

Life of Howard Hughes Was Marked by a Series of Bizarre and Dramatic Events

Two years ago one of Howard R. Hughes's many lawyers appeared before a Federal judge in Los Angeles in one of the many court cases involving the reclusive billionaire.

Asked to explain the failure of his client to appear, the attorney, Norbert Schlei, said Mr. Hughes was "a man to whom you cannot apply the same standards as you can to you and me."

He got no dispute on that point from judge or jury, although the case ended in one of the few setbacks Mr. Hughes ever encountered in court—a \$2,823,333 defamation award to his former aide Robert A. Maheu.

Neither that development nor the sequence of dramatic events that continued until his death ever persuaded him to appear in public. Shy, suspicious and obsessed with privacy, he traveled by night in private planes, almost never emerged from his international network of aeries, rarely received even his closest business associates and from day to day was seen only by a handful of men who served as combination secretaries, nurses, cooks, bodyguards and messengers to the outside world.

Perhaps the most bizarre outcome of a Hughes effort emerged a year ago when it became known that he and the Central Intelligence Agency had teamed up in a science-fiction escapade to recover a sunken Soviet submarine from the Pacific Ocean floor.

Ship Constructed

The submarine, which sank 750 miles northwest of Hawaii in 1968, held nuclear warheads and code books, and Mr. Hughes, at the behest of the C.I.A., commissioned the construction of a ship called the Glomar Explorer and a mammoth barge to retrieve the vessel. The entire project was conducted under the ruse of being a deep-sea mining research venture.

The notoriety attending that adventure followed by less than a year a series of disclosures suggesting that part of a \$100,000 Hughes "contribution" to former President Richard M. Nixon was included in some \$50,000 that Charles G. Rebozo is alleged to have spent for Mr. Nixon's benefit.

A persistent theory is that the Watergate break-in and the cover-up plot that followed it stemmed from a White House effort to suppress public knowledge of the payment from Mr. Hughes to Mr. Nixon.

The Irving Affair

Controversial and headline-making as these incidents and numbers of others in Mr. Hughes's life were, none galvanized the attention of the world like the extraordinary sequence of events stemming from the announcement by McGraw-Hill and Life magazine on Dec. 7, 1971, that they planned to publish an "autobiography" of Mr. Hughes, as told to a little-known expatriate American writer named Clifford Irving.

Many writers had attempted to get Mr. Hughes to tell his story, but none had ever gained his cooperation. Then Mr. Irving, falsely claiming to have met secretly with his subject more than 100 times for tape-recorded discussions about his life, came forward with a 230,000-word manuscript entitled "The Autobiography of Howard Hughes."

McGraw-Hill gave him \$750,000 for it—a \$100,000 advance on book sales and \$650,000 in checks made out to "H. R. Hughes," as payment to Mr. Hughes for his "cooperation."

Mr. Irving's wife, Edith, using the name Helga R. Hughes, deposited the checks in a Swiss bank. McGraw-Hill sold excerpt rights to Life.

Mr. Hughes promptly denounced the work as a hoax in an extraordinary telephone news conference, filed a lawsuit to halt publication and promised to prove Mr. Irving was a fake. (He also charged that his aide, Mr. Maheu, "stole me blind," leading to the defamation decision two years later.) The publishers rallied to Mr. Irving's defense—and the battle was joined.

For a nation preoccupied with the seemingly insolvable complexities of Vietnam, the Middle East and other problems, the Irving-Hughes fight was a fascinating mystery, fraught with intriguing ambiguities but sure to be unraveled in the end.

For weeks, the struggle was

played out across the front pages and broadcast outlets of the country with claims and counterclaims by the principals, disputes among handwriting experts over the "H. R. Hughes" check endorsements and almost daily new revelations by investigative reporters.

Gradually, however, the tide began to turn against Mr. Irving. Edith Irving was exposed as the "Helga R. Hughes" who appeared in Switzerland. Evidence mounted that Mr. Irving's manuscript resembled published and unpublished materials produced by others.

In mid-February of 1972, Life and McGraw-Hill conceded the work was a hoax and canceled publication plans. Mr. Irving and his wife pleaded guilty and both served jail sentences for their deception.

