25 Years Ago, April 1991

April 23 After a lengthy fly-off, the U.S. Air Force names the Lockheed YF-22 as the winner of the advanced tactical fighter competition. Incorporating the latest in stealth technology, this highly advanced aircraft can supercruise—fly supersonically without the need of an afterburner for its two Pratt & Whitney F119 turbofan engines. David Baker, Flight and Flying: A Chronology, p. 484.

April 27 The Eurocopter Tiger attack helicopter completes it maiden flight from its factory in Marignane, France. Germany and France have already ordered Tigers that are equipped with anti-tank missiles and other ground support weapons. Each Tiger is fitted with two 1,285-equivalent-shaft-horsepower MTU/Rolls-Royce/Turbomeca turboshaft engines. David Baker, Flight and Flying: A Chronology, p. 484.

50 Years Ago, April 1966

April 4 NASA announces the selection of 19 pilots for astronaut training, bringing the number of its astronauts to 50. Some of these astronauts go on to serve in Apollo missions to the moon, and three of them, Charles Duke, James Irwin and Edgar Mitchell, later walk on the moon. Flight International, April 28, p. 733.

April 6 The first revenue service of a passenger hovercraft over an international route begins when a British Westland 38-passenger SR.N6 hovercraft, operated by the Swedish-owned, British-staffed Hoverlloyd Ltd., departs from Ramsgate, England, to Calais, France. The hovercraft, also known as an air-cushion vehicle, is a craft capable of traveling over land and is a hybrid vessel operated by a pilot as an aircraft rather than a captain as a marine vessel. Flight International, April 21, p. 47.

April 7 An Atlas-Centaur vehicle is launched from Cape Kennedy with a dummy Surveyor soft-landing lunar spacecraft. One purpose of this mission, designated Atlas-Centaur 8 (AC-8), is to demonstrate Centaur’s capability to restart its high-energy engines in the space environment following a coast period in Earth orbit. Another goal is for the AC-8 vehicle to inject the dummy Surveyor into a simulated lunar transfer trajectory toward an “imaginary moon” following a 25-minute coast period in Earth orbit. The spacecraft then is to be placed in a highly elliptical Earth orbit, extending more than 804,650 km into space. But the Centaur stage fails to achieve a successful second ignition, leaving the dummy Surveyor stuck on Earth. Washington Post, April 8, p. A9; Atlas-Centaur 8 press kit, pp. 1-2.

April 8 The 1,769-kg Orbital Astronomical Observatory (OAO), the first in a series of four U.S. space observatories, is launched by an Atlas-Agena vehicle from Cape Kennedy. But after two days in orbit, it ceases operation due an overheating battery and short circuit. The mission of the OAO spacecraft is to make the first high-quality observations of space objects in ultraviolet light. OAO-2 is not launched until Dec. 7, 1968. Aviation Week, April 18, p. 31.

April 10 Aviatrix Geraldine Mock sets a world nonstop record for a woman in a 4,550-km, 31-hour flight from Honolulu, Hawaii, to Columbus, Ohio, in a single-engine Cessna 206. Mock was the first woman to make a successful solo flight around the world in 1964 in a single-engine Cessna 180, taking 29 days, with 21 stopovers. New York Times, April 12, p. 25.

April 12 The Soviet Union celebrates Cosmonautics Day as the fifth anniversary of the world’s first manned space flight, by Yuri Gagarin, that includes speeches by Gagarin and other cosmonauts at the Kremlin and at other events. Gagarin completed his 108-minute orbital flight in his Vostok 1 spacecraft in 1961. New York Times, April 14, p. 7.

April 13 Pan American World Airways, under the direction of Juan Trippe, places the first order for the new Boeing 747, the world’s first widebody
jetliner that is soon christened the “jumbo jet.” The order is for 25 747s, including 23 490-seat passenger models and two cargo models. The $525 million order is the most expensive in airline history. New York Times, April 14, p. 1.

April 25 The Soviet Union launches its third Molniya 1 (Lightning) communications satellite in a highly elliptical orbit. Such orbits allow the satellites to remain visible to sites in polar regions for extended periods. This type of orbit is suited to high-latitude regions that are difficult or impossible to service with geostationary satellites. On April 26, the first long-range radio and TV transmissions via the satellite between Moscow and the Far East are made. On May 18 the satellite transmits TV pictures of clouds over the Earth to ground stations. Primarily, the early Molniya satellites serve government and military communications traffic. Later, they’re also used to support the Russian civilian Orbita television network. Aviation Week, May 2, p. 26.

April 26 A NASA Convair 990 jet aircraft begins a series of flights to test new spacecraft sensors for weather measurements and to collect data at over 12,192 meters in support of the upcoming Nimbus C weather satellite scheduled for launch in May. NASA Release 66-107.

April 29 One of the world’s largest and most sophisticated space tracking and telemetry antenna is officially dedicated in Goldstone, California. The 64-m diameter, $14 million dish antenna is later used to track Mariner and other spacecraft to Mars, Venus and even Pluto. NASA Release 66-88.

75 Years Ago, April 1941

April 2 The Heinkel He 280V-1 prototype, the first aircraft powered by two turbojet engines and the first intended to be a fighter, makes its inaugural flight. The He 280 uses two HeS 8 centrifugal-flow engines designed by Dr. Hans von Ohain, the inventor of the first jet engine to fly. While designed as a combat aircraft, the He 280 is not placed into production; the larger Messerschmitt Me 262 is produced instead. J.R. Smith and Antony Kay, German Aircraft of the Second World War, pp. 293-298.

April 6 The German Luftwaffe conducts its first air attacks on Yugoslavia. By April 17, Yugoslav forces capitulate. The Yugoslav air force is eliminated four days after hostilities begin. Interavia, April 24, p. 5.

April 15 For the first time in the Western Hemisphere, a single-rotor helicopter achieves a flight longer than an hour when Igor Sikorsky pilots his Vought-Sikorsky VS-300A for 1 hour, 5 minutes and 14.5 seconds at the Sikorsky plant in Stratford, Connecticut. That’s a dramatic advance from his first helicopter flight of several seconds in 1939. E.M. Emme, ed., Aeronautics and Astronautics 1915-60, p. 41; D. Cochrane, V. Hardesty and R. Lee, The Aviation Careers of Igor Sikorsky, pp. 130, 132.

April 17 Igor Sikorsky’s VS-300A helicopter, fitted with floats, makes the first helicopter water landings with Sikorsky himself piloting. Dorothy Cochrane, Von Hardesty, and Russell Lee, The Aviation Careers of Igor Sikorsky, p. 130.

100 Years Ago, April 1916

April 15-29 The Royal Flying Corps reinforces British troops besieged by the Turks at Kut el Amara. RFC aircraft from 30 Squadron deliver 13 tons of supplies to the troops in the first large scale aerial resupply. Despite these efforts, the approximately 12,000 British and Indian troops surrender after a four-month siege. A. van Hoorebeeck, La Conquete de L’Air, p. 117.

April 20 Elliott Cowdin II, a pilot for the newly formed Escadrille Americaine, receives the Medaille Militaire, the first American to receive the prestigious French award. A. van Hoorebeeck, La Conquête de L’Air, p. 117.