

HANGAR QUEEN



Howard Hughes's Flying Boat emerges from years of seclusion.

BY MARY F. SILITCH

The sun had not yet risen above the horizon when I arrived at Terminal Island on Long Beach Harbor, where Howard Hughes' famous Flying Boat had been hidden from view for 33 years. It was just getting light enough to see the huge aircraft, laid bare at last in the partially dismantled hangar. Its ghostly white, smooth surface caught the first rays of the late October sun, and the airplane seemed almost luminescent in the early dawn light.

The most amazing thing about this quite remarkable aircraft is not its size, but its simple beauty. Reams of copy have been devoted to comparing its tail with a 10-story building, or its horizontal tail with the wing of a Boeing 727. But you hear little about its aesthetic qualities, perhaps because it has been hidden since 1947, and no one has had the opportunity to be struck by its elegance. This was my first chance to see it, as it was being moved from its shielding hangar.

Brightly striped tents dotted the harbor's edge, and kelly-green fake grass carpet was spread to keep the

dignitaries' Guccis out of the dust. I had been warned about the rough terrain on Terminal Island, but there was no need for hiking boots—this was roughing it, California style.

On a pier jutting out into the water, a dozen or so journalists and photographers were silhouetted against the rising sun, cameras ready to record the historic move—as soon as there was enough light. Others lined the edge of the green carpet, along with officials and invited guests. Most of them looked as if this were the first time they had crawled out of bed while it was still dark. It certainly took an event like the unveiling of the Spruce Goose to lure me to such an unlikely spot, 2,600 miles from home, at such an ungodly hour.

Actually, as I stumbled down the ladder to the press boat where coffee and Danish and Bloody Marys were waiting, I felt fortunate to be there, no matter what the hour. When Howard Hughes died in 1976, the fate of the Flying Boat had been uncertain. The life-support systems that had protected his gigantic air-

plane were shut off. The air conditioning in the hangar that enclosed the craft after its one and only flight no longer fought against the Los Angeles smog. The work that kept the airplane almost airworthy ceased; monthly engine tests stopped. The eight nacelles were shrouded with black covers, and the propellers were missing.

Hughes' Summa Corporation was losing the lease on the hangar site, and the seaplane had to go. Summa finally rejected the notion of shipping off slivers of the Flying Boat to a multitude of museums, and donated it, intact, to the Aero Club of Southern California. I spent weeks negotiating with Summa, the Aero Club and Wrather Corporation, the entertainment company chosen to display it, and was helped at every turn by Edward Story, AOPA 704126, a member of the Committee To Save the Hughes Flying Boat. I was going to be on the West Coast, and I wanted to tour the seaplane. I was assured that it would be impossible to make the tour, and I also was assured that it would be a cinch.

From the moment of its conception to its first and only flight (above) the giant Hughes Flying Boat has stirred the imagination and created controversy. Last fall, it was finally afloat again saved from destruction, and on its way to a new home.

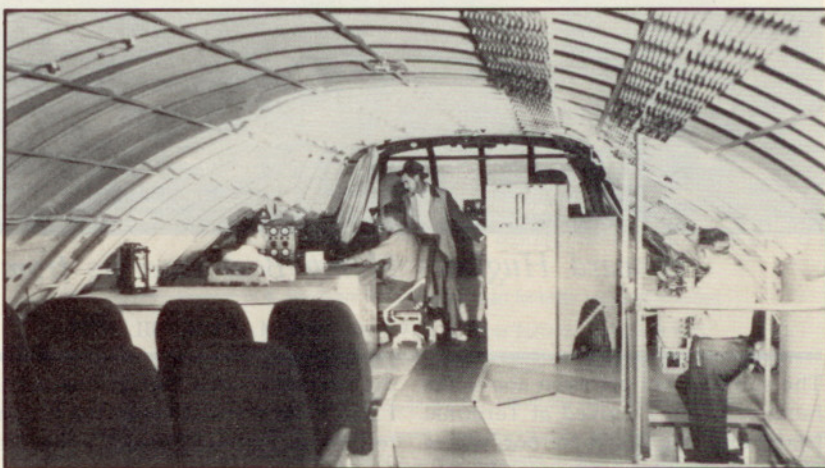
I was still carrying on the negotiations when I arrived in Seattle last fall, a few days before my trek down the coast. The Flying Boat was going to be shifted temporarily to a nearby pier, until it could be displayed permanently next to the *Queen Mary*, now a tourist attraction in Long Beach. The move was imminent, and I made daily calls to my contacts. No one was going to be allowed to watch, I was told. Of course I would be invited, I was told. It all depended on to whom I was talking at the moment. This was turning out to be a more complex operation than just privately touring the ship, as I had hoped to do.

