



Sikorsky S-39B, c/n 904 as it appeared during happier days in the 1930s. This same aircraft is now being restored by the Connecticut Aeronautical Historical Association. (Photo - Donald M. Ives)

SIKORSKY S-39 FINALE

By Mitch Mayborn

A long, hazardous 34 year adventure ended this October for one of Igor Sikorsky's colorful, rugged S-39s. The plane, S-39, c/n 904, NC-803W, arrived in Connecticut from Alaskan oblivion accompanied by the hull and some parts to a sister S-39, c/n 920, NC-58V.

The arrival of c/n 904 was the culmination of several arduous years of futile attempts to first locate, then acquire for restoration, a Sikorsky amphibian of the twin boom era. The plane, now resting in Hartford, Connecticut under the care and ownership of the Connecticut Aeronautical Historical Association, will eventually be restored for permanent care and exhibition in a museum operated by the Association.

While the events leading up to the acquisition of these planes will be recorded here, this article will also chronicle the histories of several more of the S-39s first described in the article, "The Sikorsky S-39", which appeared in the A.A.H.S. JOURNAL, Spring 1962, pages 3 thru 16.

On page 6, column one, of that article, the third paragraph beginning, "With the end of the S-39 program ...", should be disregarded. The somewhat confused picture of "production vs. sales" has been cleared up by Jack Harkness, who was then General Superintendent.

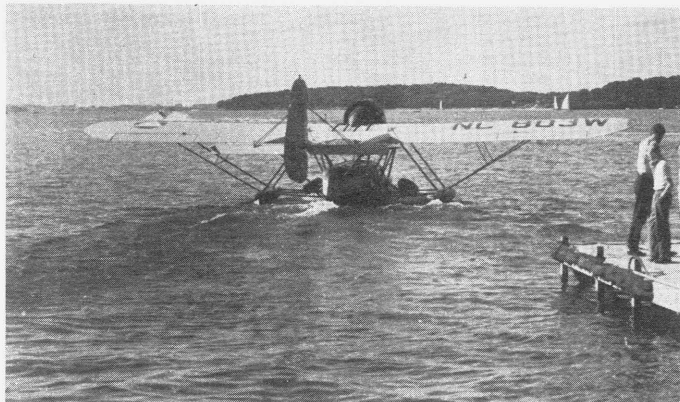
Mr. Harkness relates that a second batch of twenty S-39s had been authorized by top management of United Aircraft, and a major portion of the parts and sub-assemblies manufactured, when Keystone announced that they were offering a competing amphibian for \$17,500.00. Mr. Harkness, who was with Keystone at the time this design was laid down, recalls that The Keystone Commuter

was a rather crude biplane with relatively poor hull lines.

However, Sikorsky could not reduce its competitive price for the S-39 below \$21,500.00, due mainly to the cost of the engine. The head office of United Aircraft at this time decided, on the basis of existing and forecast market conditions, not to go ahead with the second production contract; and issued instructions to halt the S-39 work, and to scrap the already-completed parts for the 'carry-on' production.

In line with this considerable production cut-back, the General Superintendent was instructed to reduce the shop force from 950 to 350 men. He requested permission to make the lay-offs in two increments; but corporate management was worried about the immediate impact on the local labor market and general economy; and directed him to make the layoffs in six increments of about 100 men per week. Psychologically, this was bad; because no man knew when his turn was coming. The resulting stalling, slow-downs, and shop chaos was, perhaps inevitably, blamed on the General Superintendent. Partially as a result of this, and also because the need had been clearly shown for closer coordination between production and design, Mr. Harkness was subsequently reassigned to a position as chief Planning Engineer, a high-level liaison office between the Manufacturing and Engineering Departments.

