

LIFE STORY OF A WORKING PILOT

PHIL FILLINGHAM 1918 to now.

I was born in England just weeks after the final Zeppelin bombing raid on London. From a very early age I became interested in aircraft, pressuring my parents to give me balsa models for my earliest remembered birthdays. As a child of 10 I followed with eagerness the Schneider Trophy races and in the years that followed I was often awed by the sight of huge dirigibles passing close overhead, including the R-34, R-100, R-101, Graf Zeppelin and the Hindenburg. Those were the days when aircraft flew so low and slow that passengers and crew were visible. Occasionally they would even wave to us kids on the ground. When the Second World War broke out I was a bank clerk in Rio Gallegos, Argentina, following the progress of the war on the BBC World Service. After the Battle of Britain I decided to become a Spitfire pilot and I volunteered for the R.A.F. However, because of various restrictions I was only allowed to return to England in 1943, by which time requirements had changed - the R.A.F. only needed tail gunners - so I joined the Fleet Air Arm branch of the Royal Navy. In September of 1944 I went to Boot Camp in Portsmouth, England at H.M.S. St. Vincent, coming in third in a class of 163. I started flight training in Canada in December, made my first solo on a Fairchild PT19 on Jan. 5th. 1945 after 9.05 hours dual, completed training and got my wings on June 11th., receiving the Admiralty Award as the best all-round trainee on #129 Pilot's Course in Kingston, Ontario. Seven days later I married in my sailor's bell-bottom uniform and left for England to complete Advanced Flying Training. I was commissioned a "Temporary Probationary Acting Sub-Lieutenant" - arguably the lowest form of naval life ! The war ended and for a year I shuttled between various jobs until commencing Deck Landing training in September 1946.

In February 1947 I joined 816 Squadron, flying Fairey Firefly I attack fighters aboard H.M.S. Ocean, based at Malta in the Mediterranean. During a visit there by the USS Philippine Sea I saw my first helicopter: a Sikorsky S-51. After our squadron disbanded in 1948 I had accumulated 81 deck landings, and I acquired another 81 in one hectic week aboard H.M.S. Illustrious as a "clockwork mouse" training Deck Landing Control Officers ("Bats"). I had requested and been approved for conversion to helicopters and on November 2nd, 1948 I joined 705 Squadron for a conversion course, H.M.S. Siskin, Gosport, England. After 4 hours and 30 minutes of dual instruction on Sikorsky R-4's I made my first helicopter solo. In the Royal Navy the R-4 was referred to as the "Gadfly I". The solo checkout consisted in my instructor getting on and off the helicopter while I held it stable in a hover ! Six weeks later I was assigned to Portland Navy Base as Officer in charge of the Helicopter Unit, which consisted of two "Gadfly I's" on fixed floats maintained by one Petty Officer and six ratings. Wearing parachute and dinghy pack made the R-4 so heavy that it required a wind to leave the ground. In August of 1949 I was attached to the Ministry of Supply as a Test Pilot at the R.A.F. station at Beaulieu in Hampshire. There, under the leadership for Squadron Leader Cable, a mixed staff Army, Navy and R.A.F. pilots flew Sikorsky R-4, R-6, S-51, Bristol 171 and Cierva Air Horse helicopters. Among other tasks I was assigned to test autorotation performance on R-4 and R-6 aircraft - and we even flew a fully instrumented R-4 under the hood ! Not very successfully ! My performance as a helicopter pilot was rated "Above Average", and by this time I had accumulated nearly 300 hours helicopter time, mostly on the Sikorsky R-4. In May 1950 I left the British Navy, emigrated to Canada and found a job with Spartan Air Services in Ottawa who sent me to the Bell helicopter factory in Niagara Falls for conversion

