John M. Miller
an Aviation Legend

by Martin J. Pociask

Photo courtesy of The American Helicopter Museum.

Courtesy of John Miller.

The following interview with aviation legend John Miller is a compilation based on a lengthy interview with Martin J. Pociask, HAI's Communications Director and Editor of *ROTOR* magazine at the aviator's home in Poughkeepsie, New York on October 26, 2006, and at a Quiet Birdmen dinner presentation later that same evening, and several subsequent telephone conversations with Mr. Miller. This interview also contains some extracts from an interview given by Mr. Miller to former HFI Curator, John Slattery, on February 16, 1998 at HELI-EXPO in Anaheim, California.

ROTOR: Tell us about your beginnings, and your early interest in aviation.
Miller: I was born John McDonald Miller, on December 15, 1905 in Poughkeepsie, New York. At an early age I wanted to become a steam locomotive engineer. When I was four and a half years old, I saw Glenn Hammond Curtiss, a pilot and fellow New Yorker, from Hammondsport, flying a specially built airplane, with bamboo outriggers in front and back. He was flying on a run from Albany, New York to New York City for a $10,000 prize offered by the New York World newspaper. Curtiss, in his Hudson Flyer took just over three hours to complete the 152-mile flight — entirely over the Hudson River. It was the longest flight on record, and the first airplane flight within the city limits of New York. Curtiss built the plane special for this flight.

ROTOR: He stopped to refuel near your home.
Miller: He was allowed two refuel stops, and made one of them right across the road from my home. My father took me across the road to see the aircraft. I was very impressed when I saw that flying machine take off and fly down the river. Then and there, I lost all interest in becoming a steam locomotive engineer. I was four years and five months old when I made up my mind to become a pilot — I did it, and I've been flying since 1923.
ROTOR: Glenn Curtiss was a bicycle racer and manufacturer, who graduated to airplanes. Tell us about Glenn Curtiss and his airplane.
Miller: That's right. Glen Curtiss was a bicycle racer and manufacturer of bicycles, just like the Wright brothers. He was a contemporary and a competitor of the Wright brothers who also manufactured motorcycles, and constructed the airplane that he flew down the river. It was the fourth plane he ever built. They built the four-cylinder engine in his motorcycle factory. It ran perfectly. He did a good job in the design of the engine. Nobody had ever seen a flying machine around here before. It was the first one.
ROTOR: Some people found it hard to accept the reality of manned flight. Some even thought it was a trick or something. They thought that airplanes were an illusion.
Miller: Yes, that's right. People had seen balloons, but only a very few had ever seen a flying machine. They didn't even have the word "airplane" at that time. There were people who didn't believe they could fly. When I was barnstorming, I would overhear conversations. Some even believed that airplanes and humans flying were

somehow against God's will, that it was a sin.

ROTOR: In 1911, your mother took you to see your second airplane at the fairgrounds.

Miller: Yes, the local county fair featured a flying machine, but there was a breeze blowing a bit. So it sat on the ground all afternoon. I was disappointed. My mother had taken me out on the new trolley car to see it. That was the first electric streetcar I had ever seen. I had seen people drive cars the year before. Then my mother and I went home to prepare for dinner. While we were eating dinner, the airplane flew over the house in Poughkeepsie.

ROTOR: In 1913, the same pilot and airplane returned for the opening of Kingwood Park.

Miller: Yes, in 1913, they opened Kingwood Park for settlement. The same pilot, Beckwith Havens, a pilot for Glenn Curtiss returned. Curtiss had an organization that took airplanes all over the country and exhibited them at county fairs, and so forth. The airplane came in on a freight train in several big boxes, about five feet-square. It was set up in a tent, about a half-hour from my house. They set up a tent and charged a dime to see it.

ROTOR: Tell our readers how you prepared for your career.

Miller: During summer vacations I took jobs in the tool room at a factory and learned how to be a toolmaker. When I was 18, my uncle gave me books about World War I flight and airplane engines. I studied them from cover to cover. Captain Horatio Barber had written one of the books. He was a flight instructor in England. He taught himself how to fly. It was titled Air Evac. He coined the word we now use. It was an excellent book.

ROTOR: A surprise crash landing in your field helped to lift you off the ground.

Miller: During my last year in high school, a barnstorming pilot was on his way up here to Poughkeepsie. His engine failed – he didn't crash – but landed in a hayfield a few miles from here. I helped him put another engine in the airplane. I helped him all that summer working on the airplane, patching the holes, working on the engine, and so forth. On October 1923, he gave me the airplane and said, "If you fix it up I'll come back and teach you how to fly." It was a World War I Jenny. I didn't want to wait for him. I did not tell my father or mother that I had a plane. I hid it on the property. I used my uncle's books to teach myself how to fly in just over two months. The pilot was Swanny Taylor. He had a very old Jenny — painted with barn paint — it had holes in the cockpit big enough for a cat to fall through. The Jenny had belonged to Ruth Law, a very famous woman pilot before World War I.

