

Osvil "Ozzie" York

by Martin J. Pociask



Left: Ozzie on pipeline patrol, Oklahoma 2005.

Center: Ozzie as instructor in the Canadian Air Force in Pendleton, Ontario, 1943.

Below: Ozzie conducting field operations in Alaska, 1949.

PHOTO AT LEFT COURTESY OF JEFF EVANS.

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The following HFI Heritage Series interview was conducted with Osvil (Ozzie) York, helicopter pioneer, whose remarkable 50-year career with Allied Helicopters covered the early years of the development of the helicopter industry, and Martin J. Pociask, HAI's Director of Communications and Editor of ROTOR® magazine, accompanied by David Osborne, HAI's videographer, who recorded the interview, which took place on February 24, 2009, at HELI-EXPO® 2009, in Anaheim, California.

Osvil "Ozzie" York with Marty Pociask, HAI's Director of Communications and Editor of ROTOR.

PHOTO BY DAVID OSBORNE, HAI

ROTOR: Hi, I'm Martin Pociask, Director of Communications and Editor for Helicopter Association International. I'm here at HELI-EXPO® 2009 in Anaheim, California, interviewing helicopter pioneer, Ozzie York. Ozzie, let's start with you telling us a little about yourself; where you were born, and where you live now.

York: I was born in Winston County, Alabama. Winston County is known as the Free State of Winston. Winston is the only county that didn't secede from the Union during the Civil War.

ROTOR: Where do you currently live?

York: Currently I live in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

ROTOR: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

York: I have two sisters, both younger than I am. They live in Foley, Alabama. They live side by side in a house that they each own.

ROTOR: Can you tell me a little bit about your education?

York: Well, I went to school in Indianapolis, Indiana. I went to grammar school there through the 6th grade, and then my family moved to Foley, Alabama to a little farm. I finished high school in Foley.

ROTOR: You have had a long affiliation with Helicopter Association International, from when it was HAA, Helicopter Association of America. Back then, you also served on the Board of Directors as treasurer. Can you talk about that?

York: That was a long time ago. Jim Ricklefs and some other people formed an association out in California, and they made some

agreements to hold meetings with the different helicopter companies that were operating back in those days. We went to Bell several times, and we went up to Philadelphia, and also out to Palo Alto for a convention. When I became treasurer, I think I had been to two conventions prior to that.

ROTOR: Who was president at the time? Wasn't it Eleanor Rudnick Falk?



Left to right: Denzil McDowell, Lou Leavitt and Ozzie York in front of Staggerwing Beechcraft, taken at Gulkana, Alaska, summer 1949.

York: Well, Eleanor became president the year I became treasurer. She wasn't a Falk then. She hadn't married yet. I think Joe Seward might have been when we had the meeting originally, and then Eleanor was elected for the following term.

ROTOR: And who was secretary at the time?

York: The secretary was Donald Larson.

ROTOR: It was a much smaller organization back then, wasn't it?

York: Very much smaller. We could fit the whole group in a hotel room.

ROTOR: And what were the dues?

York: I believe the dues were \$10.00 a year.

ROTOR: It was a real bargain then.

York: It was! I remember writing to Red Jensen to collect the dues.

ROTOR: You are here at HELI-EXPO® 2009 and we have a record attendance here of 18,000. HELI-EXPO® keeps on growing. And

you are still a part of this. You still come to every show.

York: In the early days I came, but then I got too busy. There were quite a few years when I was not able to attend, but then when it got so that I could, I have been coming every year.

ROTOR: Ozzie, let's go back in time. Where did you go to college?

York: I went to college in Auburn, Alabama. They used to call it the Alabama Polytechnic Institute. Everybody today knows it as Auburn.

ROTOR: What were you studying?

York: We had an ROTC unit at that school at that time that was connected



Bell 47B on powerline patrol, circa 1950. This aircraft is now on display at the Smithsonian's Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center

to the artillery. So I had some classes in that. I was also taking animal husbandry, algebra, English, and some other classes.

