



ABOVE, TOP RIGHT Introduction of the larger Bell 212 helicopter made heli-skiing available to far more people. Today, the Bell 212 is the industry workhorse for remote mountain skiing. **CMH Photo**



An Alpine Helicopter Bell 47G-3 carried Hans Gmoser's group of skiers into the North Canoe Glacier in the Cariboo Mountains in May 1963. Gmoser is on the far right. **CMH Photo**



TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN

ALTHOUGH THE FIRST ATTEMPTS AT COMMERCIAL HELICOPTER SKIING WERE UNSUCCESSFUL, ONE MAN DECIDED THERE WAS SOMETHING TO THE IDEA; HIS PERSISTENCE AND FORESIGHT LED TO THE CREATION OF ONE OF THE HELICOPTER INDUSTRY'S MOST UNIQUE SECTORS.

by Bob Petite

The thrill of skiing rugged, mountainous terrain, on untracked snow, away from civilization, is the dream of many die-hard, backcountry skiers. For decades, the helicopter has played an essential role in this ultimate skiing experience. And Canadian Mountain Holidays — based in Banff, Alta., and owned by Alpine Helicopters Ltd. since the mid-1990s — has played an essential role in the history of heli-skiing.

HOW IT BEGAN

The first recorded occurrence of a helicopter being used to airlift skiers into the mountains was back in 1948, by Skyways Services Ltd., which was one of three Canadian commercial operators at the time. Skyways began in 1947, dusting agricultural crops in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. When that venture proved unsuccessful, the company shipped its Bell 47B-3 to Vancouver, B.C., in search of other work. It was subsequently leased to Aero Surveys Ltd., which proposed a helicopter service to transport skiers from Vancouver to nearby Grouse Mountain. Although trials took place, the helicopter was never used commercially for heli-skiing.

The first documented attempt at commercial heli-skiing didn't occur until some years later, when Art Patterson — a Calgary, Alta., geologist and avid skier — surprised many with his idea. As Patterson recalled in an interview I did with him in 1994: "I used to ski a lot and wondered why we couldn't use a helicopter to fly skiers into the mountains. There also wasn't a lot of work for helicopters in the winter, so they should be available. I got hold of Tommy Fox and Tellef Vaasjo from Associated Helicopters in Edmonton [Alta.]. We talked, and they thought that it was a good idea. Associated supplied a Bell 47G-2 and we looked into getting the operation underway.

"I had worked around the mountains but knew nothing about the snow. I needed to find a professional guide and asked Ethan Compton, a Calgary-based mountain-climbing [and] sports store owner. Compton quickly suggested mountain guide Hans Gmoser.

"Now I needed a place to ski and made application to Banff National Park. They turned me down flat. I would have to go outside the park, as I had already lined up a group for skiing.

"Hans Gmoser agreed to go with me. Associated was using a Bell 47G-2 out of Canmore, Alta., in their mountain flying school for new pilots. We had to find a place that could be driven to, and then to take off from there. On Feb. 23, 1963, we flew up into the Kananaskis Valley and settled on a place up the Spray Lake Road, near a dam and on a small glacier.

"Associated pilots Roy Staniland and Jack Lunan flew the helicopter to assess heli-skiing potential. Conditions were awful, but we were able to ski some of the slopes. This was the first time a helicopter was used for [commercial] heli-skiing."

Twenty enthusiastic skiers were flown to the same area the next day. While the conditions were far from perfect, both Patterson and Gmoser could see the possibilities. Although, said Patterson, "We were rather horrified about the amount of flying needed with a two-passenger helicopter to get all the people up the mountain!"

A second commercial heli-skiing attempt was made over the Easter weekend up on the 9,000-foot Mummery Glacier north of Golden, B.C., in the eastern part of the province. Some good heli-skiing was had, but rain canceled all flying on the Monday. "At this point, I could see that if you wanted to go broke, this was probably the way," related Patterson. "It wasn't long before I dropped the idea of any future heli-skiing."

STAYING THE COURSE

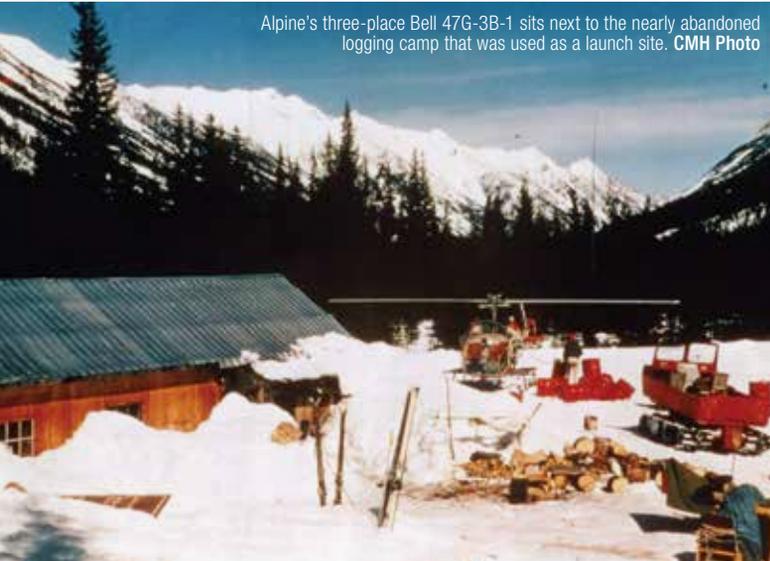
Optimistically, Gmoser remained convinced that heli-

Pilot Jim Davies and engineer Bill Allway next to Bullock's Alouette II, the first turbine-engine helicopter used for heli-skiing.
Jim Davies Photo



The larger Alouette III replaced the Alouette II in 1968. **Jim Davies Photo**





Alpine's three-place Bell 47G-3B-1 sits next to the nearly abandoned logging camp that was used as a launch site. **CMH Photo**



Bullock's Alouette III was capable of transporting six skiers plus their gear. **Jim Davies Photo**

skiing could be a viable operation. He had used a Cessna 180, flown by veteran mountain pilot Jim Davies, to fly in skiers, landing on glaciers in the Cariboo Mountains in central-eastern B.C. in 1962. And, he had gained extensive knowledge of the mountains throughout Western Canada through the numerous skiing, hiking and climbing expeditions he had done since the early 1950s.