Photo courtesy of The American Helicopter Museum.

Pitcairn and Orville Wright.

ROTOR: You were going to attempt your first flight on the anniversary of the Wright brothers flight. What prompted the decision to fly two days earlier?

Miller: I soloed on my birthday, December 15, 1923, two days short of 20 years to the date, December 17, 1903, that the Wright brothers made their flight. I was getting myself ready to solo by flying across the field, just barely above the ground, skimming along over the grass — what we called grass cutting. I suddenly realized that I was running too close to a stone wall on the other end of the field. I opened the throttle to go over it and then I was up in the air flying solo. I didn't know how to turn, but I had read books about making turns. I spent probably the better part of an hour practicing, and eventually, I taught myself how to make turns. I practiced turns, and made several attempts to land, when I

realized I had a problem. I was unable to land because I had to come in over high trees. So I went to the field where Swanny Taylor had been flying. Cut the throttle, and then landed. Since the farmer hadn't been paid to use the field, I took off again. After four or five attempts to come in over the trees, I landed successfully in the field where the airplane had been stored.

ROTOR: Do you recall your first paying passengers?

Miller: A farmer, who had been watching me fly, came over and asked me if I could give him a ride. He said, "That sure was pretty the way you came down. Can you take people up?" I hesitated, but then said, "Yes, I do." I needed the money because gasoline was ten cents a gallon at that time. There was a big sign on the side of the fuselage that read five dollars for rides. I pointed to the sign, but he asked me again, "How much is that?" I realized he didn't know how to read and told him five dollars. He said, "I don't have that much money." I asked, "How much do you have?" He brought out $1.50 in change. I told him "Come on, get in," and took him up. So I carried my first paid passenger on my third solo.

A man and his wife in a Model T Ford, came over and said, "I'd like to buy a ride." I said. "Five bucks," and took them both up for five dollars apiece. I was really in the money, ten dollars plus change. By that time, the day was over and it was getting dark. So I went home. While I was flying that man and his wife I had seen this tremendous parade of automobiles going out of Poughkeepsie and back, on a new concrete road, just passing each other. People had never seen such a road before. All the roads leading in and out of Poughkeepsie were dirt roads, dirty and dusty, with mud ruts. I think it was the first paved road in the United States. Route 376. It was about 12 miles long. Thomas Edison built the road. He had a cement operation in New Jersey. I thought, there's a great bit of luck. I can have passengers.

ROTOR: You went home and planned to take up more passengers the next day.

Miller: I went home and didn't say anything. My parents still didn't know that I had a plane. I went next door where I could make a private telephone call and called my friend. I asked him to meet me the next morning with two cans of gasoline. I asked the farmer if I could use his field. I gave him five dollars. His property had no trees or fences and was alongside the new concrete road. I flew my plane and parked alongside the road. All the people brought their cars to drive on the new road. When they saw me, they came over and I gave them rides all day long at five dollars apiece. By the time I got through I had almost $100. What a fortune!

ROTOR: One passenger recognized you.

Miller: One of the passengers, a Mr. Gabler, was my father's assistant, who had known me since I was born. I hoped he wouldn't recognize me, so I kept my helmet and goggles on. After the ride, he gave me his five dollars and said, "Say, aren't you Miller's son?" I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "Well I'll be darn! I didn't know you were an aviator." I told him that I had been for quite a while. Actually, It had only been 24 hours. I knew then and there that my goose was cooked. Monday, after school, I went home. My father came home later and just sat down and read the paper for a while. He finally said, "John, Mr. Gabler said you took him for a ride in Swanny Taylor's airplane. I understand you were taking people up to fly." I told him, "Yes, but it's not Swanny Taylor's airplane. It's mine now." He said that plane was in pretty awful shape. He grounded me until it was fixed properly.

ROTOR: What did you do with the money you earned?

Miller: Well I had earned all of the money I needed that Sunday to re-cover that airplane. I bought the complete covers for the plane from Dayton Airplane Supply Company, in Dayton, Ohio, through a mail order catalog. I overhauled that old Jenny. And it was beautiful when I got through with it. And I sold it later.

ROTOR: You went off to Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, New York, to study engineering.

Miller: In September I went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, to study mechanical engineering. During the winter of 1926, I became seriously ill with some kind of flu, so I had to drop out and start over again the next year. I graduated from Pratt in Mechanical Engineering in 1927. During all of that time, I was not doing any flying. I was studying.