After the Irving affair, during which he remained secluded in a hotel in the Bahamas, Mr. Hughes spent what was for him a busy year of moving around. Caught between political factions in a dispute over his presence in Nassau, he quit his penthouse at the Britannia Beach Hotel.

But he did not return to Las Vegas, where he had lived at the Desert Inn penthouse. Instead he went to Managua, Nicaragua, then to Vancouver, British Columbia, and back to Managua. Dislodged but unhurt in the earthquake that struck the country soon after that, he left and went to London, taking the penthouse suite at the Park Hotel.

No matter where he was, Mr. Hughes's five close-lipped male attendants served him around the clock, in shifts. All but one were Mormons, whom he favored because they did not smoke or drink. The fifth was married to a Mormon.

Other than these men, Mr. Hughes rarely saw anyone but his wife, Jean Peters, the actress he married in 1957. They were divorced in 1971 after a lengthy separation.

The difficulty of seeing Mr. Hughes was once summed up

by his uncle, Rupert Hughes, the novelist, who said, "I can get through to the Almighty by dropping to my knees, but I don't know how to get in touch with Howard."

It wasn't always that way. Back in the nineteen-thirties, when he was setting air speed records and was the maverick Hollywood producer of "Hell's Angels," "Scarface" and "The Outlaw," the newspapers were laden with photographs of a lean and smiling Mr. Hughes posing with Jane Russell, Lana Turner, Ava Gardner and other film and cafe society beauties. A fictive version of those Hollywood years was reputedly contained in Harold Robbins's novel "The Carpetbaggers."

Won Congressional Medal

As a daring pilot, he set several air speed records and in 1938 flew around the world in 91 hours—a feat for which he was voted a Congressional medal. He never bothered to pick it up, however, and years later President Harry S. Truman found it in a White House desk and mailed it to him.

In public welcomes and ticker-tape parades that honored his flying exploits — including one in New York — the lanky Mr. Hughes was a smiling hero. "He had the face of a poet and the shyness of a schoolboy," according to The New York Times account of his City Hall reception.

But even when Mr. Hughes was a public figure, there were elements of mystery and enigma to him. His comings and goings were cloaked in secretiveness; his business dealings were consummated at odd hours and at places as uncommon as a men's room in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

Those who met Mr. Hughes in the early fifties, before he had secluded himself to the point where Fortune magazine spoke of him as "the spook of American capitalism," said that he customarily materialized for business conferences in tennis sneakers, jeans and a shirt open at the collar. There were a number of explanations for his reclusiveness: the desire of a billionaire to avoid importunate friends; his deafness; his shyness, which had been evident since young manhood; and a hypochondriacal fear of germs, which extended to separate refrigerators for himself and his wife, separate copies of magazines and newspapers and an unwillingness to shake hands.

One man who knew him well recalled:

"I went to shake hands and

he said, 'I'm sorry, I've been eating a sandwich and I got mustard on my hand.' That's all right, I said. 'Well,' said Mr. Hughes, 'I cut my hand when I was shaving; I have both mustard and blood on my hand.'"

A Governor's Request

After Mr. Hughes had settled in Nevada in 1966 and had invested more than \$125-million in casinos and real estate, Gov. Paul Laxalt let it be known that he would at least like to speak with his state's benefactor. Shortly thereafter Mr. Hughes — or a voice that identified itself as his — telephoned the Governor. Shrewd in politics, especially after his buffeting in Washington, Mr. Hughes, according to Mr. Laxalt, was an occasional telephoner, and the two men sometimes conversed for an hour.

About 25 years ago Mr. Hughes denied, in an interview, that there was anything especially eccentric about himself. He said:

"I am not a man of mystery. These stories grow like Greek myths. Every time I hear them, they're more fantastic. I run several businesses, and the people associated with me read those stories and do not understand them.

"There is nothing mysterious about me. I have no taste for expensive clothes. Clothes are something to wear and automobiles are transportation. If they merely cover me up and get me there, that's sufficient."

Eccentric or not, Mr. Hughes went to Nevada in 1966 under unusual circumstances, arriving

at Las Vegas in the dead of night in a private railroad train from Boston. He had journeyed to Boston from his home in Bel Air, Calif., for, depending on which report was accurate, an operation to relieve his deafness or to scout ways to invest the \$566-million he had recently received for his 78 per cent holding in Trans World Airlines. It was believed to be the largest sum ever to come into the hands of one man at one time.