The halt in S-39 production necessarily led to the dissolution of the Project Group under Bob Labensky which designed and developed the aircraft. Some of the Group's thirty-nine engineers were moved to the still



S-39, c/n 904, is showing taxiing out for a take off from Lake Okoboji, Iowa in 1946. (Photo - Mikesh)

healthy S-38 project, some were absorbed into groups working on experimental flying-boat models, and some were necessarily relocated to other jobs. But the "little-brother amphibion" (the Sikorsky people at that time coined the word, "amphibion", to indicate land-water-air capabilities as opposed to the land-water connotation of "amphibian", but this word never became popular and the world lost an excellent, definitive term), the S-39, lives on strongly in the memories of the men who designed and built it.

Official United Aircraft Corporation documents of 1929/30, on file in Hartford, state the twin engine version was definitely called the S-39A while the single engine version was called the S-39B. The documents also indicate that UAC was considering the offering of both versions simultaneously as well as a single engine version with the Wright J-6-9, 300 hp, engine. The consideration for offering the twin version in addition to the single engine Wasp, Jr., or Wright version envisioned an airplane with the following improvements:

- 1) Metal hull (already designed at that time)
- 2) Increased stabilizer area
- 3) New tail surfaces
- 4) Slightly increased wing area
- 5) Increased power

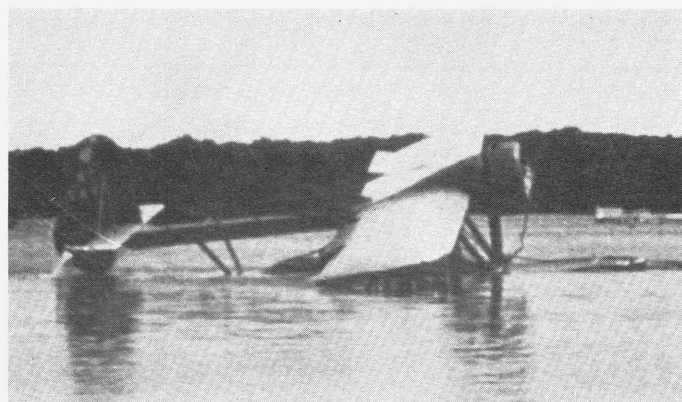
The following specifications were listed:

S-39A

Engines - 2 Cirrus Hermes, 110 hp @ 2000 RPM
 Span - 52 feet
 Weight Empty - 2200 pounds
 Wing Area - 352 Square Feet
 Payload - 510 pounds
 Total Useful Load - 1100 pounds
 Weight Loaded - 3300 pounds
 Capacity - 1 pilot, 3 passengers
 Maximum Speed @ s/l - 107 mph
 Cruising Speed @ s/l - 90 mph @ 1700 RPM
 Service Ceiling - 11,700 feet
 Price - \$18,000.00

S-39B

Engine - 1 Wasp, Jr., 300 hp @ 2000 RPM
 Span - 52 feet
 Weight Empty - 2555 pounds
 Wing Area - 350 Square Feet
 Payload - 540 pounds
 Total Useful Load - 1145 pounds
 Weight Loaded - 3700 pounds
 Capacity - 4 persons
 Maximum Speed @ s/l - 122 mph
 Cruising Speed @ s/l - 100 mph @ 1750 RPM
 Service Ceiling - 16,000 feet
 Price - \$17,500.00



S-39, c/n 920, is partially submerged in Lake Okoboji, August 1946 after being rammed by water taxi. (Mikesh)

The documents further indicate that an original order for 40 S-39s was given to Sikorsky by United Aircraft Corporation. The first experimental model was completed in March 1930, and the first production model came off the line in April 1930. Harkness says the price of the S-39B was \$21,500.00, but the documents of 1929 say it was \$17,500.00 which may have been the original, scheduled price. It is entirely possible that the price was advanced in 1930 or '31 to the higher figure.