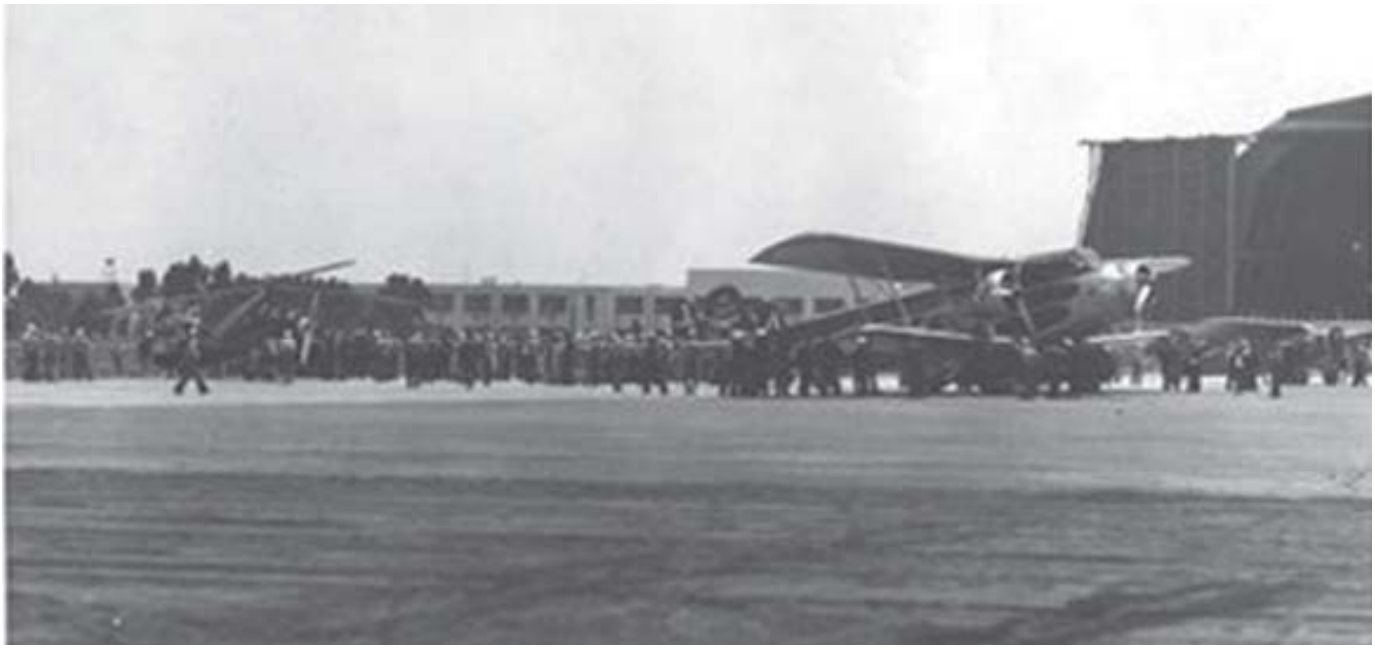
ROTOR: You saw Charles Lindbergh?

Miller: While attending Pratt, I would cut classes and go out several days to Roosevelt Field to watch Lindbergh land and take off. I heard

Photo courtesy of John Hughes.

ROTOR magazine Editor, Martin J. Pociask interviewing aviation legend, John Miller in his home in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Photo provided by John Miller.



May 29, 1931—John M. Miller's Pitcairn PCA-2 Autogiro. Boeing 80 tri-engine of Standard Oil Company of California, flown to San Diego from San Francisco to meet the autogiro after Miller had completed the first transcontinental flight of a rotary-wing aircraft.

that Lindbergh was taking off in the morning on his history-making New York to Paris flight on May 20, 1927. He was staying at the Garden City Hotel. The hotel was absolutely jammed with reporters and so forth, not even a chair was available. I watched him take off the next morning. After Lindberg's flight, I got to know him. He kept his plane at the Teterboro, New Jersey Airport. Once I helped him push his airplane in and out of the hangar. Lindbergh gave me his autograph.

