maurras

"I thought about what Lindbergh went through before he took off from Roosevelt Field 40 years ago," Major Donald B. Maurras said after the flight. "We had lots of help and company on our flight. He went alone. He had a lot more guts than we did."

Major Maurras is a plain-spoken man of 42. His face shows the lines of weather and laughter. Maurras took his HH-3E helicopter down near London to establish a New York-to-London helicopter record. "We were 30 miles from Heathrow," he said, "and it was hazy, so we were vectored into the field. We flew at 50 feet, but went by the tower too fast for positive identification. We had to do a 180-degree turn and come in again, slower this time."

His HH-3E flew on to Le Bourget, where it landed behind the first helicopter, commanded by Major Zehnder. "I was in Paris for four days," Maurras said, "before we took the helicopter on to Rhein-Main Air Force Base at Frankfurt, where it was loaded aboard a transport for Vietnam. During the Paris Air Show, we flew two refueling demonstrations. The mechanics of refueling are simple, but some helicopter pilots have a psychological aversion to flying that close to a large, fixed-wing plane. Men who have flown in Vietnam find



it easier; they're used to close air formations, especially during the monsoon season.

"The worst part of the flight was the long haul over water after we lost sight of Greenland," he said. "We had enough fuel at all times to return to land if necessary, but the idea of nothing but water below is frightening. The prettiest sight in the world was Scotland, and its mountains beyond the coast. As a matter of fact, the closer we got to Paris, the better we felt. By the time we reached Le Bourget, we could have gone on another eight hours without any trouble."

Headwinds and tailwinds posed problems. "We averaged 114.6 knots (131.7 miles an hour) ground speed during the crossing," Maurras said, "but we were down to 47 knots (54 miles an hour) at one point, fighting headwinds. On the other side of Iceland, which we couldn't see, we got help from tailwinds. Across the English Channel, the tailwinds got stronger and stronger and we flew faster and faster. We had to change our estimated time of arrival four times."

The two helicopters stayed close together, flying formation, until they parted over England. The tanker planes flew 1,000 feet behind the helicopters, sometimes above, sometimes below, except at refueling time and except for the lead tanker, which flew at 20,000 feet over the ocean to handle communications and navigation.

"We'd worked with the tankers in Florida before the flight," Maurras said. "We had one eight-hour trial run to Galveston, Texas, and back. There were few difficulties."

One difficulty, an oil leak in Zehnder's HH-3E that developed in the flight from Eglin to New York, was corrected before takeoff. Maurras said his helicopter functioned perfectly on the crossing except for windshield wipers that didn't work and faulty ultra-high frequency radio reception.

During his 24 years in the Air Force, Maurras has accumulated 5,000 hours in the air, 2,500 of those in helicopters.

He served in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966 with the 20th Helicopter Squadron. "Some of my missions were rescue," he said, "but I flew mostly as high bird — or escort — for the HH-3E rescue helicopters."

Ordinary things like eating and sleeping were difficult during the transatlantic flight. "We had two litters rigged up on either side of the cabin, with air mattresses to absorb some of the vibration," Maurras said, "but no one slept much. We had box lunches from New York and when they were gone, we ate C-rations. We had a hot cup to warm our rations, but we stuck pretty much to coffee and fruit juices. Even so, we all became dehydrated. On the day we arrived in Paris, we were in bed by 6 p.m. and up five hours later with splitting headaches. It was the dehydration." ❄