to the Bell Model 47. My instructors were Floyd Carlson and Owen Niehaus, I believe. By the end of the same month I was already at work in Knob Lake (later Stephenville) Labrador. We lived in tents, washed in and drew our drinking water from the lake. As winter closed in we worked our way south through such backwoods towns as Grandmere, Bagotville and Arvida before returning to Ottawa for the winter. In early February 1951 we started a job servicing railroad construction crews between Seven Islands and points north. Winter operations were new to me. We covered the machine each night, put on blade covers, and in the morning it took about 30 minutes heat from our Harmon-Nelson heater to get it started. For several years Bell had a problem with its fan belts, which could break in as little as three hours operation. Hopefully they would go 30 hours and sometimes they even made 100 ! I had my first forced landing when my belts broke over a forest area. Fortunately, because of the icy temperatures, I was able to fly almost two minutes before the cylinder head temperature went off the clock and so attained an open space on an ice-bound river. It was 10 days before we were able to obtain and fly in a spare set of belts to a machine now buried under almost three feet of snow ! My greatest thrill that winter was the hair-raising take-off in an overloaded Noordyn Norseman from an undersized lake ! My next stop was a Fire Protection job at Maniwaki, Quebec where I made my first roof-top landing. Then in June 1951 we did a barometer traverse job across the uncharted Gaspé Peninsula en route to Newfoundland to do a triangulation survey for the Canadian Topographical Survey department. This time we didn't have to live in tents....we had rented an empty caboose from the railroad and that was our living quarters. We based on the railroad in Gander, Badger and St. Johns. On August 13th. I had my second forced landing when a fuel line broke and I had to autorotate my Bell 47D into trees, about 25 miles from Corner Brook.

After we landed and all the crashing and breaking noises had subsided my passenger turned to me and said: "Fillingham, I never knew you could swear like that !". It was a long walk out.... That December we started another railroad construction job in Northern Manitoba where our two Bell 47D's were based on a frozen lake in Sherridon, Man. We invented a wooden grid system to prevent our float equipped birds from freezing to the ice. Daytime temperatures were between 10 and 25 degrees below zero..and our machines had no heaters ! After thawing out our frozen stabilizer bar reservoirs with about an hour's Harmon Nelson heat we jumped in and got going north on the line until our thumbs froze when we had to sit down facing south to thaw out in the sun ! When spring came we converted one of our machines to skids for spraying the work crews and I learned that the northern black fly is unconquerable ! This was my first experience with spray equipment. After three years as a Bush Pilot in the wilds of Canada I next went to fly the Venezuelan jungle ! In October 1952 I obtained my U.S. Commercial License #12502 and was employed by New England Helicopters on a contract for I.A.G.S. (Inter American Geodetic Surveys). We carried out triangulation and gravity surveys and even, on occasion, had the luxury of sleeping in town.....well, a garage IS better than a tent ! This was too good to last, so I was transferred to the Guajira Peninsula where we slept in an abandoned building, checked our boots each morning for centipedes and drank water from an open well polluted by the local cattle. Here I learnt to take advantage of up-slope winds to carry my overladen underpowered Bell 47D1 to an otherwise unobtainable mountaintop landing. We next moved to the Magdalena River valley where the villagers had never before seen a helicopter. I was forced to carry a stick to ward off the local children from climbing over the tail boom while the rotor still turned ! Rain forest operations at this time were marginal at best.

The jungle canopy was 200' above the floor with some larger trees attaining 250'. Cutting a landing area here with machetes was difficult enough and the workers naturally tended to do as little as possible. We would fly around overhead pointing out trees to be cut and areas to be cleaned off only to be met with shrugs of "Pero, señor.....no se puede !". Taking off in 106 degree heat with a 400lb. load from a tiny area taxed our technique to the max. complicated by the ever recurrent plug fouling on the #5 cylinder of our 186h.p. Franklins before the advent of TCP. I spent one night on a remote hilltop, feeding several thousand mosquitoes, when the helicoil came out with the lead-fouled plug. Flashing my rescue mirror next morning brought my fellow pilot to the scene. Being based in jungle villages like Chiriguana, Chichimagua or El Banco we had to rely on the local drug store (if any) to cure our amoebic dysentery. In September 1953 I moved to Lafayette, Louisiana to start a 12 year association with Petroleum Helicopters Inc. (then Pet-Bell Inc.). I learned to wear hip boots to work in the marshes and swamps when CG imbalances had to be compensated for by moving the battery from front to rear - and vice-versa. I learned to hold the main rotor of our Bell47D1's motionless for gravity meter surveys. I learned to carry towers and heavy tubs beneath the high float gear on seismic surveys. We worked ten days straight - and earned our money. In December 1953 I again headed for Colombia to support a jungle seismic survey ten out of Las Cruces - a tiny airport in the heart of the Magdalena River valley. My first "recon" flight was over unbroken canopy for two hours, praying that my fan belts would not break ! They didn't. We had to educate ourselves on tropical flight limitations at the same time as we had to educate the native COLOMBIANS with whom we worked, most of whom were military

