THE ORIG
CANAD

Canadian Helicopters Limited's two restored Bell 47D-1 helicopters sit on the edge of a lake in northern Ontario in 1955. **Mike Fleming Collection Photo**

GINAL
DIAN

In 1952, when the rotary-wing industry was still in its infancy, two pioneering men joined forces to create the "original" Canadian Helicopters Ltd.

By Bob Petite

The blue, red, and white aircraft of Canadian Helicopters, now part of the HNZ Group Inc., are a familiar sight across Canada, but many may be surprised to learn that the famous operator wasn't the first company to carry the storied name. The "original" Canadian Helicopters was formed in 1952, when the helicopter industry was just seven years old, by rotary-wing pioneers Paul Ostrander and Jack Fleming. At the time, the Canadian civil registry showed a grand total of 25 commercial helicopters.

The Canadian commercial helicopter industry had begun in 1947 when five Bell Aircraft Company Model 47B-3 agricultural aircraft were imported into the country. These aircraft were operated by the Photographic Survey Company Ltd. (later Kenting Aircraft) in Ontario, Skyway Services Ltd. in Manitoba, and Okanagan Air Service Ltd. (later Okanagan Helicopters) in British Columbia.

Ostrander, who had been a World War II Royal Canadian Air Force Spitfire pilot, got his start with Skyways Services Ltd., where he flew a Bell 47B-3 — and had the dubious distinction of being involved in the first commercial helicopter accident in Canada. His early career took him across the country, where he worked for a variety of operators, including Okanagan Air Service, the Helicopter Exploration Company, and Hollinger Ungava Transport.

After five years of flying for other people (during which he obtained a degree in business), Ostrander decided to branch out and start his own helicopter company. He used his connections in Ottawa and was able to win an Army Survey topographic and mapping contract in the Northwest Territories — the first contract for the newly-formed Canadian Helicopters Ltd., which was based out of Toronto, Ont. However, Ostrander was still missing a crucial component for his business — a helicopter. And, at that time, they were difficult to obtain from Bell due to the war in Korea. However, he eventually found a used Bell 47D in Providence, R.I., which was owned by Leon W. Plympton of New England Helicopter Service Inc.

Ostrander contacted Jack Fleming, with whom he had worked alongside at the Helicopter Exploration Company, to see if he'd like to join him at Canadian Helicopters Ltd. Fleming had obtained his start in the aviation industry in the early 1940s at Central Aircraft Ltd. in London, Ont., and after working for a time in the mining industry in Yellowknife, N.W.T., had joined the Helicopter Exploration Company where he maintained the company's Hiller 360. However, the offer to join Ostrander's new company proved too good to resist, and Fleming was soon in Providence to start overhauling the used Bell 47.

Canadian Helicopters Ltd.'s first helicopter — a Bell 47D — is readied for the trip from Providence, R.I., to Edmonton, Alta., in 1952.
Mike Fleming Collection Photo

A TOUGH START

Money was very tight for the little Canadian Helicopters company. Ostrander was able to convince Plympton to let them pay for the Bell 47 after the completion of the topographic survey contract — and in exchange, Plympton got a third share in the company.

With the Bell 47D overhauled, it was loaded onto a trailer and hauled across the U.S. to the border crossing in Alberta, where it was held up as no one had the money to pay the C$1,800 sales tax to bring it into the country. However, the money was eventually sent, and the helicopter was soon back on its way to Hay River, N.W.T., for the start of the army survey project.

Canadian was to receive $20,000 for the work when the helicopter arrived in Hay River. But upon their arrival, there was no money. Ostrander made several calls to the federal government in Ottawa, and, ever suspicious, flew the helicopter into the woods, hid it and walked out. Fortunately, his concerns proved to be ill founded; the money was soon in hand, the helicopter was brought back out of its hiding place, and Canadian began work on its first contract.

The aerial survey covered 52,000 square miles (135,000 square kilometers) from Hay River to Yellowknife. The contract started on June 16 and was completed on September 30, 1952. "We flew over 300 hours," recalled Fleming in an interview with *Vertical*. "It was a fabulous year. We kept dumping fan belts and replacing them around every 25 hours." The work included topographic surveys and barometric control mapping.

In his log book at the completion of the army survey, Ostrander wrote: "Six thousand landings and take offs. Best day 10.40 hours, one engine failure, five days unserviceable. We are in business, I think."

With that year's survey complete, Fleming began the overhaul of the Bell 47D back in Edmonton, while Ostrander headed east to Toronto. While Fleming was still working on the overhaul, he received a call from his business partner; Ostrander had made a deal with Plympton to purchase two more helicopters. Canadian Helicopters was expanding.