ROTOR: You left college in 1941 to join the Canadian Air Force.

York: No, I left college after one year and went to work in Pensacola trying to make some more money to go back to college, and during that time I went up to Montgomery, Alabama and took a physical, which I didn't pass. I took a written test, and then I went back to work since I couldn't get into the Army Air Corps. A kid named Victor Clark that I had roomed with at Auburn had joined the Army Air Force as a pilot, and was about to graduate down at Randolph Field. For some reason or another, he didn't make it. During that time there was a Clayton Knight Committee that was recruiting people to go over to England and join the RAF because they needed a lot of pilots. Victor knew that I had tried to join the Army Air Corps, and he asked me if I would go with him to Canada. I had an old 1935 Ford, and I drove up to Selma to meet Victor, and we drove up to Canada to join the Canadian Air Force. Of course, they were happy to see us. They were recruiting a lot of people to go over to Britain to fight the war, so I didn't have any trouble

getting in or being recruited at that time.

ROTOR: So that is where you learned to fly?

York: Yes, I learned to fly in the Canadian Air Force. Of course, they had everybody they could recruit and had quite a few people lined up for training, so we did a lot of ground school in the beginning. Then they sent me to St. Eugene, Ontario for Elementary Flight Training School, and I flew Canadian fleets. During that time, the U.S. authorities tried

to get some of the people who had joined the Canadian Air Force to transfer back to the United States. That was the first legal opportunity that we had. Apparently some people had gone AWOL to come back to the United States after Pearl Harbor. So I went up to Montreal to see if I could transfer back, and tried to get into the Navy. I was interested in the Navy because I had lived in Foley, Alabama, which is 28 miles from Pensacola, and saw all those Navy pilots flying down there. However, I couldn't pass the Navy physical, either, and they turned me down. So I thought, well, I'll see if the Army Air Corps will take me, and I went to see their doctors, and they decided they would take me. Then I asked them how long it would be before I would get to start flying. They said to get through to pilot flying with all the people they were recruiting, and the services they had, it would probably be six or seven months. So I thought that, since I was already flying with the Canadians, I would just stay where I was. I went back then, and finished my training with the Canadians. I went up to Moncton, New Brunswick and finished advanced training. The class I was in at Moncton was pretty much split down the middle. Half the pilots went to Bowfighters, and the other half to Spitfires. Except six of us they sent to flight training school to become instructors.

ROTOR: Did you see any action?

Two Bell 47s on a mountaintop conducting a survey in Utah in 1951.



York: No, I didn't see any action. I never saw any combat in all my five and a half years in the service.

ROTOR: You served mainly as a flight instructor?

York: Pretty much. All the time I spent in Canada was as a flight instructor. Then in 1944, I got a chance to transfer back to the United States Air Force. I came back then and reported to Romulus, Michigan, 3rd Ferry Group in January of 1945.

ROTOR: When did you first come in contact with helicopters?

York: I didn't come in contact with helicopters until much after the War was over.

ROTOR: How about the first time you soloed in a helicopter?

York: Well that was quite some time later. I did a lot of stuff before I got to that point. When I transferred to the U.S. Army Air Corps, I was in the 3rd Command. They sent me through some ground school training alongside B24s, B17s, P63s, and P47s, but I didn't get to fly any of those airplanes. I flew in C47s and C46s, and did some copilot flying on ferrying C46s. Then I took an instrument course in AT7s in Romulus, and occasionally with the flight engineer taxied a B24 across the field from where Ford was building it at Willow Run to where the Air Force took charge of it across the field. That was the closest I ever got to fly a B24. I did several of those. Also, I ferried some C46s out of Buffalo, New York to Fort Wayne, Indiana where they would do re-work on them. Shortly after that, they sent me to St. Joe, Missouri, and I went through C46 School there, to get prepared to go overseas. And then I went over to Europe. I was based in Bovingdon, not too far outside of London, which was the 8th Air Force Base. That was part of ATC at that time. I flew C47s and C64s from England up to Ireland. We were flying material out of B24 repair depots up there that they were shutting down since the War was just about over, and bringing that stuff

into London. We were also flying over to Paris in a C47, and after about 6 months in that area, I was transferred to Paris. The War in Europe had ended at that time and we were flying to various bases in Europe.