To add to the record of the S-39s several further accounts are given below. There has been no new information on c/n's 900X, 902, 903, 906, 909, 910 and 912 through 919. The first S-39 about which new information has come to light is:

<u>Construction Number</u>	<u>Model</u>	<u>Register Number</u>	<u>Date Built</u>
901	S-39A	NC-887W	1930

Phil Redden, who was later to figure prominently in the rescue of the two S-39s, c/n 904 and 920, talked with Vic Lenhart, owner of S-39, c/n 911, NC-809W. Lenhart thought that 901 crashed at Dillingham, Alaska in the bush, and is still there. Last owned by Hans Mirow.

904	S-39A	NC-803W	1930
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Return of this plane to Connecticut from Alaska on 19 October completed its active history. Next step is restoration and permanent exhibition in a museum as the oldest known Sikorsky amphibian in existence, and one of but four other Sikorsky Airplanes known. (The others include Howard Hughes' S-43H, c/n 4327, NX-440; JRS-1 (S-43), BUONO 1063 in the National Air Museum; and the currently active VS-44 c/n 4402, N-41881, flying for Avalon Airlines.

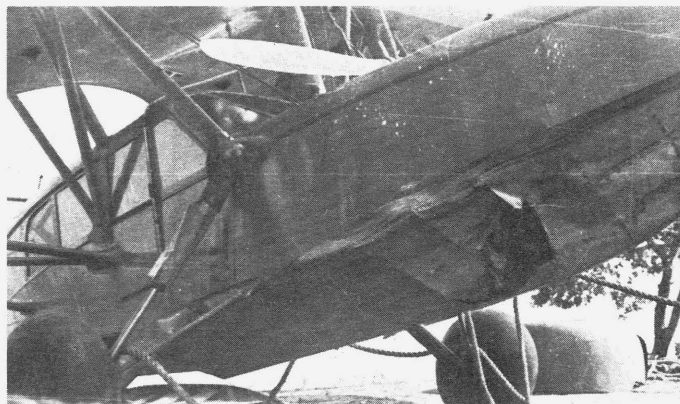
Let's go back to line 1, page 11 of "The Sikorsky S-39" and pick up the history of NC-803W where it reads, "By 1945, NC-803W was in Michigan, owned by J. H. Patterson, who still owned it in 1946". A more detailed account of this plane's subsequent career follows, with a report from Major Robert C. Mikesh, followed by a report from Phil Redden.

Maj. Mikesh, in letters to the author on 13 June and 16 September, 1963, said, "I was very fortunate to have been at Lake Okoboji, Iowa in the summer of 1946, where three of the S-39s were; NC-803W, NC-805W and NC-58V. It was at this time that I received several hours flying time in NC-58V through my close association with the pilot, Mr. Oleson, who previously had been my instructor in private flying.

"In early 1946, Mr. G. K. (Jerry) Halverson, Arnolds Park, Iowa, purchased two S-39s: NC-803W and NC-58V. In recent letters in answer to my questions, he states that he purchased both aircraft from Buck's



After being towed out of Lake Okoboji, c/n 920 rests on solid ground showing damage. (Photo - Mikesh)



Another view of c/n 920 shows damage to hull after it was rammed by boat in August 1946. (Photo - Mikesh)

Seaplane Base, at Pittsburgh, Penn. Both aircraft were used for commercial airplane rides from a dock at Arnold's Amusement Park. Through delays in acquiring his commercial license, Jerry hired Mr. C. P. Oleson, then of Ottumwa, Iowa, to fly as the commercial pilot.

"Mr. G. C. Vanderburg with NC-805W was to also operate commercially off the lake, but because of a license and parts problems, I don't believe the aircraft carried many commercial passengers under his ownership.

"Due to a taxi accident to NC-58V, all commercial flying from Lake Okoboji was abruptly halted in mid August 1946, by the Iowa Conservation Commission.

"While in use by Halverson, NC-803W got away from the pilot while landing in a cross wind and hit a fence post, crumpling the port pontoon. It was immediately flown back to its land base of operation at Fuller Airport, Milford, Iowa, by Mr. Halverson, where it remained tied down for the rest of the summer. It was later flown 15 miles south to Spencer, Iowa, still minus the float, where it was hangared. (This airport was just south of town and has since been closed.)