The move was not the first for the Flying Boat, and complexities were nothing new in its turbulent history. The idea for the huge aircraft was conceived during World War II by Henry J. Kaiser, the ship builder who had large notions about large flying ships. They would be useful in the war, to transport vast numbers of troops.

Howard Hughes was to design and build it. An \$18 million government contract was given to the new Kaiser-Hughes Corporation in 1942 for three prototypes. The airplane was to be built of wood, since



When it was first towed into Long Beach Harbor, in November 1947, the Spruce Goose was behind schedule, over budget and under congressional scrutiny



Howard Hughes, in hat, was under pressure to prove its worth. He waited for the winds to subside, then lifted off for the Flying Boat's only flight.



metal was scarce during the war. As Hughes biographers Donald Barlett and James Steele noted, "Working with wood was much more complicated than working with metal. The skin and structural parts would be composed of thin sheets of plywood, built up layer on layer and bonded together by special waterproof glues that would presumably make the seaplane impervious to water, heat and fungus. Since every piece of wood has its own density, each

would have to be accurately weighed and analyzed before it could be used in the construction."

The engineering problems of building the largest-ever aircraft looked simple, however, compared with Hughes' management problems, and work on the aircraft progressed slowly at the Culver City plant. By 1944, a new manager had been brought in to handle the project, and he decided to move the craft to Long Beach for final assem-

bly and flight testing. Turning down federal money for the move, because it would mean that the government could choose someone else as test pilot, Hughes paid \$80,000 to a professional mover to truck the large pieces to Terminal Island, near the Long Beach Naval Shipyard.

By now, it was 1946. The war in Europe was over, and the Hughes Flying Boat was not finished. Kaiser was out of the project. Shortly after the move to Long Beach, Hughes

crashed while testing his XF-11 photo reconnaissance aircraft. He was severely injured, but somehow managed to pull through. After a long convalescence, he found himself, in January 1947, under investigation by a special Senate committee looking into the national defense program. When he appeared before the committee, he was questioned about his military entertainment expenses and about the Flying Boat.

Hughes vowed at the end of his testimony: "I have put the sweat of my life into this thing, and \$7.2 million of my own money. My reputation is wrapped up in it. If it fails to fly, I will leave the country. And I mean it."

Back in California, he put the construction crew into a frenzy of final completion. The hearings would resume in mid-November. The Senate was not going to make the decision about the Hughes Flying Boat's ability to fly.

On November 1, 1947, Hughes had the drydock flooded, and the Flying Boat, finally afloat, was towed into Long Beach Harbor. Thousands of people watched from Terminal Island, but just as the crowds last October had to wait for something to happen, the spectators did not get to see the aircraft in action until the next day. The wind came up too strong for the announced taxi tests. The next afternoon, despite the continuing wind, Hughes made a short taxi run at about 40 knots. With press representatives aboard, he taxied off again, at 78 knots.

Then with only one reporter and no other pilots aboard, Hughes pushed the throttles forward again. At about 66 knots, he asked the hydraulics engineer for 15 degrees of flaps, and the Hughes Flying Boat lifted off for the first and last time.

Hughes had flown his aircraft, and it worked. He leased it from the government and carefully stored it away, an expensive reminder of his moment of triumph.

As I waited on the press boat on the far side of the channel for the Flying Boat to be moved last fall, I could imagine the impatience of the crowd—and of Hughes—that day in 1947 when the winds were too strong. We had been summoned

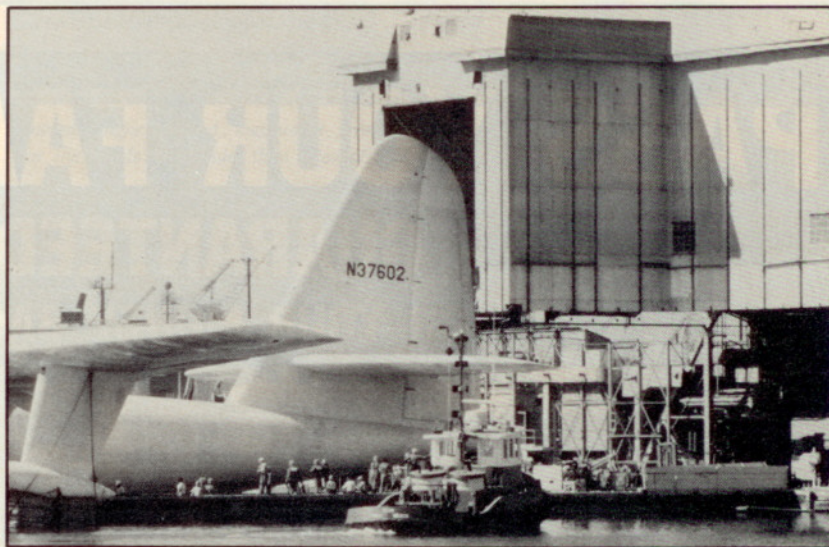
there at 6 a.m. because the tides had to be right for the move. The hangar was flooded to allow the aircraft to be floated out, and, if the tide were too high, the tail might not clear the top of the hangar. But there were problems with the steel net that was to be used to tow it out and, eventually, to lift the world's largest airplane, with the world's largest floating crane, onto the temporary

flights in the area and hovered briefly overhead for a look. Two Wrather Bell JetRangers circled all day, giving VIPs and the media bird's eye views.