ROTOR: How did your career take you to helicopters?

York: After I came back from the service in 1946, I couldn't get a flying job, so I wound up going to Spartan to get an A&P License. After I finished that, in 1947 I got a job flying for Stewart Sales Corporation in Indianapolis, Indiana. The fellow I worked for in Indianapolis also owned a P39 that Tex Johnston had won in the Thompson Trophy Race in Cleveland in 1946. He had gotten a machine from Bell Aircraft and had raced it in 1947, and that is when I went to work for him. We were trying to get it ready in 1948. I had gone up to Bell to get an engine, and some information on what needed to get done to that machine since they had never made any written documents or had any data on what they had actually done to make it a racer. During that time, they tried to sell a helicopter to Rollin Stewart. And eventually, in February of 1948, he bought his first one. And that was the first helicopter I rode in. but I didn't get any training in it until later. He bought a second helicopter, a Bell 47D, in the summer of 1948. They were using it for agricultural spraying up in Wisconsin and various other places. I flew Stewart up there in a Beech several times and then, after they finished the season, it was back in Indianapolis. Stewart then asked the helicopter pilot to give me a little time in it. I flew with a pilot by the name of Bob Gangwish at that time.



Ozzie inspecting wreckage of a submerged Bell 47 that had crashed in the Tok River in Alaska when the river was high.

I got a couple of flights in it, probably an hour and forty-five minutes all together. I soloed in the thing and flew it around in a pattern. I didn't fly a helicopter on assignment until much later, but that was the first time I flew one. The next spring Stewart got a survey contract in Alaska for two machines. He couldn't find anybody to go up there. He had found some people to go and apparently one of the crew backed out on him. He finally asked me if I would go up there. He sent me to Bell to take a maintenance course on a Bell 47D, so that an insurance company would cover his machines. So we went to Alaska and spent the whole summer with the USGS. And when I came back from Alaska, Stewart had sold the machines to Roy David and Ed McGee out of New Orleans, and a company called Allied Helicopters. They were in business with a C54, flying cargo to Central and South America. Stewart had a fellow running advertising on helicopters, and he was going to work for David and McGee down in New Orleans to try and promote the helicopter business. He was trying to get me to go down there. At that time I wasn't very interested after coming back from Alaska. I thought I would probably still stay and fly that airplane



Geological exploration at Icy Bay, Alaska, circa 1953.

for Stewart. But anyway, I went down to New Orleans to be interviewed and to see if I wanted to go to work down there. I saw what they were doing with that C54 — they had a big hangar that belonged to Eastern Airlines. They had half the hangar leased for their operation. They had all kinds of cargo in there that they were hauling to Central America. I thought that would be a good place for me to go to work, flying that C54. I would also be doing the maintenance on their two helicopters. They had a contract that Stewart had already provided, that required flying about 10,000 miles of powerline for TVA. So, after working in New Orleans for awhile, I did get to fly in that C54 a couple of times. However, they had a partnership with that C54, and one of the partners didn't want to spend the money to get considerable work done on it, so they sold it to Kirk Kerkorian. We had to move then out of that big hangar in New Orleans. We moved east to a place called Michoud. There was an airfield out there and a big hangar that people who used to build boats down there in New Orleans owned, and we moved our helicopter operation out there. During that time, we had acquired two more machines. One was a Bell 47B model that we got from Bell Helicopter and put on the powerline patrol. And the other one we bought from Joe Jacobson in Kansas City. Joe

Jacobson was running this machine at a flight school. It was a machine that Willie Ong, the original owner had owned there. Ong had used it for agricultural spraying. Then the Korean War started and we got forced out of the building we were in. Available places were pretty scarce around New Orleans, so Allied decided to move back to Oklahoma. Both of these owners were from Oklahoma originally, so in 1951, we moved to Tulsa. And, of course, during this time I was accumulating hours on these helicopters with various pilots that we had acquired, and so I was gaining a little knowledge all along on flying them. The move to Tulsa, Oklahoma was to a little airport called Brown Airport. We started doing agricultural spraying work at that time. We also had another contract in Alaska.