Recuperated at Ranch

Mr. Hughes and his entourage installed themselves on the ninth (and top) floor of the Desert Inn, one of the most renowned of the Las Vegas hostleries. So far as is known, he left his quarters only for trips to his nearby ranch. Reports were that he often worked around the clock for four days at a stretch and

then, exhausted, recuperated at the ranch.

Work, for Mr. Hughes, often consisted of one telephone call after another, associates said. However, he rarely made night calls to persons who did not work for him. Once, when an aide complained after he had been aroused by calls for the third time after midnight, Mr. Hughes told him:

"Look, the bankers and others I have to call during the day. But you work for me. I can call you any time."

Shortly after his arrival in Las Vegas, Mr. Hughes bought the operating contracts of the Desert Inn for \$13.25-million, and later the property as well. One story was that he had acted when the owners requested him to leave his \$250-a-day suite to make way for already-booked guests. Another explanation was that this was the first in a series of shrewdly calculated investments by which Mr. Hughes could multiply his millions with relative tax freedom. "There are very few places in America

he could afford to get caught dead in," an aide remarked, alluding to Nevada's absence of state income or inheritance taxes.

A third, and perhaps complementary, explanation was provided by Mr. Hughes through Mr. Maheu in 1967 after the hermit entrepreneur had extended his Las Vegas holdings to desert acreage outside the city. This was that Mr. Hughes had in mind a huge regional airport for supersonic jets and subsonic jumbo jets that would transform Las Vegas into a terminal for the Southwest and California.

"A whole new concept of airport versus city location may take place," the Hughes statement said. "For instance, there may be one SST and jumbo-jet airport to serve the entirety of southern Nevada, California and Arizona. From this terminus, passengers may be flown by regular jet aircraft to any normally located present-day airport."

However visionary this statement may have been, reaction to it in Las Vegas was optimistic. "Everybody's punchy, especially the real estate brokers," one businessman said at the time. Others built a castle of dreams in which the hot desert area bloomed with industry. And Hank Greenspun, publisher of The Las Vegas Sun, began to compare Mr. Hughes, quite favorably, to Sir Isaac Newton.

In all, up to the close of 1969, Mr. Hughes had in-

vested about \$150 million in Las Vegas properties. His chief holdings, in addition to the Desert Inn, were the Sands, the Frontier and the Castaways hotels, all containing gambling casinos; the Silver Slipper, a supper club and casino; the Landmark Hotel, as yet to be opened; the 520-acre Krupp ranch; and the North Las Vegas Airport.

Besides this, Mr. Hughes was the purchaser of Air West,

with 9,000 route miles in eight Western states, Canada and Mexico. The acquisition was subject to approval of the Civil Aeronautics Board and the President. The line cost Mr. Hughes \$150-million, but it put him back in the air travel business, which he had left when he sold his controlling interests in Trans World and Northeast.

Former F.B.I. Agent

Reputed to be an exceedingly shrewd businessman, albeit an unconventional one, Mr. Hughes operated through Mr. Maheu, a strapping, middle-age former agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and scores of subordinates, most of whom never saw him.

The anchor of Mr. Hughes's fortune was his wholly owned Hughes Tool Company, situated in Texas, which manufactures and leases rock and oil drills. It also is the owner of a number of his other properties. He owned, moreover, the Hughes Aircraft Company in California, which manufactures electronic devices as well as planes and holds many Government contracts. This concern was nominally owned by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. Furthermore, he controlled Sports Network, Inc., a company that syndicates live and taped coverage of sports events to television stations.

Not everything that Mr. Hughes sought was he able to acquire. In 1968, for example, he failed in a bid for the American Broadcasting Company network of television and radio outlets. And a deal for at least one Las Vegas casino fell through.

Befitting a man with a passion for privacy, Mr. Hughes tried to suppress books about himself. He was not totally successful, however. Before the Irving affair, one biography in progress was bought up from the writer; but two others persevered — Albert Gerber, who wrote "Bash-

ful Billionaire" for Lyle Stuart, and John Keats, who did "Howard Hughes" for Random House. From these and other sources Mr. Hughes's life has been fairly well documented.