In May 1963, Gmoser chartered a Bell 47G-3 from Alpine Helicopters to fly a group of skiers to the North Canoe Glacier in the Cariboo Mountains. As Davies told me in an interview in 1994, he again served as Gmoser's pilot: "I picked up the Alpine Bell 47G-3 in Jasper [Alta.] on May 4, 1963, and ferried it to Valemount, B.C., for Hans. The next five days were spent ferrying ski parties up to the 11,800-foot elevation on [Mount] Sir Wilfred Laurier. The guests found the mountain skiing tremendous."

As Gmoser explained in Canadian Mountain Holidays' historical literature, "Once again, I had a good demonstration of the kind of skiing the helicopter could open up. We had superb snow conditions, and everyone was convinced that helicopters and skiing in these mountains were a tremendous combination." But, as Gmoser said at the time,

"Would there be enough people to pay the price?"

In 1964, Gmoser led a group of skiers to the Bugaboo Glacier in southeastern B.C. The group experienced some of the most impressive skiing ever. And, it became clear to Gmoser that a nearby abandoned logging camp would make an ideal site to stay at and from which the helicopter could launch.

After discussing the logistics and costs of such an operation with Davies, in the spring of 1965 Davies brought in a Bullock Wings and Rotors Bell 47G-3B-1 for the transport duties, allowing Gmoser to offer two weeks of helicopter skiing in the Bugaboos. Said Gmoser, "These were exciting days. The group came to experience what we all felt was the most awesome way to ski in the mountains."

Gmoser's small company, Rocky Mountain Guides Ltd., soon became Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH), and its new offering of heli-skiing simply soared. In 1966, 70 skiers arrived for six weeks of magnificent skiing high in the Bugaboos using Bullock's Bell 47G-3B-1. By 1967, 150 skiers over 10 weeks were flown into the mountains in the four-passenger, turbine-engined Sud Aviation (later Aérospatiale) Alouette II, again supplied by Bullock and

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piloted by Davies.

In 1968, Davies brought the larger Alouette III, capable of carrying six skiers. And by now, business had grown enough that Gmoser had built a remote lodge in the Bugaboos to accommodate the skiers. (The following year CMH branched out into different locations with flights into the Cariboo Mountains, marking the first commercial heli-skiing there.)

In 1969, the Alouette II was back again, but was soon replaced by the turbine Bell 204B, CF-BWR, the first of its type imported into Canada. The 204B was a big improvement, being able to lift nine skiers. It was as fast as the Alouette III, but carried more passengers, had a larger cabin and was preferred by the skiers.

In 1970, Bow Helicopters (Bullock's name after it was purchased by Bow Valley Industries Ltd.) operated the larger Bell 205A-1 alongside the 204B. However, it was the twin-engine Bell 212, introduced to CMH in 1973, that became the heli-ski's industry workhorse and CMH's calling card. (CMH trialed the more powerful Bell 214B in 1977, but it proved less economical than the 212.)

"When I brought in the first Bell 212," said Davies in the 1994 interview, "I kept it all winter. It felt good to have the luxury of two engines, and all the people liked it. The load was kept down to 11 passengers because of the weight of the ski rack and skis. Keeping fuel at half loads allows both the gross weight and the altitude you want to reach, which can be up to 10,000 feet elevation."

The Bell 212s CMH currently uses have all been modified with a high-performance installation certified by CMH's current owner, Alpine Helicopters, to allow a greater safety margin in mountain operations. The Bell 407s and 206 LongRangers in its arsenal are used for smaller groups, snow safety and specialty flights.

Alpine (which is itself currently owned by resort giant Intrawest; see p.34, *Vertical*, Aug-Sept 2011) was originally formed in 1961 with a focus on serving the natural resources sector. It expanded into heli-skiing and began providing full-season contracted service to CMH in 1981 when a group of experienced mountain pilots left Bow (after it was bought by Okanagan Helicopters) and came over to Alpine. Alpine became CMH's sole helicopter services supplier a few years later, and purchased the lucrative company about a decade after that.

Today, the little experiment that pioneering mountain guide, hiker, skier and climber Johann Wolfgang (Hans) Gmoser (who, regrettably, passed away on July 5, 2006, as the result of a cycling accident) started in an abandoned lumber camp next to the Bugaboo Glacier has grown into a mountain itself. CMH employs some 500 people during its peak season, and operates from eight remote backcountry lodges and three town-based hotels to cover a service area of about 5,800 square miles (15,000 square kilometers).

CMH's success also spawned a number of other heli-ski operators, including a few built by Gmoser's friends and former employees (i.e., Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing, Purcell Helicopter Skiing and Selkirk Tangiers Helicopter Skiing). Maybe more importantly, the industry Gmoser pioneered has not only become symbolic of the ultimate adventure lifestyle, it has reinforced to many people how powerful and versatile helicopters can be.

Bob Petite is an air attack officer with the Alberta Forest Protection Division. He has over 40 years of experience working on wildfires both on the ground and in the air, utilizing air tankers and helicopters.



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