



humble BEGINNINGS

THE USE OF HELICOPTERS IN THE GULF BEGAN OVER 60 YEARS AGO WITH BELL 47s REPLACING THE MARSH BUGGIES USED ALONG THE MOSQUITO-INFESTED LOUISIANA COAST.

by Bob Petite

Today, it's hard to imagine the Gulf of Mexico without helicopters. They are an essential transportation link in the offshore oil and gas industry. From Bell LongRangers to Sikorsky S-92s, more than 600 helicopters operate along the Texas and Louisiana coasts, ferrying oil and gas workers to more than 5,000 offshore platforms — some as far as 250 miles out.

In fact, helicopters have had a presence in the Gulf since the late 1940s, before rotary-wing aircraft were even used to fly out to the rigs. In those days, the new commercial Bell 47 was the only means of flight for oil companies operating in the swampy marshes off the Louisiana coast. The little two-seat Bells were used by seismograph companies to assist in the search for potential oil deposits under the coastal marshes.

Helicopter Air Transport Inc. (HAT) out of Camden, N.J., was one of the first commercial rotary-wing companies in the United States to operate in the Gulf. It started operations with Bell 47B and Sikorsky S-51 helicopters. Peter Wright, HAT sales manager, had been searching everywhere for work, other than pilot training, for the company's helicopters. One area where he saw potential for this was in Louisiana — specifically in the regions wet, mosquito-plagued marshlands.

Wright felt helicopters were a cheaper and more effective way of moving surveyors and gravity-meter workers than the slow, cumbersome marsh buggies used at the time. He was able to initiate a contract with the Robert H. Ray Company, a geophysical exploration firm in Houston, Texas, which was under contract to Standard Oil. HAT



initially supplied a Bell 47B — registration NC21H — with four-wheeled landing gear. (The gear was later changed to floats for landing in the marshes.)

The very first helicopter-aided oil survey in the Gulf took place between May 11 and Aug. 12, 1947. The Bell 47B cost \$75 per hour to operate, and had a guarantee of 80 hours per month. The gravity-meter survey work was carried out in the Terrebonne Parish area of Louisiana, with the helicopter based at Houma airport and Fred Feinberg as pilot.

In the end, only 115 hours were flown over the 93 days of the contract. The helicopter did not fly for 65 days, due to maintenance and repairs, plus a grounding by Bell Aircraft Corporation. Even with those problems, this first use of a helicopter in oil exploration was considered a success. Unfortunately for HAT, that was its only attempt at supporting oil exploration, the company went bankrupt in mid-1948.

BELL MOVES IN

Bell Aircraft was next to join the fray. Having established its helicopter field operations in late 1947, it needed work

for the division. Company president Larry Bell sent chief pilot Alvin (Tex) Johnson to Houston to try to sell the helicopter as a means for supporting oil and gas exploration in the oilfields along the Gulf Coast, similar to the previous HAT operation.

The resulting Texas-based operation devoted its work entirely to the oil and gas industry, and contracts were negotiated with Humble Oil and Refining Company, and the General Geophysical Company. Three Bell 47Bs had their cabins replaced with bubble canopies, while floats replaced wheeled landing gear.

Brooks Kaufman recalled being hired for the Texas operation: “Bell hired me as a pilot with their newly formed helicopter field operation out of Houston, Texas. Bell 47B NC23H was the only helicopter down there already. Dick Stansbury, a Bell test pilot and an instructor at the Bell training school, was the first to fly for the helicopter field operations. Tex Johnston managed the Houston field operations. I ferried Bell 47B NC103B from the factory in Niagara Falls, N.Y., to Louisiana. The work out of Houston was basically oil exploration on gravity-meter surveys and seismograph in Cameron, La., and south of New Orleans

MAIN A Bell 47D-1, operated by Bell Aircraft's oil exploration division, flies past a drilling rig off the coast of Louisiana in 1949.
Bell Helicopter Photo

ABOVE Petroleum-Bell Helicopters pilot Phil Fillingham in front of a Bell 47D-1 in March 1954. He was assisting in the search for a U.S. Navy aircraft that had crashed in a Louisiana swamp. The small Bell 47 was the first helicopter used to transport supervisory personnel out to oil rigs in the Gulf.
Phil Fillingham Photo

Vertical Rewind Helicopters in the Gulf

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carrying out oil exploration for Shell Oil. It was executed in three months, while it took a year to do working with marsh buggies.”

The helicopter operations proved very successful for Bell, resulting in pilots Elton J. Smith and Bill Quinlan being brought down to Louisiana, due to all the work during 1948, while Stansbury took over management. Said Stansbury, recalling how he moved up the ranks: “I was demonstrating the Bell 47B to oil people in West Texas when Tex Johnston quit Bell to go with Fabick Helicopters. I took over managing the helicopter operations.”

