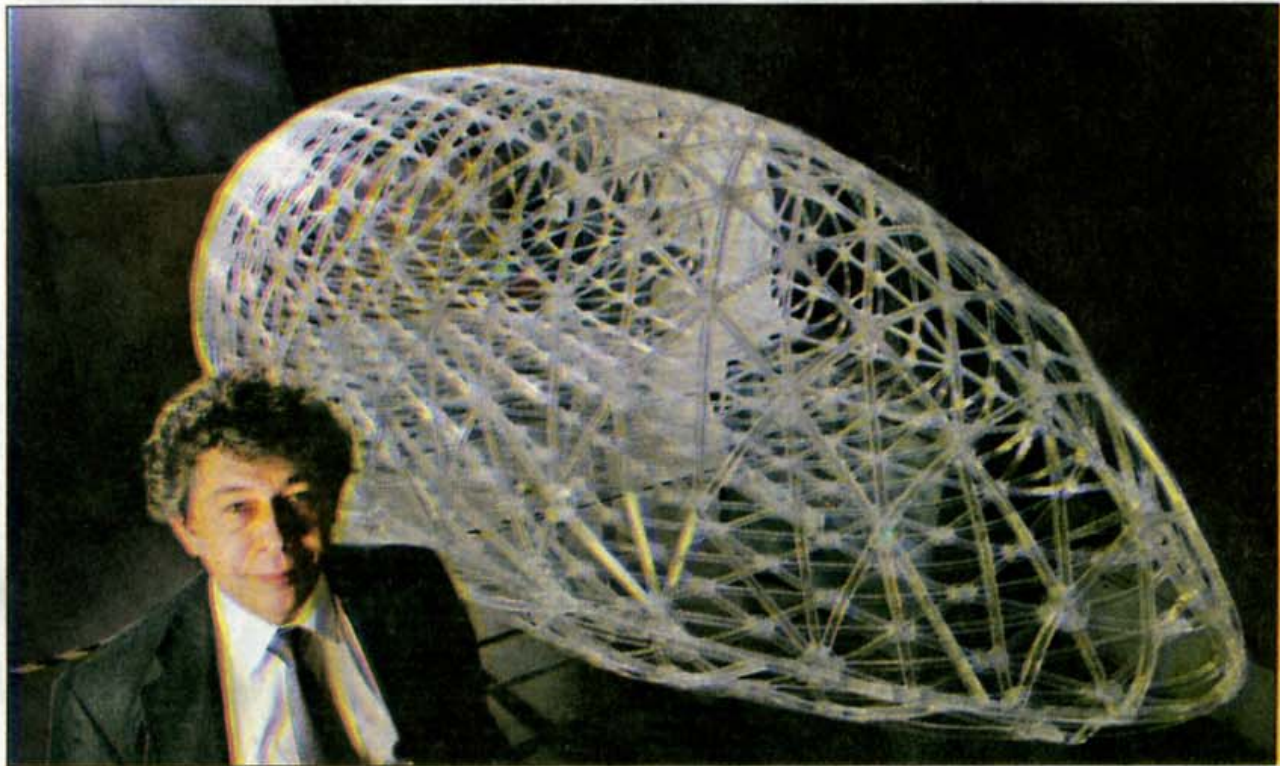


BUSINESS

Tuesday, January 17, 2006

latimes.com/business



STEPHEN OSMAN Los Angeles Times

HIGH HOPES: Worldwide Aeros founder Igor Pasternak with a shape model of the blimp-like craft he is seeking to build for the Pentagon. The U.S. contract could be worth \$11 billion over 30 years.

Small Company Aims to Soar Above Lockheed to Win Blimp Contract

The firm is confident the Pentagon will pick its design for a craft to move troops and cargo.

By PETER PAE
Times Staff Writer

It's the blimp industry's version of David and Goliath.

An obscure Tarzana firm run by Russian emigres is locked in competition with Lockheed Martin Corp., the world's largest defense contractor, to win a Pentagon contract to build 900-foot-long, blimp-like aircraft to move cargo and troops into combat zones.

Worldwide Aeros, which makes blimps used for flying billboards, generated plenty of buzz in aerospace circles last summer when it and Lockheed each landed \$3-million contracts from the Pentagon to do preliminary design work.

The Pentagon's advanced research arm expects to pick the winning design in September and award a \$100-million contract for a prototype airship. The winner then has a chance to bid on a blimp production contract potentially worth \$11 billion over 30 years.

"In reality we don't feel Lockheed is our technical competitor," said Igor Pasternak, 41, Worldwide Aeros' founder.

"There is only one solution, and we have that one solution," the Russian-trained scientist insisted.

Pasternak's company "wrote a proposal that seemed outstanding," said Norman J. Mayer, a veteran airship designer for Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. and the Navy, who helped the Pentagon evaluate the blimp proposals. "They were very serious about what they were trying to do. Time will tell how well they do it."

Winning will not be easy.

Lockheed farmed out the blimp job to its Skunkworks unit, the legendary aircraft design house in Palmdale that has de-

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Pentagon Contract for Blimp Is Up in the Air

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veloped many of the nation's most advanced aircraft, including the SR-71 and U-2 spy planes.

