

HOW I MADE IT: IGOR PASTERNAK



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

ALOFT: "I don't remember ever wanting to do anything else as a profession," says Worldwide Aeros' Igor Pasternak.

Blimp maker aims to expand

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The gig: Igor Pasternak, 45, is the founder and chief executive of Worldwide Aeros Corp., a Montebello-based developer and maker of blimps used for surveillance, advertising and transport.

Childhood: Pasternak grew up in Lviv, a Ukrainian city of 700,000 near the Polish border in the former Soviet Union. It was his childhood dream to become an airship designer after he saw pictures of blimps in a magazine.

"It was something that I fell in love with right away," he said. "I don't remember ever wanting to do anything else as a profession."

Early years: After earning a degree in civil engineering at Lvov Polytechnic University, he formed his own company in 1987 and began working on production of airships for advertising and scientific applications as well as on a Russian project to develop mammoth airships to transport cargo to the remote Siberian oil fields.

The endeavor was one of the first private business enterprises permitted under Mikhail S. Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms. But when the Soviet Union collapsed, Pasternak's investment capital dried up. Pasternak fled Russia and immigrated to the U.S. in 1993.

Moving to America: After arriving in New York, Pasternak immediately began working to get Worldwide Aeros off the ground. To do that, he had to woo clients.

He taught himself English by watching Arnold Schwarzenegger movies — because he said they were easier to understand — and eventually became proficient enough that he attracted a handful of customers.

"Starting the business was a real struggle at times," Pasternak said.

"But I secured some customers and moved to California. We stuck here ever since."

Worldwide growth: Since launching the business, Worldwide Aeros' more than 35 different lighter-than-air platforms have been sold and flown in about 10 countries on four continents.

"We are all around the world," Pasternak said.

Now with about 70 employees, Worldwide Aeros expects more than \$10 million in revenue this year from selling commercial airships for advertising and surveillance work. In addition, the company has won several multimillion-dollar Pentagon contracts to develop a military transport airship.

Tragic setback: In 2000, Pasternak's sister Marina, 32, and Levon Samamyam, 35, an employee and friend, died repairing an

airship at San Bernardino International Airport.

The two suffocated while patching holes in a ballonet, a balloon inside the helium-filled blimp, that had been damaged during flight tests.

"It was a very tragic event," Pasternak said. "But we had to go back to work."

The future: Pasternak is developing the Aeroscraft, an airship as long as two football fields, to be used for transcontinental and transoceanic transport for cargo and passengers.

It may conjure up images of the Hindenburg, but Pasternak assures that, in distinct contrast to earlier-generation airships, the Aeroscraft is a new type of aircraft that combines airplane and airship technologies.

The craft would be like a flying cruise ship capable of traveling several thousand miles. It could hit a top speed of 174 mph, meaning it could go from Los Angeles to New York in about 18 hours. And by flying at an altitude of 8,000 feet and lower — compared with airlines' 30,000 — passengers would have a clear view of the landscape below.

"You have to stay innovative in this business," Pasternak said. "You always have to stay on the cutting edge if you want to be successful."

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