"In 1949, it was sold to an Army Major from Kansas, for \$1,000.00 plus hangar expenses. He got as far as Sioux City, Iowa, and sold it to someone from Alaska for \$11,000.00 and it went up there, to quote from Mr. Halverson's letter. At the time it was in Iowa it was medium blue and yellow (still is--Author), perhaps having some silver."

Following its arrival in Alaska, under the ownership of Clem Simmons, NC-803W was to see service as a bush plane, until it made a forced landing at Yakutat sometime in the 1950's. Since that time, it has been at Yakutat, a settlement with a population of 260 persons, a fish cannery, and a World War II airport which is kept in service for the airlines and bush pilots.

Following the forced landing in the 1950's, the S-39 lay at Yakutat, gradually deteriorating due to salt air, heavy snows, and a push out of the way by a bulldozer. As time passed, a stand of 6 to 8-in. trees grew up around it and the ferns flourished. Little notice was made of NC-803W, now a wreck, except by a passing hunter or two, who shot it full of holes.

Interest generated by earlier historical articles on the S-38 and S-39 plus information on approximate locations and owners developed by these articles eventually resulted in the location and now acquisition of this plane for preservation.

On hand to carry out the Alaskan part of the search and do all of the actual work was Phil Redden, who also owned the hull, and some parts to S-39 c/n 920, NC-58V, which was shipped with NC-803W to Connecticut.

First reports from Alaska showed that NC-803W was in the bush a few miles outside of Yakutat, but near a road. Redden went to Yakutat at the request of the CAHA and after obtaining a salvage title, packed it for shipment to Connecticut.

His first hand report, in a letter of 23 July 1963

to Harvey H. Lippincott, President of the CAHA, follows:

"Last week I went to Yakutat and dismantled S-39, NC-803W and moved it seven miles to the village. I was not able to crate the plane as there is no lumber for sale in Yakutat, which consists of one fish cannery and the airport.

"The S-39 wasn't in quite as good a shape as we thought. Someone in the last month had torn out the gas tanks and I was able to find only one. Also, they had smashed and cut up one of the booms. The wing roots were badly damaged in the center section as well as most of the ribs and there was quite a bit of corrosion especially in the tail surfaces. The wings had collapsed from snow and then were removed. The plane had been pushed with a bulldozer bending the engine mounts and tearing a hole in the hull at the main gear mount and the bow was caved in when it crash landed about 10 years ago.

"Most of the instrument panel is still there but a lot of the interior is missing. Almost all of the struts are there, but one of the "V" outriggers is missing.

"I was very lucky to accidentally stumble onto all the right hand float struts in a garbage dump several miles from the plane. The floats are missing, but I have one here that will be good for a pattern. There are quite a few bullet holes.

"You will have to thoroughly clean all parts to get the salt out of it as it spent 10 years in a grove of trees right on the ocean beach and only the constant rain kept the corrosion from being much worse. We had three inches one day while I was working on it. I was there four days, but with the rain, and my job waiting I didn't stay any longer than I had to.

"The engine accessory case was completely destroyed by corrosion, and looked like a tub of white ashes dumped on the engine. The mags, starter and generator fell off when I cut the wires. I had to cut some wires, lines and pieces as the bulldozer had jammed the engine up into the wing to where it didn't make much sense. I guess I didn't need to cut the ignition harness, but in the rain I got carried away. It was the non-metallic cable and would look better replaced anyway.

"I took some pictures, but some of the film was ruined in a little mishap with a water puddle. Also tried to tag or mark the pieces, but some of it had already been torn apart, and I didn't know exactly how it went, so part of it won't be marked. I tagged nine bundles with addressed cards. They are:

"No. 1 - Hull. Filled with small parts. Probably 100 lbs. or about equal to the missing glass, fittings, seats, etc. There is no crating on it so take the dimensions and weight of the hull from the factory records. I had no way of weighing the thing, it is about 5x5x97.