By contrast, Worldwide Aeros, with 40 employees, expects \$10 million in revenue this year from selling blimps for advertising, including promoting MasterCard and Spalding sporting goods.

Pasternak has built about 30 blimps in the U.S. His blimps cost about \$3 million each; components are made in Tarzana, then assembled in hangars in San Bernardino or Palmdale.

But Pasternak said he had faced bigger challenges than outwitting Lockheed, including persuading six of his employees and their families to flee Russia with him in 1993.

Pasternak grew up in Lviv, a Ukrainian city of 700,000 near the Polish border.

After getting a degree in civil engineering, he formed his own company in 1988 and began working on a Soviet project to develop mammoth airships to transport cargo to the remote Siberian oil fields. It was one of the first private aeronautics ventures permitted under Mikhail S. Gorbachev's perestroika reforms, Pasternak said.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Pasternak's investment capital dried up. With growing anti-Semitism in his country,

Pasternak said, he and his colleagues fled Russia and emigrated to the U.S.

Eventually, he was able to persuade several investors to fund his aerospace company based on his experience making blimps in Russia.

The Pentagon hopes that these new airships can help move U.S. troops more quickly. Currently, personnel and equipment travel separately; heavy weapons, such as tanks, are transported by ship, which can take more than a month.

Ultimately, the Pentagon envisions buying 14 to 16 heavy-lift airships, each capable of carrying 500 tons of cargo and passengers.

The airships would travel up to 138 mph, with a range of more than 10,000 miles.

In addition to increased cargo capacity, the airships would give the U.S. military additional flexibility in moving troops closer to the battlefield because in theory the craft could bypass ports and runways. The airships would have only one requirement: an open landing field about two to three times their size.

"It can totally change how you conduct warfare," Pasternak said of the concept.

He envisions the aircraft as not a blimp or an airplane but as a hybrid of the two. The vehicle would rise into the air thanks to

nonflammable helium, much as a blimp does, but the bottom of its hull would act like a wing to give it additional lift and control, he said. The craft would be powered by propellers.

Pasternak contends that this new design would be easier to handle and that it could land under a pilot's control, without ground handlers having to pull on tethers as with conventional blimps. But the concept still faces several hurdles, analysts said.

Although engineers have decades of knowledge in developing airships, none has been built to carry the tonnage the Pentagon envisions for its project.

Moreover, the airships would be vulnerable to antiaircraft fire, not only because of their size but also because they would be flying at relatively low altitude of about 10,000 feet, bringing them within range of shoulder-fired missiles.

The challenges for the prevailing bidder will be immense. But win or lose, Pasternak sees the project as a means to a different end: to build commercial versions for carrying business cargo or even paying passengers.

His "cruise ship in the sky" would have hotel-like rooms, vast lobbies with viewing areas, a restaurant and space for about 180 passengers. It would fly from Los Angeles to New York in about 18 hours.

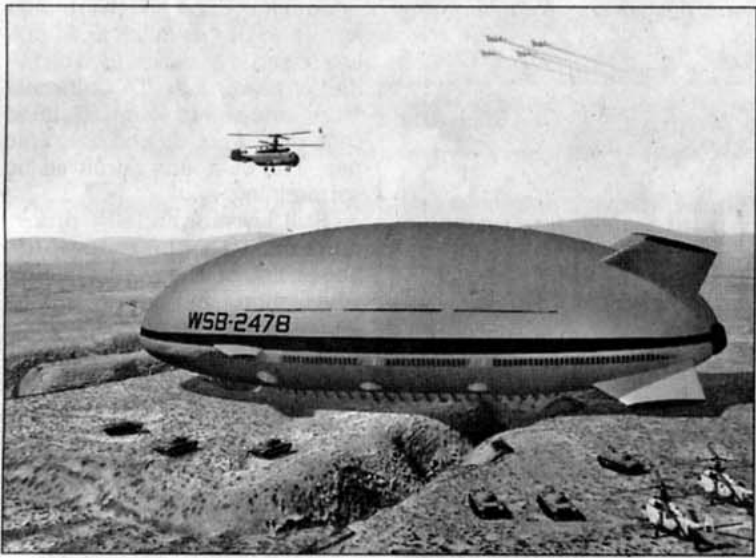
"You can have dinner, go to sleep and wake up in the morning in New York," Pasternak said.

He said the craft would cost about \$46 million to build — about the same as the 150-seat Boeing Co. 737 passenger jet but half as expensive to operate.

Businessmen have talked up grand plans for passenger blimps for decades, and none has taken hold. Ever since the hydrogen-filled passenger dirigible Hindenburg burst into flames in 1937, lighter-than-air ships have been little more than a footnote in history.

Pasternak, who doesn't shrink from taking on a behemoth like Lockheed, brushes aside any qualms.

"It'll be a completely different approach to moving things," he said.



Aeros Aeronautical

MILITARY MIGHT: An illustration by Worldwide Aeros of its blimp-like craft that would transport U.S. troops to combat zones.