His time there saw both ups and downs. “The first year,”

said Stansbury, “we had three ships on seismograph geophysical work. One of the pilots cracked up one of the Bell 47Bs, NC23H. A seismograph employee [had] found himself stuck in the mud in the marsh. He placed his arms over the side of the helicopter float and held on. The helicopter started to lift up off the marsh grass, and over the ship went on its side. The ship was outside its

center of gravity.”

On the upside, the addition of Bell’s quality control inspector, Edward Unwin, to the operation in 1948 saw the start of new innovations. The helicopters had been overhauled during the past winter and were now carrying tubs filled with seismic equipment attached to supports for the dusting hoppers. The helicopters also began laying out seismic cable, and dragging the cable sideways to the next area. Unwin had devised a system to assist moving the cables while the helicopter flew sideways.

“After the contract was coming to an end in the fall in 1948, two companies, American Exploration and Offshore Navigations, could see the value and cheaper costs in using helicopters to do geophysical work,” recalled Stansbury. “Owners Frank W. [Jack] Lee and Robert L. Suggs [along with Maurice M. Bayon] approached Bell Aircraft about buying out the Bell operation. They were very pleased with the helicopter’s work. Bell agreed to supply most of the pilots and engineers. I agreed to supervise the helicopter operations. That is how Petroleum-Bell Helicopters started in early 1949.”

PET BELL

Petroleum-Bell Helicopter Services Inc. — also known as Pet Bell — was officially formed on Feb. 21, 1949, based in Lafayette, La. The first two production Bell 47Ds, NC131B and NC132B, were sold to the company straight away, while Bell 47D, serial number 78, NC212B, was added on March 1, 1949.

There was so much work in the area, though, that Bell Aircraft’s helicopter field operations in Louisiana actually continued on. “We moved our base of operations into another hangar across the tarmac from the new Petroleum-Bell Services,” said Stansbury.



Then, on May 13, 1949, the Bell Aircraft Supply Company, a.k.a. BASCO, a subsidiary of Bell Aircraft, commenced operations with Arthur L. Fornoff as its first manager. The goal was to provide better customer service on the West Coast, and an oil exploration division in Louisiana. The new company took over the old helicopter field operations division out of Lafayette.

Another Bell test pilot, and the first instructor at Bell's training school, Joe Dunne, then took over supervision of the operations. It became another success story for Bell Aircraft. Eventually, the company got out of operating helicopters commercially when more rotary-wing operators came on the scene (Bell did not want to be seen as competing with its customers). The field operations came to an end around 1951.

Meanwhile, Pet Bell's beginnings never hinted at what it would become (i.e., Petroleum Helicopters Inc., a.k.a. PHI). Suggs and his partners started the operation with an investment of \$100,000 US, eight employees and three Bell 47Ds. They started small and built up only when operations were proven safe and profitable.

Working with the oil and gas companies, Pet Bell personnel devised new innovations and methods in seismograph and gravity-meter-survey transportation, utilizing helicopters in initial oil exploration work. The vision and skills of Suggs as a leader in the helicopter industry helped create

a company that became a forerunner in helicopter transport. And, as time went by, Petroleum-Bell set standards envied by other helicopter companies.

The 1950s became a time of growth and expansion for the company, and oil exploration began moving further offshore, away from the marshes and out into the Gulf in the search of new oil reserves. That exploration work saw the first use of larger helicopters for transporting oil industry personnel (although, it took some convincing to get the oil companies to give up their traditional sea-faring ships).

In January 1954, Petroleum-Bell purchased its first Sikorsky S-55, capable of hauling six passengers. The first offshore flights with the S-55 were soon conducted out of Grand Isle, La.

Before long, other operators gained offshore contracts in the region, like California's Rotor-Aids in 1955, which began work with two Bell 47G-2s and a Sikorsky S-55. Supporting oil and gas exploration quickly became a key sector for the rotorcraft industry, and helicopters soon became an indispensable tool in the never-ending search for fuel.

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OPPOSITE LEFT A Sikorsky S-55, operated by PHI, on a drilling rig in the Gulf.

Jeff Evans Collection Photo

OPPOSITE RIGHT The Bell 47B was first used on gravity-meter surveys in the marshes around the Gulf. The gravity-meter instrument can be seen inside the right side of the cockpit on this modified Bell 47B NC13H.

Bell Helicopter Photo

BELOW Helicopter Air Transport began operations in Camden, N.J., in May 1946. One of its Bell 47Bs, NC21H, was used on the first oil-exploration surveys in Louisiana, starting in May 1947.

Jeff Evans Collection Photo