Howard Robard Hughes Jr. was born on Christmas Eve, 1905, in Houston. He was shy and serious as a boy and showed mechanical aptitude early. He attended two preparatory schools, the Fessenden School at West Newton, Mass., and the Thacher School at Ojai, Calif. He also took courses at Rice Institute in Houston and the California Institute of Technology, Pasadena. It is not clear how long he remained at either place. He held no degree.

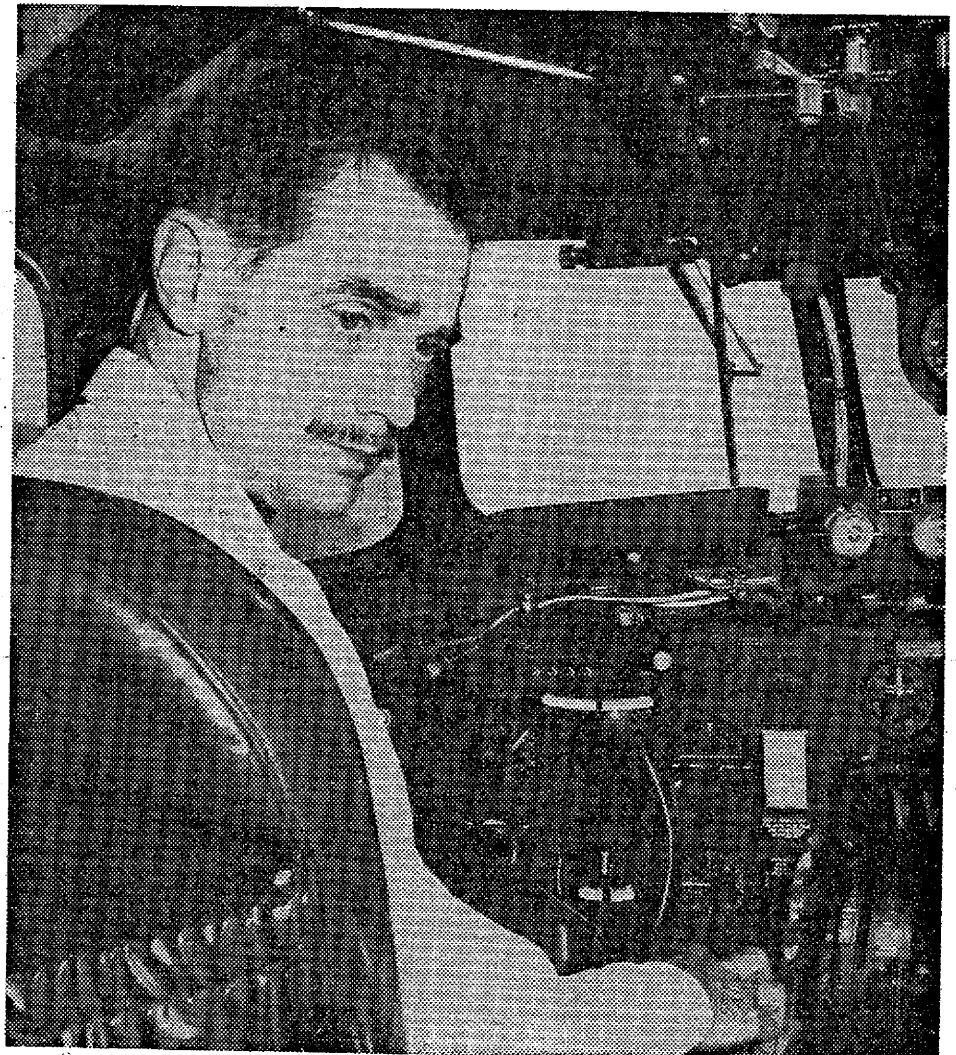
Mr. Hughes's father was a mining engineer who developed the first successful rotary bit

for drilling oil wells through rock. In 1909 the Hughes Tool Company was organized to manufacture and lease the patented rock bits. This was the beginning of the Hughes fortune.