"No. 2 - Right Wing. The wings are in almost air-worthy condition frame wise, but the fabric is rotten. I pulled it off except where the numbers were so I



C/N 904 as it appeared when salvaged by Phil Redden outside of Yakutat, Alaska during the summer of 1963 and prior to shipment to Connecticut. (Photo-Redden)

could clean out the leaves, squirrel nests, etc. Also I wired three 2x4 on edge, crosswise on each side and then nailed a 2x4 flat lengthwise on these at about the span location so the wings could be stacked one on top of the other without damage. The 2x4's were scrounged off the beach.

"No. 3 - Left Wing. Same story 7'x19' about 20-in. including the dunnage.

"No. 4 - Center section. Fastened 2x4 on bottom of this so it could be stacked same way so figure size 13'x17'x about 20".

"No. 5 - Rudder fin. This is a unit by itself with no crating.

"No. 6 - Stabilizer, left boom and interboom wires are wired together in this bundle and is about 14'x3½'x about 8 or 10 in.

"No. 7 - Engine. The mounting ring is still on the engine as is the exhaust ring and is laying shaft up mounted on 2-3 ft. 4x6 with 2x4 spiked under these crosswise so it can be picked up with a fork lift. There is no propeller or Townsend Ring.

"No. 8 - Pallet of struts. The station manager let me have a pallet so all the heavy struts and landing gear are piled on this. Most of the parts are wired together in bundles of three or four pieces each and all more or less wired to pallet.

"No. 9 - One box of parts. This is a wooden box that five gallon tins of gas came in and is filled with small heavy parts; mags, generator, starter, etc. Weight about 100 lbs. 1x2x2.

"It rained 3 of the 4 days I was there. Cordova Airlines' Station Manager, Ray Mapes, helped me when he could, and the FAA station manager, Fred Miller, was helpful and is going to supervise the loading of the parts."

The parts were shipped to Anchorage where they were repacked and integrated with the S-39, c/n 920, parts and the whole shipped to Connecticut.

NC-803W arrived at the CAHA facilities at Bradley Field, Windsor Locks, Connecticut on Saturday, 19 October 1963, to end the colorful adventures of one more of the S-39s. But, the pattern is broken here and instead of total destruction or oblivion, the plane will be restored and preserved for posterity, a fitting tribute to a rugged plane.

907 S-39A NC-805W 1930

As in the case of 904, Maj. Robert Mikesh was of great help in clearing up the history of this plane.

He reported: "In the late summer of 1946, NC-805W owned by G. C. Vanderburg, and operated from Spirit Lake, Iowa, was being landed on Lake Okoboji. Unknown to the pilot, the right landing gear had slipped down, consequently it 'water-looped' on touchdown, which damaged the wing tip. It was floated to Terrace Park, where it could be taken out of the water. Early one morning about 2:00 a.m. when highway traffic was light, they lifted the tail wheel into the back of an open convertible for the three mile highway trip to the Spirit Lake Airport. The main wing panels had been removed for the trip.

"Halfway to the airport, the lights of a weaving car were seen approaching, and knowing that the driver must be drunk, they pulled off to the side of the road. Unfortunately, this left the Sikorsky still on the highway, cocked at an angle. Like you suspect, the car hit the hull with full force at an angle at the landing gear. This made a pretty big mess, but it was fortunate that no one was hurt. If that wasn't enough, while arguing who was to blame, an unsuspecting car from the other direction plowed into the other side of the hull. As told to me, it was many small pieces of aluminum twisted shapes, by now. The patrolman who was summoned was quite puzzled about the reported accident of a car hitting an airplane.

"The parts were taken to the airport, where they were stacked behind the hangar for years. Five or six years later it was sold as scrap. To follow all this up, I went behind this hangar and there is no trace of anything resembling an airplane part, as the hangar is now a theater, and even the weeds some distance away revealed nothing. I called two junk dealers who were in business at that time, but apparently they weren't the purchasers, or at least they had no airplane parts or were not familiar with the incident. Jerry Halverson had talked to George Vanderburg, the week before my visit and asked him. He confirmed that it was sold as scrap, but did not remember to whom he sold it. He was glad to get rid of it."