ROTOR: Who was Howard Stark?
Miller: Howard Stark was the first pilot to fly in fog using a turn indicator successfully. Before that, no one could fly in the fog. Howard and I knew each other quite well. He lived in Duchess County, only 30 miles from my home and learned to fly after he was discharged from the Army. He barnstormed all through farm country in his Stinson Cabin biplane. He also had a Rocco biplane that he flew down to Cuba, and made enough money to buy a new Stinson Cabin biplane, with a turn indicator. No manual came with the turn indicator. Nobody knew how to fly using it, including the factory test pilot. Stark taught himself to fly with the turn indicator. He used the instruments in a certain order to stay on course and to stay in the air. His method was called the Stark 1-2-3 System. He wrote and published a pamphlet, which he sold by mail. Pilots bought the pamphlet and taught themselves to fly by instrument with his system.
ROTOR: Didn't Lindbergh credit Howard Stark's system for helping him to make his flight?
Miller: Lindbergh bought Howard Stark's pamphlet. The day before Lindbergh took off, he was standing at his airplane about 50 feet away. I heard Lindbergh mention Stark's pamphlet and system. Then somebody pointed Howard Stark out to him. He walked over to where Howard and I were standing. Lindbergh brought the pamphlet that he used to teach himself how to fly with instruments. He thanked Howard and then walked back to his airplane. One month after Lindbergh took off, I graduated from Pratt mechanical engineering in the class of 1927.
ROTOR: After you graduated, you applied for a mechanics license.
Miller: In 1927, the Department of Commerce took over aviation. They set a January 1 deadline to apply for a license for interstate commerce. I couldn't get a pilot's license since I didn't have a plane and wasn't doing any flying, so I applied for a mechanics license. I got a telephone call from the instructor at Roosevelt Field saying he was coming up to Poughkeepsie to give me the examination for the mechanics license. He drove up to Poughkeepsie, almost 100 miles and gave me the examination sitting in his car. I was told that they were short of mechanics to work on licensed aircraft. He asked me questions and I gave him answers, it took all day. I got 100 on the exam because I had studied the manual backwards and forwards.
ROTOR: You joined Gates Flying Circus. What was that like?
Miller: In September of 1927, the Gates Flying Circus came to Poughkeepsie. I introduced myself to them and said, "I have an airplane mechanic license." They questioned how I could be a mechanic when I didn't have an airplane and there wasn't one anywhere near Poughkeepsie. I explained everything to them and they gave me a job as crew chief on one of their planes. It had a 400 horsepower B237 Liberty engine. At the end of the day it was blowing two valves. I was given the job of getting that airplane ready by next Saturday. I took the two cylinders off and the camshaft. Every night after work I was in the machine shop grinding them down by hand. The next day turned out to be the biggest day in the history of the Gates Circus in Massachusetts. I worked for the circus until an inspector grounded all of their airplanes. A short time later, two students landed on top of each other in Schenectady. I bought

the wreckage of one of the planes. It was a World War I J-1 New Standard NC193E. I spent six months, working 14 hours a day with nothing but hand tools. When I was finished, it was absolutely beautiful. I hired someone to give me a checkout up in Schenectady.

ROTOR: Tell us about your license test at Roosevelt Field

Miller: I got a temporary license — a letter of authority and flew down to Roosevelt Field. The flight check was quite an adventure. It was a beautiful morning. Not a bit of wind in Poughkeepsie. When I got over Long Island Sound, I started to stand still. There was such a strong south wind that I could hardly move the airplane. After a long struggle, I got to Roosevelt Field. I had to make a vertical landing. They were quite surprised that anyone could fly in that wind. I had five men holding down the wings. The inspector said, "You mean that you flew down from Poughkeepsie in that airplane to take a flight test?" We took the flight. He said, "Spin it," and I spun it. After a while, the wind drifted us to the Southside of the field. So he said, "Slow down," and I did another vertical landing. He went into the office and gave me my license. I had to fly in a tremendous tailwind, but I got it back up to Poughkeepsie.

ROTOR: You sold your Standard?

Miller: I sold it to a young fellow from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and gave him a very thorough course in how to fly. I made sure that he was an absolute master of the airplane on the ground before he flew without a flight instructor. I drew him a flight plan and he flew the plane back to Portsmouth, New Hampshire successfully. He flew it for three or four years, and then kept it in a barn for over 25 years. A TWA pilot bought it and kept it for about the same amount of time, and finally restored it. It's now in Dayton, Ohio, with the same engine and propeller, still flying. Nobody wanted to destroy it. It was really beautiful.

ROTOR: You bought a New Standard for barnstorming.

Miller: I did a great deal of barnstorming flying a New Standard B-25. I started going around to county fairs and similar events, and hanging around airports. I barnstormed mostly in the backcountry, where people had never seen an airplane. I advertised on the blank side of penny post cards, and sent out hundreds to the farming districts. The roads would be jammed with cars for more than a mile in every direction. My flights were less than one minute — I would take off, do a wing over, come out and do another wing over, side step, swish tail, and land. Push them in one side, and out the other — four people at a time for a dollar a head. I carried 40,000 passengers for one dollar a head in the summer of 1929.

ROTOR: You bought a Pitcairn Autogiro?

Miller: In 1931, I bought a Pitcairn autogiro PCA-2 for $15,000 for exhibitions. I was the first individual person in this country to buy a rotary-wing aircraft. Corporations had bought all the others for publicity purposes.

ROTOR: Tell us about Amelia Earhart and the plans that both of you had to attempt a transcontinental flight.