The Hughes Tool Company had almost a monopoly in this field and consequently accumulated enormous revenues and profits. Even after the expiration of key patents in the nineteen-thirties and fifties, it continued to dominate the market.

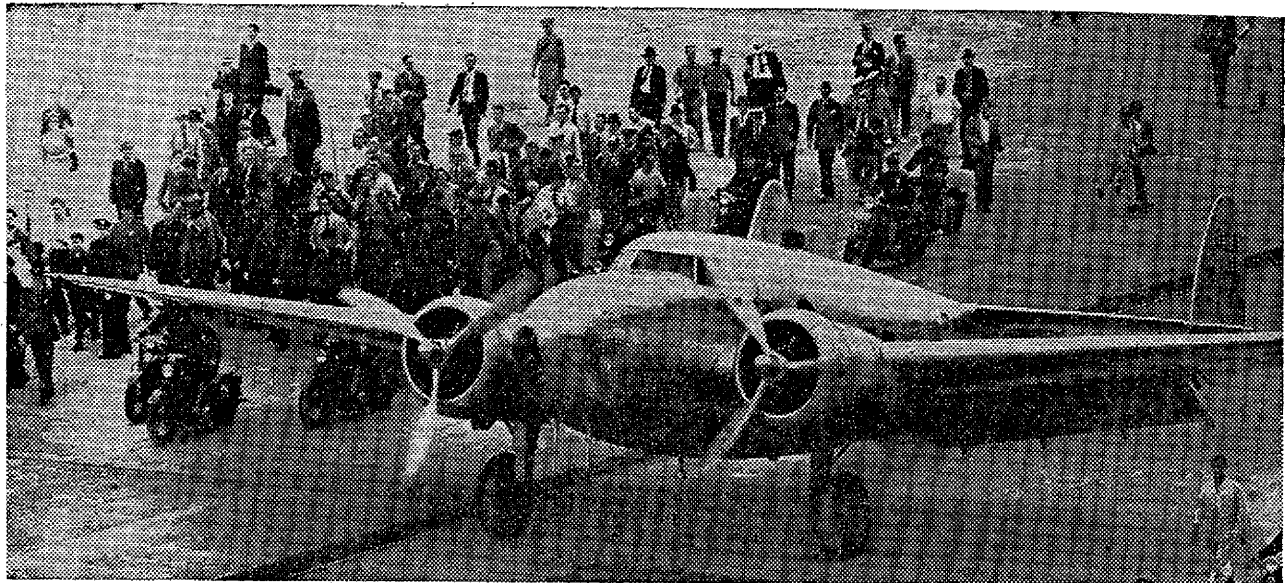
When his mother died in 1922, Howard Hughes inherited 50 per cent of the company. On his father's death in 1924, he received 25 per cent. The family business was then appraised at \$650,000. Mr. Hughes assumed personal direction of the company at the age of 18. Two years later, he bought out the remaining family interest.

When 19, Mr. Hughes married Ella Rice, a Houston social figure and member of the family that founded Rice Institute.



Howard Hughes at the controls of a plane during demonstration of radar device in 1947

Associated Press



The New York Times

"The 'World's Fair of 1939,' a Howard Hughes plane, landing at Floyd Bennet Field, Brooklyn, in July of 1938 after establishing a record of three days, 19 hours and 14 minutes in a round-the-world flight.

This marriage lasted four and a half years. Mrs. Hughes obtained a divorce on the grounds of cruelty.

A Flop and a Hit

Meanwhile, Mr. Hughes had shifted his interest to Hollywood, where he set forth, characteristically, in lone-wolf style, to become a movie producer. His first film was called "Swell Hogan" and it was so bad it was never released.

But then came "Hell's Angels," starring the late Jean Harlow, the picture that made Miss Harlow a rising star and was a spectacular success all around. Filmed in 1930 at a cost of \$4-million, it was then the most expensive movie ever made. Much of the cost resulted when the picture was made over for sound, which had come into general use when it was half finished. Mr. Hughes wrote, produced and directed this film, which grossed \$3-million.

There followed other successes, including "Scarface" with Paul Muni and George Raft and "Front Page" with Pat O'Brien. As an independent producer, Mr. Hughes turned out about a dozen pictures in the late twenties and early thirties.