conscripts assigned to protect us from the local bandits. Some months after I left one of the party chiefs had his head cut off by those same bandits. On my return to the States I was checked out in the newly acquired Sikorsky S-55 and assigned crew change work out of Leeville, to rigs drilling offshore in the Gulf of Mexico. Starting at dawn we flew three round trips, getting home at dark. In foul weather the heliports aboard the drilling barges would bounce wildly and the helicopters would tend to slide off into the Gulf. This was eventually corrected by the introduction of a wooden grill system. In June of the following year PHI was awarded a contract for triangulation work with the U.S. Geodetic Survey in the Sierra Nevada of California. The area was very high altitude, including Mt. Whitney. Our chief pilot took one look and decided that the job was not safe using our unsupercharged Bell 47G2's. So I was sent out to replace him. Privately I agreed with his assessment - but couldn't afford to lose my job. I had never landed above 4000' before, but my first flight was from our base on Dome Rock, east of Porterville, 7,000' ASL. We had lightened our 47G2's by eliminating the battery and generator, without doors or cushions they weighed around 1,450 lbs. We spent the summer learning how to land in impossible places at impossible altitudes (including 14,492' Mt. Whitney) without any certain knowledge of wind direction. Hovering was impossible above 9,000'. Each landing was a semi-controlled crash. The experience gained in this hair-raising summer stood me in good stead in later mountain operations. My next adventure was to take a Sikorsky S-55 from Lafayette to Venezuela via Houston. On arrival at La Guaiara I had to check out a Venezuelan inspector on the S-55 so that he, in turn, could check me out for a pilot license. We flew for two days to reach the mouth of the Orinoco River only to find out that the dredge whose crews we had a contract to change.....did not have a heliport! For the remainder of the contract we flew the S-55 like A

much smaller machine, landing it in all sorts of unprepared sites on hilltops and in jungle clearings. On return to Louisiana I was checked out in the Alouette II - the first jet helicopter in the PHI stable. In May of 1957 I was sent to Wyoming, flying a mountain job for the U.S.G.S. We based at Pahaska tepee, on the eastern edge of Yellowstone Park, and the site of a long-ago hunting party with Buffalo Bill Cody and the King of Belgium. A commemorative shield painted on a tree was still visible. For a year I worked as Sales Manager and assistant to Frank Lee in the Lafayette office, and during this time I made sales trips to Houston, Dallas, Tulsa, Little Rock and even as far as New York and Puerto Rico. In October 1959 I had an unusual job : To demonstrate a brand new Hiller 12E on a tour around the South. I had never flown a Hiller and felt more than somewhat embarrassed at times when questioned by veteran Hiller pilots as to the advantages of this new model vis-a-via earlier ones ! In the spring of 1960, while acting as Administrative Assistant to Frank Lee, I was given a contract to bid on. It was in Alaska and we bid high. We got the contract anyhow because the terrain had apparently scared off all the other bidders. When I arrived up at Yakataga I found that the area to be surveyed consisted mostly of mountains and glaciers where level spots were few and far between. Cloud cover made triangulation very difficult in this part of SE Alaska. I was once trapped and had to descend through 600' of cloud "blind" - not even a needle-and-ball ! Very interesting. In 1962 I checked out in the Sikorsky S-62 and spent the next two years doing crew change work out of Morgan City and elsewhere. In 1964 I switched jobs and went to work for Tenneco Aviation, flying their Bell 47J2A out of Houma, Louisiana. The job was patrolling pipelines inshore and personnel support inshore and offshore. Part of the job was relieving duty on the Cessna 185 Amphibian, landing in