908 S-39A NC-806W 1930

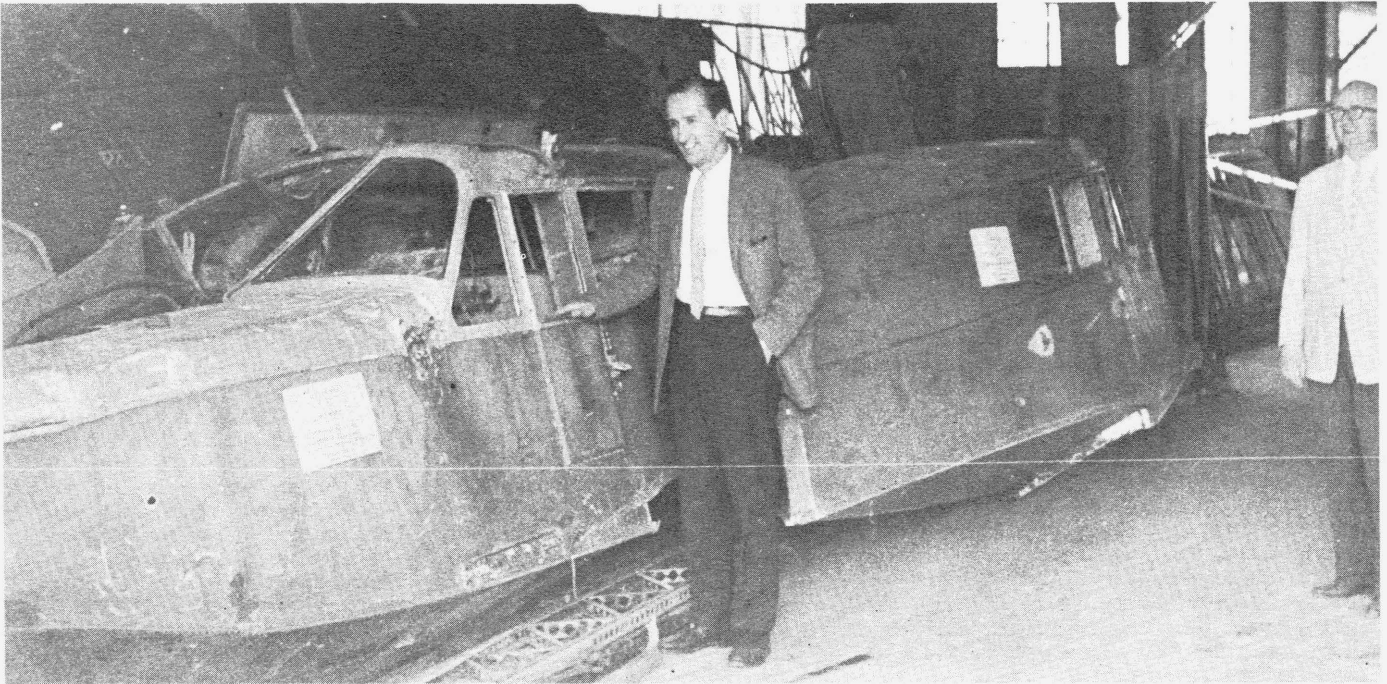
Phil Redden reported that this plane was probably (although this is not confirmed) scrapped.

911 S-39C NC-809W 1932

Shortly after publication of "The Sikorsky S-39," a Fairbanks, Alaska dentist, Dr. Sydney Stealey wrote the author with additional information on the final end to one more of the S-39s. Reported Dr. Stealey, "This past March (1962) I was in Anchorage and tried to locate



Another view of c/n 904 showing how the attentions of a bulldozer almost pushed the engine into the pilot's compartment. (Photo - Phil Redden)



Igor I. Sikorsky, Jr. inspects the hull of c/n 904, hull of c/n 920 in background, at CAHA Bradley Field facility.