Miller: One day after I had ordered my autogiro and was waiting for delivery, I read in the paper that Amelia Earhart, sponsored by the Beech-Nut Packing Company, had gone to the factory and was trying to purchase an autogiro, to make a transcontinental flight. The Pitcairn Company knew that my plan was to make the first transcontinental flight. The newspaper reported that Amelia had established an altitude record for a rotary-wing aircraft and expected delivery of an autogiro on the

Photo provided by John Miller.

May 14, 1928—Picairn PCA-2 Autogiro Delivered to John M. Miller at Willow Grove, PA (Pitcairn Factory Field) Flown by Miller to San Diego Naval Air Station. The first flight across the U.S.A. by a rotary-wing aircraft.

Photo provided by John Miller.

John Miller showed off his collection of memorabilia to ROTOR magazine Editor, Martin J. Pociask.

1st of May.

ROTOR: What did you do when you heard that they gave your number 12 to Amelia?

Miller: My autogiro with serial number 12 was supposed to be delivered on the 1st of May. But Pitcairn notified me that they were not going to deliver until the 15th of May. Amelia didn't want serial number 13, she wanted serial number 12. So they gave her my nameplate with serial number 12, and gave me her nameplate with serial number 13. So I complained, "I have already lost three contracts at air shows at $1,000 a piece. I have another contract to be at the Omaha Air Show for $1,000, and I want to be there." I said, Amelia can have number 12, but I had to be in the Omaha area by May 17.

ROTOR: So you got your autogiro and headed west to fulfill your contract?

Miller: I named it the "Missing Link." On May 14, I left Poughkeepsie in my autogiro flying under NC10781. I headed west and fulfilled my contract in Omaha ahead of time, then just kept on going, heading to the west coast ahead of Amelia. After arriving at the Omaha Air Races, on May 16, I put on 14 flight demonstrations. On May 19 I left for North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego, California, and landed on May 28. I demonstrated the autogiro for Navy officers and others who were interested in seeing my aircraft. The entire flight took 43.8 hours to complete, and I did it without mechanical incident. On the return, I flew it back to the Pitcairn factory at Willow Grove arriving June 30, 1931. The factory mechanics performed a through inspection, and declared that the autogiro only needed an oil change.

ROTOR: Tell us about Amelia's transcontinental flight?

Miller: Amelia got her aircraft and started out for her cross-continent flight. Along the way, she stopped for crowds, gave interviews, and distributed samples of Beech-Nut chewing gum. Somewhere in the Rocky Mountain area, while coming in for a landing, she washed out, and a university in Ohio bought another autogiro for her. Amelia landed in Glendale, California, on July 7, 1931. She learned that I had already accomplished the record. Incidentally, on her way back, she washed out on her second autogiro. Somebody else bought a used one for her.

ROTOR: Amelia set an altitude record in an autogiro at Willow Grove, Pennsylvania.

Miller: You can fly an autogiro like a plane, but what's the use? It's an autogiro! She flew to 18,415 feet over Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, on April 8, 1931, in an autogiro borrowed from the Pitcairn-Cierva Autogiro Company. It was a record. It would have been a record if she had flown to 10,000 feet. Factory test pilots had flown higher, but they weren't certified.

ROTOR: You took the autogiro on the air show circuit. Tell us about some of the venues where you performed. What was the pay like?

Miller: I developed an airbag procedure for the autogiro. At the National Air Races, in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1932, I performed a loop-the-loop for the first time. I had looped earlier in a military plane, but not in an autogiro. Pitcairn was worried, and tried to stop me. But the Department of Commerce didn't have the power at the time to stop me. So I continued to do it. I got paid $1,000 a show to loop at the Cleveland, Los Angeles, and Chicago International Air Shows in 1933. There were numerous smaller shows, where I got $500 a show.

ROTOR: Sometimes you performed in tandem with another pilot. Is that right?

Miller: Yes, Al Wilson. A very well known stunt pilot in the movies. He and I were very good friends. We would fly together and pass each other with various curves and so forth. We worked together as air show pilots and staged mock dogfights. I would make my landings with the autogiro in the middle of a white circle. Wilson was flying a replica of a 1910 Curtiss Pusher. As I was landing I heard the engine of the Curtiss Pusher over my head. All of a sudden there was a crash. Wilson had decided to buzz me, and hit my down wash. He didn't realize that when I made a vertical decent to land, I pulled a big column of air down with me. When he hit that column of air it pulled him down. He hit the *ROTOR* on my autogiro, which was still rotating. It cut the landing gear off his aircraft. His plane nosed to the ground and he crashed ahead of me. Al died of head injuries two days later.

ROTOR: How would you assess the Pitcairn's performance?

