

Wesley G. Lematta

Editor's Note: This article is based on interviews between Wesley G. Lematta, Founder and Chairman of the Board of Columbia Helicopters, and Frank L. Jensen, Jr., Secretary of the Helicopter Foundation International (HFI).

HFI: Wes, thanks for taking time for this interview. Let's start at the present: You are Chairman of the Board of Columbia Helicopters, a very successful company that you founded 46 years ago. But to get to where you, and Columbia Helicopters, are today, took a lot of hard work and some tough decisions along the way. So let's jump back to when and how you got started in the helicopter business. When was that?

Lematta: In 1945, when serving as an infantryman in the Philippines, I laid in a foxhole seeing our aircraft flying over the top of me, strafing the enemy and thinking that the pilot could at least sleep in a bed at night. That was the seed that propelled me towards eventually getting my flying certificates on the GI bill when I came out of the service.

HFI: And how soon after that did you start Columbia Helicopters?

Lematta: In 1957, my brother Eddie financed a Hiller 12-B, which was the start of Columbia's eventual fleet of approximately 50 helicopters. On April 24, 1957, we incorporated Columbia Helicopters, Inc. (CHI), and established the company at the Troutdale Airport near Portland, Oregon.

HFI: What sort of missions were you flying with your Hiller 12-B?

Lematta: Just about any legitimate work I could get, including flying Santa, the Easter bunny, giving rides, and later some small power line construction work.

HFI: If I remember correctly, you also made a very important and heroic rescue, that same year. Please tell us about that.

Lematta: When I learned of a ship sinking off the coast of Coos Bay Oregon, I was in the area and was able to quickly fly to the beach. Actually, I had just transported the District Engineer to that ship to present a safety award to the crew. Rough seas prevented boats from getting to the ship. Fortunately, I was able to rescue 17 of the seamen before the ship was completely swamped.

HFI: That was quite a feat, considering how many trips

between the ship and the shore that you had to make, and under very challenging conditions. Congratulations! And then the next year, 1958, what sort of flying did you do?

Lematta: I used the Hiller 12-B to tow a pair of water skiers from Portland Oregon to Astoria Oregon. The skiers were hoping to set a distance/speed record with their feat. Unfortunately, their large bets were probably put on hold when we nearly ran out of fuel about 5 miles from our final destination, forcing me to land prematurely—much to their chagrin! Later I used the Hiller as a flying trapeze with the assistance of my brother, Jim. A pair of acrobats performed beneath the aircraft at fairs and festivals throughout the West and Midwest.

HFI: And in 1959 you expanded your fleet, I believe?

Lematta: Yes, that year we purchased the company's first new helicopter, a Bell 47G. In October of that year, I used the new 47G to string towlines between a grounded ship and The Salvage Chief, a recovery vessel, offshore.



Wesley G. Lematta, Founder and Chairman of Columbia Helicopters

HFI: Wes, you have really set an example that Igor Sikorsky would be proud of, with all of the helicopter rescue work that you have done over the years. Wasn't it about this time that you developed a system for assisting helicopter pilots doing construction work? Please tell us about that.

Lematta: That was the Direct Visual Operational Control (or DVOC), which I developed in 1960. The technique involves suspending the load from a long line, and flying the helicopter while leaning out an open door to observe the load placement. This method greatly enhances precision load placement by helicopter. Plastic side bubbles on the helicopter later eliminated the need for flying with the door open. And the DVOC has proven

its value many times over, in the past 43 years.

HFI: When did you move the company from Troutdale Airport to Swan Island?

Lematta: That was in 1962, and we remained there for 14 years before moving to our present location at Aurora, Oregon, approximately 25 miles south of Portland.

HFI: When did you obtain your first tandem rotor helicopters?

Lematta: In 1969, I purchased three Boeing-Vertol 107-II's from Pan Am.

HFI: You have been a true pioneer in civil use of tandem rotors, and in heli-logging. When did you start with this activity?

Lematta: In 1971, we proved the feasibility of logging with helicopters when CHI took part in the first heli-logging project using a Sikorsky S-61. That same year we moved two Boeing-Vertol 107-II's to Papua New Guinea



top: Wes Lematta flies over the frame of his new Swan Island headquarters on May 2, 1962.

bottom: Wes Lematta (left) and unidentified men look over plans for the company's new headquarters at Swan Island. Date of photo: May 2, 1962.

to begin moving oilrigs. This was the first use in the oil patch of what was then considered "heavy lift" helicopters. A world record was set by Columbia that year in the longest rig move by helicopters — 70 nautical miles (nm).