The aircraft were two Bell 47Bs, but Fleming and newly-hired aircraft engineer Ernie Grant (who Ostrander knew from his days with Hollinger-Ungava,) planned to convert them into 47D-1s. However, they ran out of money and

Pioneering helicopter pilot Paul Ostrander (left) with maintenance engineer Ernie Grant on the floats of the cabin model Bell 47B. Mike Fleming Collection Photo

Jack Fleming watches as the Bell 47B runs up prior to lifting off. **Mike Fleming Collection Photo**

One of the operator's aircraft on floats in old town Yellowknife, N.W.T., during a topographic survey in 1952. **NWT Archives Photo**

Ostrander (left) and Jack Fleming at the New England Helicopter Service hangar with their restored Bell 47D-1 in 1953. **Mike Fleming Collection Photo**

time, so only one of the aircraft completed the conversion. The other was the only cabin model Bell 47B to be imported into Canada in that configuration.

This time, Ostrander arranged to air freight the two Bell 47 helicopters up to Edmonton for the start of the 1953 army survey contract, along with other work. Ostrander hired two pilots to fly the helicopters with him — Steve Haynes and Ken Hayden. They began flying in June 1953 with all three helicopters — the Bell 47B, the Bell 47D that had worked the year before, and the new Bell 47D-1. The work area included most of northwestern Alberta; Fort Nelson, B.C.; Hay River; and Yellowknife.

One of the Bells was used in the Edson area on mapping and survey work, while the Bell 47D and Bell 47B ended up in the Northwest Territories. At one point, Canadian leased an aircraft from Associated Helicopters for a topographic survey.

The fleet had flown 450 hours by the end of the season — but following that, its return to Edmonton was to prove eventful. Ostrander flew the Bell 47B, and had to land between Yellowknife and Hay River to wait for the weather to clear. He was unaware that he was reported missing.

The Bell 47D, piloted by Haynes and with Fleming on board, had a far greater delay on its journey home. The pair had landed just north of Manning, Alta., where they had decided to check out an Alberta Forestry fire camp. All went well until they decided to take off. Fleming asked Haynes whether someone should cut down the tall tree close to the landing site, but the pilot said it shouldn't be a problem. After starting up and lifting off, the main rotor hit the tree — and down the helicopter came.

Both survived the crash — Haynes was unhurt, while Fleming required stiches after striking his head. He was put up in one of the fire tents and had to endure an all-night poker game played by the local firefighters. Grant, the company's aircraft engineer, hired a local farmer to haul the wrecked helicopter down to Manning by horse and wagon, where it was trucked to Grimshaw for transport by rail back to Ontario. Fleming got the medical treatment he needed, and made his way back to Edmonton.

The company's third aircraft — the Bell 47D-1 — was sent to Calgary to look for additional contract work with Haynes. He found some work flying the Calgary traffic engineer to investigate gridlock problems in the city.

Back at Canadian Helicopters' base at the Toronto Island Airport, work began on repairs to the Bell 47D, which was

upgraded to a 47D-1. The company's 47B was sent to the Blind River area of northern Ontario to undertake some prospecting work. It advertised the availability of its helicopters for staking mining claims in the north at a rate of $95 per hour.

While moving prospectors around in the Marathon area in the winter, Hayden wrecked one of the aircraft, which had to be hauled back to Toronto to be rebuilt; Fleming and Ostrander were finding that the helicopter industry was not that forgiving.

A CHANGING DYNAMIC

With work for the helicopters difficult to find, and the expensive costs of maintenance and restoration, money was tight for the small helicopter company. In 1954, Canadian did manage to find contracts for all three of its Bell 47s in Newfoundland and Labrador. It also looked at applying for additional bases in Ontario, Alberta, and in Newfoundland.

That summer, Canadian Helicopters Ltd. merged with Ambank Airlift Ltd., a new company based out of Fort William, Ont., that was run by G.A. "Hank" Rotherham — a former Royal Navy pilot. Ambank owned a Sikorsky S-55 plus several Bell 47s, and did forestry work for the Abitibi Power and Paper Company in Iroquois Falls. Ambank was also financed by Abitibi. The new merged company was called Canadian Helicopters (1954) Ltd.

With Abitibi having a controlling interest, Ostrander found himself losing control of the company. To make matters worse, he did not get along that well with Rotherham. (Ostrander even considered joining with Spartan Air

Services and Kenting Aviation at one time.)

Unknown to Ostrander and Rotherham, Abitibi's CEO D.W. Ambridge was talking to Okanagan Helicopters in early 1955. Abitibi was dissatisfied with the management and their investment in Ambank Airlift and Canadian Helicopters in Ontario. They wanted to know if Okanagan would buy Canadian Helicopters (1954) Ltd. — or at least take over the management of the company.

The hammer fell in March that year, when Okanagan agreed to the purchase. Okanagan's Alf Stringer took over as general manager, and Ostrander, Fleming, and Rotherham were out. The Canadian name eventually changed to Okanagan Helicopters on the side of the aircraft.

Ostrander's wife, Willie said it best: "It was a neat little company. That was Canadian Helicopters."

Afterwards, Fleming and Grant remained in the helicopter industry, forming the successful Dominion Helicopters Ltd. in King City, Ont., in 1955. Ostrander started up Western Helicopters during 1956 in Calgary, and established Niagara Helicopters Ltd. in Niagara Falls, Ont., in 1960, where he flew tourists over the falls and commenced a profitable helicopter pilot training school, beginning another story in Canada's rich helicopter history.

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