bayous and pipeline canals. On one occasion I ran aground in the Cessna in a blinding rainstorm. To get it off my three passengers and I all stripped down to our shorts, got out and pushed it into deeper water. On the ride back to base they all had a chance to resume their clothing but I had to run across the ramp, still in my shorts, to the applause of an admiring crowd thoughtfully informed by my passengers who debarked as I was shutting down ! In 1967 Tenneco bought their first Jet Ranger, changing the face of the whole operation. We had phased out the Cessna and the 47J2A soon thereafter. In 1973 we started to go all multi-engine for offshore work, re-fitting with Boelkow BO105's for this part of our operations. I was Houma Base Chief Pilot during these years. In 1976 I volunteered to take over the operation in Mahwah, N.J. where a Boelkow BO105 was flying for Tenneco Chemicals. We flew in the New York, Boston, Washington corridor and I became familiar with the 60th. St. heliport in Manhattan as well as all the other airports and heliports in the NYCity area. The high density traffic and total radio control was new and challenging to me after so many years in the "boonies". I also enjoyed night flying over this well lit area. But my 60th. birthday came up and I had to retire from Tenneco. So May 1978 found me in Murray, Kentucky flying a brand new Jet Ranger for a millionaire coal miner. He had been told that his new bird could fly night or day in any weather, but I had to disagree one fine morning at 5a.m. in dense fog. For the next four summers I flew in the mountains on government contracts for Cascade Helicopters and Reeder Air Service. In the intervening winters I became a staff photographer for my local weekly newspaper. One of my news photos was awarded 3rd. prize in N.Y. state in 1981. In 1978 I flew out of White Sulphur Springs, Montana with my daughter as "crew chief" driving the refuelling truck. Next year it was Winnemucca, Lake Tahoe areas followed by Mt. Hood. I landed on top (11,245' ASL) on an

area no bigger than a double bed. There was a precipice in front and a jagged snowfield behind but fortunately there was no wind to rock the aircraft - my main rotor was out of reach. This was the first time that I had landed a Jet Ranger at that altitude and I was somewhat apprehensive. The following year, on a contract for the Bureau of Land Management, we worked out of Grand Junction, Colorado - surveying water sources, counting wild horses, (not many), and fighting fires for the Forest Service. In 1981 I flew out of Jackson Hole, Wyoming for the Forest Service again. We went out on many fires, sometimes big ones, and I learned to use a water bucket beneath my Jet Ranger. We supported an operation to re-introduce Peregrine Falcons to that area, but by far the most challenging job was working for the Park Service every weekend when it was not unusual for amateur climbers to get lost or to fall in the Gran Teton mountains. Another regular - and much loathed job - was to carry out a large toilet bucket from a ridge in the Tetons at 11,000' whenever it was filled. This sling load, at that altitude, was as much - or more - than our Jet Ranger could handle. I capped my 33 years of helicopter flying by rescuing a climber who had fallen and was trapped on a shelf at 10,800'. There was no place to land so we slung a stretcher on a long line into reach of his rescuers and carried him to hospital in that precarious manner. For this I was given a framed Certificate of Commendation by the Park Service and the Forest Service.

As you will gather from the above recital, I have never been a "big wheel" in the helicopter industry. For 33 years I was a "foot soldier" who went out on the job, did a good job, gaining knowledge and experience to do a better one next time out. I ended up with 13,674 logged helicopter hours, plus 581 fixed wing.

Since 1982 I have attempted to keep abreast of the industry by volunteering my services to help out at H.A.I. conventions

while joining the Twirlybirds and other pioneer organisations.

There are "Captains of Industry" - and there are
"Other ranks". I was one of the latter.

W. Willingham

Monroe, N.Y. January 1991.