HFI: When did you expand your fleet of Boeing-Vertol 107 II's?

Lematta: in 1972, we were able to purchase four more Boeing-Vertol 107 II's from New York Airways. By now, we had several years of experience with that aircraft, and we were very pleased with its performance. That was also the year that CHI began to use the Vertols on logging operations.

HFI: When did you expand your operations into South America?

Lematta: In 1975, we moved two Vertols to Peru, to begin oilrig moves there.

HFI: And in 1976, you moved your headquarters to its present location at Aurora, Oregon. What else happened of significance that year?

Lematta: In 1976, CHI purchased four more Vertol 107-II's from the government of Thailand. That brought our fleet of Vertols to 11, making us the largest civil operator of tandem rotor helicopters in the world.

HFI: By now, CHI was operating throughout the USA, in New Guinea, and South America. When did you start operations in the Mid-East?

Lematta: That was in 1977, when two of our Vertols provided fire suppression and search and rescue operations in Saudi Arabia, during the annual Moslem Hadj. Also, in 1977, several of our Vertols took part in a massive forest fertilization project in Washington and Oregon states, delivering over 26,000-tons of fertilizer in carefully measured quantities.

HFI: When did you expand your operations into Alaska?

Lematta: In 1978, Columbia purchased Alaska Helicopters, a pioneer in Alaska aviation. Also that year, Columbia Helicopters received the American Helicopter Society's (AHS) "Captain William J. Kossler Award" for "its notable achievement in the application of the helicopter in aerial yarding of timber."

HFI: Didn't you also support a logging venture in Canada about this time?

Lematta: Yes, in 1979 we dry-leased some aircraft to Whonnock Industries for a helicopter-logging venture in Canada.

HFI: And I believe that you were given an AHS award that same year.

Lematta: Yes. You've done your homework, haven't you? In 1979 I was honored to receive the American Helicopter Society's "Captain William J. Kossler Award", which recognizes the greatest achievement in the practical application or operation of the helicopter. This is the



Wes Lematta (right) and older brother Bill at the Swan Island headquarters. March 5, 1965.

same award that the company had won the previous year.

HFI: It seems as if each succeeding year brings new and greater achievements to yourself and the company that you founded. Tell us some of CHI's achievements during the early 1980's.

Lematta: Actually there was quite a lot of productive activity. One of our Vertols: N6674D passed the 20,000 flight-hours mark. CHI also broke ground on a CT 58 engine test cell. And, using a Vertol 107-II, Columbia flew repair linemen in a basket over energized power lines for the first time. Also, CHI towed a 220-ton Hover Craft across 50 miles of ice off Prudhoe Bay.

HFI: Wes, the photos taken of that operation are certainly among the most dramatic helicopter shots of all time. I didn't mean to interrupt you: please keep going with CHI activities on the early 1980's.

Lematta: CHI completed successful tests on the use of composite blades on the Vertol 107-II. Also, with Boeing, CHI successfully demonstrated the Boeing 234 Chinook in Anchorage. Columbia's heavy-lift Boeing 234 "Chinook" experience began when we provided flight crews to ARCO Alaska for its two leased helicopters. ARCO and Columbia operated these helicopters from Nome Alaska to ARCO's Navarin Basin Cost #4 well, some 400 nm into the Bering Sea close to the Russian Chukotski Peninsula.

HFI: I recall that your crews had some problems with Soviet surveillance aircraft as they approached the destination near Soviet territory. Also, about this time you were elected to the Helicopter Association International (HAI) Board of Directors, I believe.

Lematta: Yes, that was in 1984. I enjoyed my service on the HAI Board. Also, in 1984, Columbia officially purchased its first two Boeing 234 "Chinook" helicopters.

HFI: In 1985, Columbia achieved another helicopter "first." Please tell us about that.

Lematta: Yes, a CHI pilot completed what is thought to be the first commercial external load using a Boeing 234 Chinook. Also, a CHI Chinook made its first commercial flight, carrying passengers and supplies to and from an oilrig in the Bering Sea. And during that year, three of CHI's Vertols were flown to Sudan by a Lockheed C-5 Galaxy. These Vertols were under contract to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to conduct famine relief operations. In 100 days of operations, the three Vertols flew a total of 2,598 hours, delivering over eight million pounds of food and medical supplies.