ROTOR: Well, you had a long career with Allied, almost five full decades, right?

York: They served me well from January 1, 1950, when I officially first went to work for Allied. Allied was formed in New Orleans in October 1949. I had been doing work for them prior to that. I was still working for Stewart. I came down when they put that first shift on the powerline patrol, probably about October 1949, and then I would still run down from

Indianapolis and do maintenance on that machine at the same time. There was another man that was part of the original group there. He wanted to get into the business that McGee and David were in, which they called SkyTrain Airways, with the cargo business. They couldn't agree, so they started a separate company, which they called Allied Helicopter Service. So I went to work for Allied Helicopter Service on January 1, 1950. I worked for them until June 30, 2006. While there I worked for Roy David. That is the date I retired.

ROTOR: 2006. That is a long, long time. What are some of the memories you can remember during the time you worked for Allied? Was there anything that particularly stands out that you are proud of, that was a high point in your career?

York: Well, we worked up in Alaska. One year we had two machines up there working for USGS in the southern part of Alaska. I went up there in the beginning and set the operation up and helped the crews get started, and then I went back home. Then one of the pilots had an oil pump failure somewhere around one of the islands, and I had to land a helicopter in the Gulf of Alaska. Of course, it was on floats. They tied that thing up and then they had a storm. It was a couple of weeks before they could even pick it up, but anyway, as soon as they had the failure, they notified us about it. We figured we had to get an engine up there, so I got a brand new engine and shipped it to Alaska. I went along with it to install it after I got up there. We brought the machine into Juneau, and I was going to put the engine in it, when I found out that the other aircraft that we had up there needed an engine more than the one that had the oil failure. Back then, engines had aluminum oil pump gears, and that is what had failed. I took the oil pump off the engine that I was going to replace and put the new engine in instead. Then I put a new oil pump on the other one. Or a newer oil pump, I should say. And then we had both machines going again. The airlines went on a strike about that time. I got

the machine out to San Francisco, and then I had to put it in on a train to get it up to Seattle, Washington, to get it on another aircraft.

ROTOR: You met Larry Bell. Can you tell me about that?

York: Yes, that was interesting because I had gone with Stewart to see Larry Bell, because Stewart was interested in trying to get Larry to help him get the P39 ready for the 1948 air race in Cleveland. Larry was reluctant to even talk about it because they had experienced problems with it when they raced it in 1946. While they were getting two machines ready to race in 1946, Jack Woolams got killed in one of those machines prior to the race. Woolams was going to fly one and Tex Johnston was going to fly the other one. While they tried to figure out what had happened to the machine that Woolams was killed in, they decided to work on the other machine and riveted some heavy strips of aluminum on both sides of it, and reinforced several things. Later on I found out that they had lost the windshield, too. I heard about that when Jay Deming talked about it in one of his QB (Quite Birdmen) interviews. But at the time, I didn't know that had happened. Anyway, Larry was reluctant to talk about the race, but he was very interested in selling Stewart a Bell 47. At that time, Stewart hadn't agreed to buy one until a year later.

ROTOR: How many hours do you think you logged in a Bell 47?

York: I've got a little over 8,000 hours in a Bell 47 as a pilot, and about 7,000 hours in airplanes and fixed wing

aircraft. I have a little over 15,000 hours total time, including my military flight hours.

ROTOR: I am told that you were also the A&P mechanic that kept Allied's helicopters flying for all those miles for 50 years. What would you tell young people today trying to get into the business?