The sun was high overhead. I had spent four hours watching the Spruce Goose not move. Then, at last, the gates of the hangar drydock were opened. Tugs slowly started towing out the giant airplane. The



Last October, the Flying Boat was unveiled at dawn after 33 years under cover. The 26-hour move continued the Goose's tradition of delay. The workers cheered as the aircraft finally moved slowly out of the hangar, its tail clearing the top.



resting place on a nearby pier. A crew of divers in black wet suits worked on their equipment and on the cradle. Tug boats and the late John Wayne's yacht, the *Wild Goose*, carrying Aero Club and Wrather officials, scurried back and forth around the still-hangared Spruce Goose. On shore, there was champagne and country music, including a special song about the Flying Boat. A Goodyear blimp escaped the Federal Aviation Administration ban on

quietness of the morning was destroyed by the clicks of a hundred cameras, as the craft moved majestically out of the hangar and into the bay. Hard hats were the only objects that came close to hitting the ceiling as the workers cheered at finally getting under way. The Flying Boat's tall tail cleared the hangar despite the fluctuations in the tide.

The operation soon came to a halt when the airplane reached mid-channel. The divers bobbed in the

cool water, and again we waited. The press boat circled the aircraft twice, slowly, so the wake would not disturb the monstrous craft. Four men stood on top of the left wing, dwarfed by the 319.92-foot wingspan. There may have been champagne on shore; but on the press boat, lunch was make-your-own, with a loaf of white bread, a few slices of ham and a jar of mayo. Given the chance to go ashore, I went, tracing down a representative or two from the Wrather Corporation for details about plans for the Boat. I had toured the *Queen Mary* the night before, and had visions of tacky souvenir shops being set up in the cockpit selling ashtrays with the image of the Spruce Goose stamped in tin.

In the heat of the midday sun, nothing was happening. I went off for another interview and for lunch. By the time I got back in the late afternoon, the Hughes Flying Boat had not budged. The helicopters were still whirring away, so I went to the dusty field that was serving as a landing spot. Circling in the boat, I had seen the aircraft from every conceivable angle—except from

above. The sun was sinking in the west as I circled over the aircraft. The right rear door of the JetRanger was removed, and I leaned out, aiming my camera, with only a seat belt between me and the Flying Boat.

As I snapped away, it did occur to me that this might be a dramatic way to go—"Imagine," they would say, "she fell from a helicopter right onto the Spruce Goose." But I was too enraptured with the sight through my lens to worry. From above, the Flying Boat was more beautiful than it was from below. The bare nacelles were less noticeable at a distance, and the red rays of the sunset gave the aircraft a warm glow. It looked even more ethereal than it had at dawn. The flight was all too short.

The press corps had moved, even if the Spruce Goose had not. The television cameras were set up opposite the pier that was the craft's destination. It was to be lifted up about 7:30 p.m., I was told by a friendly TV camera operator, when I inquired. "When is your deadline?" he asked, thinking in terms of the six o'clock news or film at eleven. "April," I replied.

The suspension of the Flying Boat did not make the six or eleven o'clock news that night. It was four o'clock the next afternoon, October 30, before it rose from the surface, and nearly eight before it was lowered onto Pier E.

Its next move—to Pier J, where the *Queen Mary* is berthed—has been delayed until September or October 1981, instead of the planned spring transfer. The world's largest geodesic dome, an aluminum structure 410 feet in diameter, rising 130 feet high, will cover Howard Hughes' treasured aircraft. According to a Wrather spokesperson, it will be an experience rather than a mere museum. There will be films, Hughes memorabilia, a history of the Spruce Goose and of flying boats in general. It is likely that they will not allow people on board, as that would require altering the aircraft's structure. Wrather, is concerned about that.

The whole new Port Adventure will be open by early 1982; Wrather is taking over the management and display of the *Queen Mary* also. The public at last will be able to see the Spruce Goose—in its original, unaltered state, I hope. □



As the crowds waited and watched and the helicopters circled overhead, the Flying Boat inched closer to its temporary pier. The world's largest floating crane was used to lift the 200-ton Spruce Goose, the world's largest aircraft, out of the water.