Miller: The Pitcairn autogiro was an excellent aircraft. It had a four bladed *ROTOR*. It was impossible to pull the *ROTOR* off no matter what you did. I used to demonstrate by pulling and the *ROTOR* would float up and fly out again. I did aerobatics with it all over the country at air shows. I would say it is the only inherently safe aircraft ever built. They were flown for thousands of hours. Nobody ever got hurt in one. Including the two crashes that Amelia, walked away from. My Pitcairn was a wonderful autogiro. I flew over 2,400 hours in it, all over the United States.

ROTOR: Can you talk about your time as a Marine Corps aviator, and your various connections to aviation?

Miller: In 1930, I joined the Marine Corps as a civilian pilot and qualified as a naval aviator. I was a Marine Corps Reserve pilot at Quantico, Virginia. I qualified at Quantico, all by myself. There was nobody else attempting to qualify. I had joined in Pensacola, Florida in the winter of 1929/30. They gave me orders later to go up to Quantico to qualify as a naval aviator. I was a Lieutenant. I earned my Marine Aviator wings. That's another story. By the time World War II came along I was a Captain and I was also Chief Engineering Test Pilot. So I held two jobs at once, for a factory building airplanes for the Navy. The Marine Corps was not going to use me for combat flying. I was too old for that, and too busy to start with. They said stay there. We need those airplanes. So you stay there and keep on testing them. During World War II, I worked for Eastern flying DC-2s and 3s, and as a chief pilot for Columbia Aircraft Corporation in Valley Stream, New York. I tested 330 Grumman amphibious "Duck" aircraft, models J2F5 with 1,050 horsepower engines. On my days off from Eastern, I test-piloted airplanes for the Navy.

ROTOR: You operated an airport in Red Oaks Mill from 1931 to 1933. Tell us about it?

Miller: I ran that airport during the depths of the depression. Nobody else in Poughkeepsie or anywhere around Poughkeepsie had an airplane — they couldn't afford one. My customers, strange to say, were bootleggers, who were using airplanes very successfully to hop back and forth across the Canadian border with whiskey. Some of these pilots would make three trips per day across the border with one thousand pound loads of whiskey. Some of the pilots were inexperienced and they would bend the airplanes out of shape. I had three or four men working with me, rebuilding airplanes for the bootleggers. It was the main source of business. There were no other airplanes around. That's what kept the business going.

ROTOR: A lady from the Women's Christian Temperance Union dropped by for donations.

Miller: One day, while we had three bootlegger airplanes we were rebuilding from wrecks. Two bootleggers came out to check on the progress. They were losing money while the airplanes were being repaired and wanted them finished. Each bootleggers had a bodyguard. And I'm sure they all had two pistols. I was unarmed. The office girl came in told me there was a lady from the Women's Christian Temperance Union to see me. She introduced herself and asked for a donation. I turned to the bootleggers and said, "How about giving her something?" They both, pulled a big wad of bills out of their pockets and gave her $100 a piece. She was expecting about five dollars, she got $200 and almost fainted. She came back every month for donations. All the bootleggers thought it was a big joke to give her $100.

ROTOR: In 1936, you worked for United Airlines. How did you adjust, since you had been more or less a free spirit, barnstorming, performing in air shows?

Miller: Yes. I decided before it was too late, that I wanted to be an airline pilot. I was offered a job flying for TWA. I was to start on May 1, 1936. However, I was also offered a job to fly for United Airlines starting April 1. So I went to work for United Airlines flying their transcontinental run. I was based in Newark for a while and then in Chicago. I was flying the Boeing 247D. It was an excellent aircraft, which at that time was the world's most modern airliner. I flew the New York to Chicago run, and occasionally, Cheyenne and Oakland. I was based in Chicago at the time, and my family was in Newark.

ROTOR: You worked as a test pilot for Kellettt. That can be a dangerous career move.

Miller: The Kellett Air Company, out of Chicago, wanted me to take a leave of absence from United for a year, to run some tests on a new autogiro. It was the first wingless aircraft to receive an approved certificate. Against my better judgment, I consented to take a leave of absence from United with the expectation of being gone for one year. But it ended up taking two and a half years to carry out the program to do the final perimeter work on the Kellettt KD-1B. It was a single engine, three-bladed *ROTOR* helicopter. What we call the direct-control type. That is a control stick, tilted hub, four-and-a half, and laterally. There was a fixed stabilizer,

Photo provided by John Miller.

July 19, 1939 Roof of General Post Office Building in Philadelphia, PA John M. Miller in cockpit of Kellett KD-1B Wingless Autogiro. The first scheduled rooftop flying operation in history.

no elevator, and a very small *ROTOR*. The aircraft was very successful. Did not have jump take-off, but rather, took off horizontally, but only for a very short distance.