By then, Mr. Hughes had been intrigued with the still-young field of aviation. He learned to fly during the filming of "Hell's Angels" and was seriously injured when his plane, of World War I vintage, crashed.

There were to be other narrow escapes. In May, 1943, he was injured again when an experimental two-engined flying boat crashed and sank in Lake Mead near Boulder Dam, Nev. His most critical injuries

occurred in 1946, when he crashed on the first flight of his XF-11, a high-speed, long-range airplane.

Injuries Almost Fatal

On the last occasion, Mr. Hughes tried to pancake the plane onto a golf course but hit three houses and a garage, instead. His chest and left lung were crushed; he also suffered a skull fracture and had nine broken ribs. Physicians gave him little chance to live. During his recovery, he designed a new type of hospital bed.

Throughout the nineteen-thirties when he was designing, building and flying his own planes, Mr. Hughes was one of the gallery of spectacular names in flying. Between 1935 and 1938 he set three major speed records and twice won the Harmon Trophy.

The Spruce Goose

These achievements, now a distant memory, were overshadowed in more recent years by a notable failure—that of the Hughes flying boat. This mammoth, eight-engine sea-plane, built of plywood, was conceived by Mr. Hughes during World War II when a shortage of metal dictated the use of alternate materials. The Spruce Goose, as it was dubbed by the press, was designed to carry hundreds of troops to Europe safely above the mauling German submarines in the Atlantic. It had a wing spread of 320 feet, a hull three stories high and tail assembly eight stories tall.

The Government put \$18-mil-

lion into the plane, and Mr. Hughes said he had invested \$23-million of his own funds. The giant craft flew only once—on Nov. 2, 1947, when, with Mr. Hughes at the controls, it got about 70 feet off the water for a one-mile run. At last report, the Spruce Goose was in a guarded hangar in Long Beach, Calif.

Before the war was over, Mr. Hughes had returned to independent motion-picture production. The occasion was a film that proved to be his most controversial venture. It was "The Outlaw," starring Mr. Hughes's personal discovery, Jane Russell.

This Western movie was filmed in 1941-42, but it was denied a seal of approval by the Motion Picture Association of America because of greater exposure of Miss Russell than was customary.

The picture was released, anyway and was shown in San Francisco in 1943. It ran into a storm of protest and censorship and was temporarily withdrawn. In 1946 "The Outlaw" was put into general distribution, with Mr. Hughes reaping both profits and publicity.

Purchase of R.K.O.

Two years later, Mr. Hughes made a more determined return to the motion-picture business by buying a controlling interest in the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Corporation, then Hollywood's fifth largest studio, for \$8,825,000.

During the erratic Hughes regime, R.K.O. was constantly in the red, losing more than \$20-million, while other studios made money. In Mr. Hughes's last two years at the studio,

R.K.O. made only five pictures, although it invested in others. Mr. Hughes was accused in one of the many stockholder suits of running the studio with "caprice, pique and whim."

On March 31, 1954, he wrote a personal check for \$23,489,478 and bought up the outstanding stock of R.K.O. He thus became the first person to own a major movie studio. The deal was the biggest personal transaction in Hollywood history.

But by July, 1955, Mr. Hughes was tired of the movies. He had been busy working on a jet liner with Convair and T.W.A. He sold the R.K.O. Radio Pictures Corporation, the motion picture subsidiary of R.K.O. Pictures, then a holding company, to the General Tire and Rubber Company for \$25 million.

In the fall he merged the remaining R.K.O. company into the Atlas Corporation in return for an 11 per cent stock interest in Atlas. He was forced to put that stock in a trusteeship because of Atlas's stock control of Northeast Airlines. He later divested himself of his interest in Northeast.

Court Fight Over T.W.A.

All the while, Mr. Hughes was engaged in one of the most spectacular corporate battles in recent years. It involved control of Trans World Airlines and resulted in a complex mass of litigation.

Although retaining his nominally controlling interest in T.W.A., Mr. Hughes lost operating control of the airline to a group of Wall Street banks and financial institutions that had financed the purchase of jet planes for the line. That was in 1961 when Mr. Hughes was forced to put his majority stock interest in a voting trust for 10 years.