HFI: Columbia Helicopters, and you, have always been in the forefront of innovation, and in practical use of the helicopter to alleviate human suffering. Please continue with activities in 1986.

Lematta: Columbia opened its Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) approved maintenance facility to perform outside maintenance. Also, in May, CHI's fleets of Boeing-Vertol 107-II's had achieved a total of 160,000 flight-hours. And CHI successfully demonstrated mixing/dropping of fire retardant using an onboard metering unit.

HFI: That system has really proven its worth since then. And what did CHI do in 1987?

Lematta: Among other activities, CHI assisted Boeing in demonstrating the 234 Chinook in China.

HFI: And thus CHI operated in yet another environment. Please continue with the rest of the 1980's.

Lematta: You're really taxing my memory. But here goes: In the Summer of 1988, CHI flew over 2,000 flight-hours fighting forest fires, setting a new company record. Many of those hours were accumulated fighting fires in Yellowstone National Park. Also that year CHI achieved 200,000 flight-hours in the Vertol 107-II's. In 1989, CHI



above: Wes Lematta, in the left seat, provides flight instruction to a student in a Hughes 200 at the company's Swan Island facility in Portland. August 8, 1963

below: An aerial photo from the company's grand opening celebration of the Swan Island facility. July 18, 1962.





left to right: Wes Lematta with brothers Jim, and Ed. June 11, 1970.



An aerial photo of the company's facility taken at the time of the grand opening in November of 1976.



A group photo showing all of the people working at Columbia's new headquarters in Aurora, Oregon in 1976 at the time of the grand opening. The photo includes all of the office and maintenance staff assigned to the facility at the time. Wes Lematta is located in the front row on the far right side.

purchased three Boeing 234 Chinooks from British International Helicopters. That year CHI aircraft assisted in clean-up operations following the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska's Prince William Sound. Also, three Vertols under contract to Chevron in Papua New Guinea flew a total of 8,429.8 flight-hours on oil exploration operations. That amounts to an average daily utilization of 7.7 hours per aircraft for the year.

HFI: And that is the sort of outstanding utilization and availability that has helped make Columbia Helicopters a leader. Please tell us a bit about the 1990's.

Lematta: CHI started that decade off doing salvage logging operations in South Carolina, in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo. That year, I was honored to receive the Lawrence D. Bell award at HAI's annual awards ceremony at HELI-EXPO 1990.

HFI: For those readers who may not know, that award is "a salute to excellence in helicopter management leadership." Wes was cited for "his vision, professionalism, and unbending dedication to safety in all operations. The citation continued that Wes "not only demonstrated the many uses of the helicopter, but also eased the way for other industry entrepreneurs." This was certainly a most well deserved award. Please continue with activities during the 1990s and where Columbia is today.

Lematta: In 1991 CHI purchased two Boeing 234 Chinooks from Trump Airlines. And that year CHI shipped a 234 Chinook to Papua, New Guinea for petroleum exploration support; that operation continues to the present day. In 1992, I retired as President of Columbia Helicopters, and retained my present title of Chairman of the Board. In 1995, I was honored to receive the Pathfinder Award given by the Boeing Museum of Flight in Seattle. That award recognizes those individuals who have made significant contributions to flight in the northwestern part of the United States. As of today, CHI's fleet consists of eight Boeing 234 Chinooks and sixteen Boeing/Kawasaki Vertol 107 II. We have now flown over 61,000 hours on those Chinooks and over 541,000 hours on our Vertols.

HFI: Wes, your career has certainly been dramatic and highly productive thus far. Your outstanding success with Columbia Helicopters alone is worthy of an entire book on that subject. And you have always found time to actively support HAI, and AHS, Twirly Birds, and HFI, among others. You were one of the first individuals to make a significant cash contribution to help HFI get started back in 1983. How active are you these days in Columbia Helicopters?

Lematta: As Chairman, I preside over the weekly meetings of the Board of Directors, and I do keep my finger on the pulse. Also, with Roy Simmons of Columbia Helicopters currently serving on the HAI Board of Directors, I have a window on that world, as well.

HFI: Again, Wes, on behalf of the HFI, I congratulate you on your truly remarkable career, and thank you for taking the time for this interview. **R**

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