ROTOR: During one test, there was a serious episode

Miller: The program included a lot of testing on control systems and various performance tests and different *ROTOR*s. The *ROTOR*s were very troublesome. We had trouble with them until we got things worked out. In one dive test, the *ROTOR*s started coming apart and I was thrown around very violently, in a way that I cannot describe. I didn't know what was happening to me. I was about 3,500 feet above the ground. I was being thrown about like a leaf in a violent windstorm. I couldn't get out of the cockpit. Every time I tried to stand up, the force would throw me back down. The aircraft flipped around so violently that I was put in the hospital with bruises and contusions, including cracked vertebrae in my neck. After I landed, I found that three feet of each blade had disintegrated. All that remained there was a bare wire and the rims. It was a wonder that there was enough surface to support the weight of the aircraft at all.

ROTOR: Why did the *ROTOR* disintegrate?

Miller: The *ROTOR* came apart because the forward moving blades were going so fast that we hit the speed of sound. Well, in this country, none of the aeronautic engineers knew anything about the speed of sound. Over in Germany, they had supersonic wind tunnels. They knew all about it. Anyhow, when the forward moving blades got near the speed of sound they disintegrated.

ROTOR: Did the aircraft finally get approved?

Miller: Yes. The Department of Commerce, Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA), for-runner to the FAA, finally approved the aircraft.

ROTOR: You came up with a plan and a contract that involved employing the autogiro for postal deliveries. Can you tell us about that?

Miller: Mr. Kellett lobbied a bill through Congress, to provide $63,000 for a one-year experimental project, flying an autogiro for post office delivery. Mr. Kellett and I spent a lot of time and numerous trips down to Washington, D.C., to lobby the bill through Congress to provide the money for a one-year experimental contract with the Post Office Department, to prove the feasibility for a scheduled operation from the roof of the building, to the airport, in all kinds of weather. Mr. Kellett went to all the airlines but one, and they turned him down on rooftop landings. I said, "Mr. Kellettt let me go to Eastern Airlines. I'll sell it to Rickenbacker." And I did. So the contract started July 1939, and Mr.

Photo courtesy of The American Helicopter Museum

Cierva and Pitcairn.

Kellettt loaned me to Eastern Airlines to try it. I figured out a way to land on the roof of the post office, carrying the mail back and forth to the airport — a distance of six miles.

ROTOR: That was Eddie Rickenbacker, right?

Miller: Yes, Eddie Rickenbacker. He asked me what percentage of trips I would guarantee to fly, and I said, "Seventy-five percent." On the basis of 75 percent, they figured a payment rate of so much a mile. I think it was $3 and something a mile, to use up the $63,000 appropriations. So that was done, and by the end of the year, we had greater than 90 percent, closer to 95 percent of the flights completed. Mr. Kellett loaned me to Eastern to fly off the roof for a year.

ROTOR: Was it profitable?

Miller: The company made a profit the very first year. In spite of the fact that some publications said in print that the system was cancelled because of a crash. But no such thing ever happened. There was no crash whatever, or flying accidents during the entire year of the contract. And that was ten flights a day, six days a week, for a year, and included somewhere between 2,500 to 3,000 landings and takeoffs from the rooftop, often under extraordinary wind conditions.

ROTOR: Were you the first person to land an aircraft on a building?

Miller: No, I was not the first person to land on a building. That had been done way back in World War I. But I was the first person to fly a standard operation off of a building.

ROTOR: Were you the only pilot making those runs?

Miller: No, I checked out another pilot. I became ill with the flu and was grounded for two weeks. So the whole thing came to a standstill for those two weeks. I had asked for permission to check out a reserve pilot. I took a pilot I knew from a procurement company and taught him how to land and fly off a roof. It took 12 hours of flying to do it. So he flew as a reserve pilot.

ROTOR: Those landings were all performed without power.

Miller: All of the landings were made without power. They were air autorotated landings, unlike a helicopter, which uses power for landing, making it easier to land the autogiro. In the autogiro, every landing is an autorotated landing. Keep in mind; you have no way to go around if you are getting close to the ground. Sometimes you had to fly backwards. Those were powerful winds in Chicago. It was very difficult and tricky.

Photo provided by John Miller.

Autogiro circa 1936.

ROTOR: When you finished that contract, you went to work for the Kellett Company.

Miller: When I finished with that one-year contract, the Kellett Company had a helicopter drawn up on paper. The Chief Engineer for Kellett had a design on paper for a helicopter with two interlocking *ROTOR*s, right and left, side by side. What we call contra-rotating *ROTOR*s. One would counteract the other. I refused to fly it because I felt that a three-bladed *ROTOR* was unsafe. They got another pilot to fly and he got killed.

ROTOR: So you stayed with Eastern.

