

Bieler shown at the end of his heli-skiing adventure. Philippe Bieler Photo

The story of Canada's first heli-skier

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How a lunchtime detour during a mountain survey became a landmark moment in alpine sport.

While the thrill of skiing on remote mountainous slopes in untracked snow was once just a dream for backcountry skiers, the development of heli-skiing has made it a winter staple for adventurous winter sports enthusiasts across the globe.

The origins of commercial heli-skiing are fairly well established: the first operations in the sector are generally attributed to geologist Art Patterson and professional mountain guide and skier Hans Gmoser in February 1963 in Alberta. However, the story of the first-ever heli-skier in Canada is a little less well-known.



Bieler alongside a helipad in the mountains of British Columbia. ALCAN Photo
Philippe Bieler was born in Geneva, Switzerland, on Sept. 27, 1933, to Jean Henri and Raymonde Bieler, where Jean Henri Bieler worked as Deputy Treasurer of the League of Nations.

After the outbreak of the Second World War, the family moved to Canada, ending up in Quebec City, Quebec. There, Bieler's father became the deputy finance minister for the Quebec Government—a position he held for 25 years. Having learned to ski in Switzerland as a young boy, Bieler's lifelong love for the slopes transferred to his new home.

In the summer of 1950, after graduating from high school, Bieler spent over a month on a Quebec government geological survey 200 miles north of Quebec City. He immensely enjoyed his time in the Canadian wilderness.

He then began a five-year scholarship in engineering at McGill University. One summer job saw him working for the Iron Ore Company of Canada in Labrador. The company

was determining the limits of the iron ore deposits 500 miles north of the St. Lawrence River.



The ALCAN Bell 47D-1 used for the first heli-skiing flight in the mountains of British Columbia in 1953. Philippe Bieler Photo

During his fourth year of engineering at McGill, Philippe and his good friend John Barber were invited by Earling Strom to ski at his Mt. Assiniboine lodge in B.C. prior starting a new summer job with the Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan). Alcan was building a major hydroelectric power project and smelter in the mountains near Kemano, B.C.

The company planned to use helicopters to transport workers, surveyors, materials and supplies, as well as for the construction of the camps, dams, powerhouse, smelter, and powerlines required. The expected cost of the project was over \$500 million.

Carl Agar and Okanagan Air Service Ltd. (later Okanagan Helicopters in 1952) were contracted to supply the helicopters and crews. Additional Bell 47 and Sikorsky S-55 helicopters were purchased by Alcan, with Okanagan supplying the pilots. It was the largest helicopter operation in the world at the time, with the industry still in its infancy.



Bieler in the mountains of British Columbia. Philippe Bieler Photo

Bieler and Barber were soon put to work after their arrival in Kemano. Bieler worked as a rod man, helping with the survey of mountain peaks near the new reservoir, which had been built high in the mountains and was slowly filling up. Barber ended up working underground in one of the tunnels where the power plant and smelter were being constructed.

While flying over the many peaks in the area, Bieler marveled at the beautiful scenery in the mountains and the numerous snow fields.

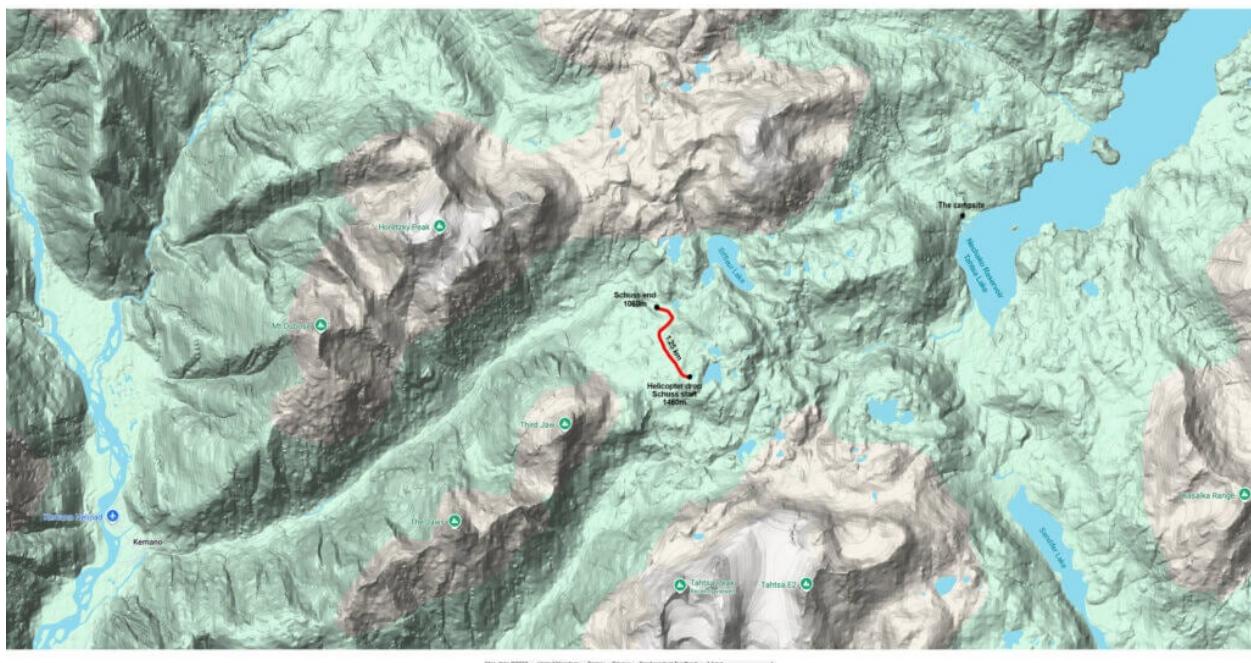


Bieler begins his mountain heli-skiing run. Philippe Bieler Photo

"In the middle of the second week, I plucked up the courage to ask my boss whether I could bring my skis and have a quick schuss [a quick direct descent] after lunch on one of the snow fields," recalled Bieler. "He was receptive to the idea. The Okanagan pilot also agreed that it should not be a problem."

The next day, Philippe located a great snow field below the Horetzky peak. The pilot had no trouble landing the helicopter below the peak, and after a quick lunch, Bieler put on his skis. "I took off on my schuss down an immaculate snowy slope for about one mile towards Siffleur Lake," said Bieler, who was ecstatic from his thrilling skiing experience. "I had the time of my life," he said. Unknowingly, he had just become the first ever heli-skier in Canada.

Philippe Bieler Heli-Ski Route, July 1953



A map showing the route of Bieler's heli-skiing run. Philippe Bieler Photo

The team flew back to the camp to discover that word had gotten out about their escapade. One of the Alcan bosses greeted them and was far from pleased, telling them what they had done was not legal and would never again be allowed.

Bieler and a friend later built a makeshift raft, and after the work was completed for the season, they sailed the whole 50-mile length of the new reservoir back to civilization.



Bieler on his sheep farm in Wales in 2025. Phillippe Bieler Photo

Bieler graduated from McGill University in 1955, and became a visionary entrepreneur, through a varied career in industry, banking, politics, and farming. He also owned several vineyards, and authored four books. Now 92, Bieler lives in Wales with his wife Zara, where they run a sheep farm in retirement. He has not slowed down.