Thereafter, both sides—the new trustee management and the Hughes interests—sued each other more than \$500 million. Repeated court hearings were held, although Mr. Hughes refused to appear at any of them.

Then on April 9, 1966, came the abrupt and surprising news that Mr. Hughes was putting his 78 per cent interest in T.W.A. up for sale.

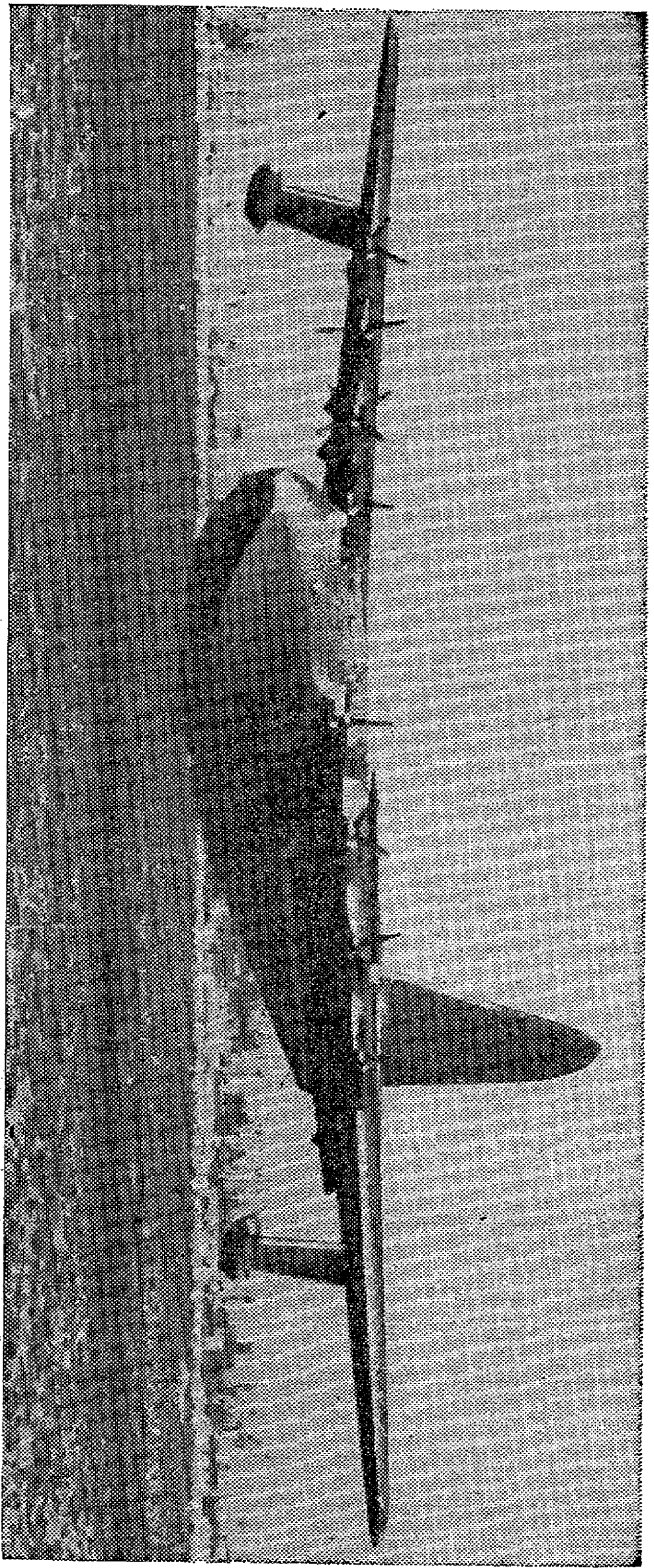
Characteristically, Mr. Hughes had no comment, nor were his aides able to offer any explanation for the decision to sell.

Selling it out did not end the court fight, but Mr. Hughes ultimately won it in the Supreme Court.



Associated Press

Howard Hughes with Ava Gardner in 1946



The Hughes flying boat at Long Beach, Calif., on Nov. 2, 1947 during its first and only test flight. The plane, with Mr. Hughes at the controls, got

70 feet off the water for a one-mile run. The Government put \$18 million into the plane, and Mr. Hughes said he invested \$23 million of his funds.

Associated Press