Mr. Vic Lenhart, but in the short time available was able to only talk with his wife. They had the parts of two S-39s and assembled one from these and were using it to haul supplies to their Lodge at Two Lakes. In 1956 or '57, they had a full load of building supplies (almost one ton) aboard and were landing on glassy water on the lake. The pilot hit the water hard and bounced, then went around to try another landing. Evidently the right wheel jolted down and went unnoticed. Upon hitting the water on the next try the plane spun around and capsized but remained floating. Two fishermen picked them up and then chopped several holes in the hull trying to get a dog out, but without success. The plane probably could have been beached, but it wasn't, and sank about two hours later, in 200 feet of water. No attempt at salvage was made.

920 S-39B NC-58V 1930

Regarding NC-58V, Major Mikesh reported in his letters that it was also purchased by Mr. G. K. Halverson from Buck's Seaplane Base, Pittsburgh, Penn., in the early spring of 1946.

"On a Sunday morning," he stated, "in August 1946, while taxiing on the step after a landing from Milford, Iowa, going to the dock at Arnold's Park, a water-taxi closed in at a 45 degree angle from the right and collided with the S-39. The boat made it safely to the shore and discharged its passengers before it sank.

"The S-39's hull was pierced, opening both forward, watertight compartments. Mr. Halverson was the only one on the S-39. A boat came to tow the aircraft into shore, but the rope broke due to the drag and the S-39 sank to the bottom near the shore, leaving the wings on the surface of the water.

"The next day a work boat began towing operations to a beach about a mile away, with the wing planing on the surface. Halfway there, the nose cleat gave way and down it went--in about 30 feet of water. It sat there for about 10 days while the insurance company decided what action to take. It was safe from storms there, anyway!

"Reclamation of the aircraft was decided upon, so a steam, excursion boat was hired for the tow. Yours truly was elected to swim down to tie the line to the base of the forward wing Vee strut. (It was a long way

down!) Once again it was under tow, and it was proven that wings do fly under water. Hardly 75-100 feet went by when the water soaked wings raised it off the bottom and had it planing on the surface again.

"Two of us dismantled the aircraft on the beach (Terrace Park, south end) and it was trucked to St. Cloud, Minn., and placed under repair by Mr. B. G. Vandre.

"The aircraft was rebuilt and ready for pick-up in late fall. However, before it was picked up by Jerry Halverson, a hail storm finished off the new fabric, and the aircraft was again non-flyable, only this time the entire expense of repair was for Mr. Halverson. To settle the total bill, Jerry gave Mr. Vandre the airplane and \$5,000, whereby Mr. Vandre resold the aircraft for \$16,500."

Bob Mikesh ended his report with an interesting comment on Halverson's feeling on the subject of S-39s: "I sure as hell did well in the Sikorsky business, huh?"

Eventually, following use in Alaska by Reeve Aleutian Airways the plane was junked and then saved by Phil Redden, who shipped its remains, with NC-803W, to Connecticut for restoration.

So ends the colorful history of the 23 rugged S-39s. In their lifetimes they explored Africa and Australia, flew on the European continent, served among the first, plush executive planes, one even being mounted on a yacht, and ended their lives in many dramatic ways. They performed outstanding and heroic rescues with the Civil Air Patrol in the war. Some were destroyed in crashes, some were scrapped and, ironically, two of the 23 planes were destroyed by drunk drivers, one being torpedoed by a boat with a drunken helmsman, and the other being wrecked by a drunken automobile driver. Supposedly, there is still an S-39 at Stoney River, Alaska, a remote trading post on the Kuskowim River, where it crashed before World War II.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: It would be most welcome if anyone with knowledge of other facets of the S-39 history would contact the author. Unusual photos of these planes, or photos and information which would be useful for future planned articles on the S-40, S-41, S-42, S-43 and the earlier S-34 and S-36 would be much appreciated.