Miller: I stayed with Eastern. I was a Captain for 25 years, and flew all types of aircraft. They had the DC2, DC3, DC4, DC7, four types of Constellations, a Lockheed Electra, and for the last five years, the DCA4. All those aircraft were four-engine, except the DC2 and DC3. I retired at age 60.

ROTOR: After you retired from Eastern, you bought a Bell 47G and continued to work.

Miller: After I retired, I bought a Bell 47G-3 and operated under a Part 135, doing a lot of police work for several years for the various county sheriffs departments in the Poughkeepsie vicinity of New York, until finally, the State of New York bought their own Bell Jet Rangers. They would call me for search and rescue, and for emergency transportation. I've taken

a few shackled criminals to prison in a modified Bell 47G. The helicopter was modified by Carson, and could carry three people. It was called a Carson T3. The bubble was lengthened by one fourth and the helicopter payload was increased by 100 pounds. The pilot sat right up front in the bubble. There was no dual control.

ROTOR: Tell us about some of the your experiences working with law enforcement.

Miller: I once picked two boys off of cakes of ice in the Hudson River, in the wintertime. They were caught in an ice flow in the middle of the river, and couldn't move. The temperature was 17 degrees, and the wind was 35 miles per hour. The sun was going down and the temperature was dropping. These boys would have frozen to death in an hour. I also searched for murder victims and lost people, and all kinds of things. It was a lot of adventure.

ROTOR: John, can you tell me about your helicopter experience?

Miller: Well, I had a Bell 47J-3. I was on call all the time by the sheriffs' offices around here. They would call me if they needed to search for somebody. One of the most hazardous propositions was flying in the orchards. In the spring and autumn, if the temperature goes down below 28, it kills the blossoms in the spring. When pear, peach, and apple blossoms get frost bitten, it ruins the crop. Also, in the autumn when the crop had not been harvested yet, if the frost hits, it can cost a lot of money. So we would fly the helicopter over the orchards at night, blowing the warm air down because right near the surface the air was cool, below freezing, 28 degrees, Fahrenheit. But the warm air was still up 100, 200, or 300 feet above. That was rather hazardous work — you could hit a tree or a power line or have the engine quit and you would be dead. So I finally gave up on that and also working power line patrol. We'd fly along the power lines, looking out for defective insulators and things like that. Did a lot of that for the power company.

Photo provided by John Miller.

May 15, 1935—Kellett KD-1 landing on Chicago Post Office roof.

Photo provided by John Miller.

1933, Pitcairn PCA-2 Autogiro in Mines Field in Los Angeles, California. John M. Miller, pilot.

ROTOR: You tried to interest hospitals to use helicopters.

Miller: I tried to get the hospitals interested, and they practically threw me out. They didn't want a helicopter or an autogiro, or any other kind of aircraft near their hospital. They claimed helicopters were too noisy. Now most hospitals have their own helipads.

ROTOR: You have worked in many roles, held membership in several organizations.

Miller: I've been flying since 1923. I've been a barnstormer, autogiro test pilot, airmail pilot, and a pilot for United and Eastern airlines. I was also the founding director of the American Bonanza Society, and a member of the ancient and sacred order of Quiet Birdmen. I've written articles, and published a book called "Flying Stories: A Chronicle of Aviation History from Jennys to Jets, by the Pilot who Flew Through it All," published by the American Bonanza Society, in 2002.

ROTOR: You are still flying? Do you still own a plane?

Miller: I'm still instrument rated and current. I fly all the time. I have a Beechcraft Baron, however, I'm not doing any professional flying now. I am just flying for fun. On December 17, 2005, I flew the Beechcraft to North Carolina with a friend to celebrate my 100th birthday. I have three motorcycles and four automobiles. I don't drive the motorcycles much now.

ROTOR: I understand you went down to Kitty Hawk for the 100th anniversary flight?

Miller: Yes, I have been going to the Kitty Hawk celebrations for several years now, including the hundredth anniversary in 2003. And I was there for 2004 and 2005. That was the last time.

ROTOR: You have pretty much lived in Poughkeepsie, New York most of your life. Is that right?

Miller: Yes, this is where I was born and raised. It has been my home except

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for when I was away different times working for different companies, but this is still my home really. I watched them build this house in 1914.

ROTOR: Thank you so much John, for sharing your wonderfully rich history with our *ROTOR* readers. Your career and accomplishments have contributed so much to the rotorcraft industry. On behalf of the Helicopter Association International, the readers of *ROTOR* magazine, and the industry that you helped to pioneer, I want to extend my sincere appreciation for inviting me to your house, and taking the time to share your experiences with a grateful rotorcraft community. I am certain that this interview will inspire today's professionals, and future generations interested in aviation.

Martin J. Pociask *is Director of Communications for* ***HAI.***

Photo courtesy of John Miller.

John Miller in his Bell 47J-3. Circa 1970s.