York: Well, first thing is that they have got to be interested in it. It has to be something they like to do because



Spraying pecan trees for Oklahoma State University, circa 1952/1953.

otherwise it is hard work. But if it is something they are interested in and they enjoy, then it is fun. I don't guess there is ever a day I went to work that I hated to go to work. I enjoyed working on helicopters, as well as flying them — same with fixed wing aircraft. During the time I worked for Allied, especially in later years, we were spread out in the agricultural spraying business, but we always had an airplane that we could use to go and find parts for helicopters, and get to where we needed to be quicker. We had a Cessna 195 that we flew for about 1,700 hours. We had that thing for almost 20 years. And then we finally got a Cessna 310. In later years, I flew a Cessna 310 from South Florida to Michigan and Wisconsin — everywhere we had somebody spraying that needed any help. I flew that

thing about 2,300 hours. It was pretty enjoyable.

ROTOR: Are you still in touch with any of the people that you worked with at Allied?

York: Yes. One of my first mechanics that worked with me in Tulsa is now working for Helicomb right there in Tulsa. John Davis, Jr. He was Vice President for OmniFlight for a number of years, and I think he worked for Evergreen for 10 years

before he came up to Helicomb. I am still in touch with him. His father worked for me, too, as an engine mechanic back in Tulsa. The last fellow that was shop foreman for me is still there in Tulsa. I still know those people. And there is a fellow I knew in Indianapolis by the name of Ralph Mong. I am still in touch with him. When we moved into the little airport in Tulsa, after moving from New Orleans, Ralph was managing the

airport there. He had been a mechanic at the airport when I worked for Stewart in Indianapolis where we kept our AT6. Stewart had an AT6 rigged up for skywriting, and he had a lady working for him in the office as a secretary. She was a skywriter. I maintained that machine and also flew. When I worked for Stewart, we also did some banner towing. We had two or three N3Ns. We only had one of them towing banners for advertising. And we did some outside work, too. I towed a banner around the racetrack in Louisville one year, when they had the horse races. That was a lot of fun. But back to Allied. We got a contract with the USGS out in Utah. I went out to Moab, Utah with two machines and worked out there all winter. And Ralph Mong worked on that job. He also worked on that first contract we



Agricultural spraying at South Bay, Florida, early 1990s. Foreground: Huey. UH1A and two Bell 47s in background.

had in Alaska. He designed a little airplane at that time and sold drawings of it. He designed it himself just like he was building a model, and I flew that thing a couple of times. Then, after he left us, Ralph went to work for a company building Learns up in Kansas. They also bought a helicopter outfit, but didn't do very well with it, though. Then he went to work for American Airlines and retired down in Texas, just outside of Dallas.

ROTOR: You have a good friend, Howard Hadley, who is President and CEO of Seegers Aero Corporation. Can you tell me how you two met?

York: When I first met Howard, we had relocated in Tulsa, Oklahoma and had bought part of an airport west of International, a little airport called Tulsa North Airport. The owner sold part of the property to Roy David, who was president of Allied Helicopter Service. David put up the finances required to bring gas and water to the facility because the fellow running the airport didn't have anything like that available. So David wound up with a truck at the airport to take care of part of that. When the Tulsa Police Department decided to get a helicopter, they started operating out of the airport, which was adjacent to our facility. Howard was in charge of the air unit that they had there.

They started off with a little Hughes 269 and eventually wound up with a LongRanger. And that is where I got acquainted with Howard.

ROTOR: Well, the two of you have been coming to all the recent HELI-EXPOs®, and Ozzie, you have garnered some awards. One is an Honorary Life Member of the Bell 47 Association, and you are also a member of the TwirlyBirds. Is there anything else?

York: Yes, I have been a TwirlyBird member since 1969, and I have been a member of the Quiet Birdmen since 1957. The TwirlyBirds presented me

with the Sikorsky Charles Lester Morris Award in 2003.

ROTOR: How long have you been an A&P mechanic and an AI?

York: I have been an A&P mechanic since 1947 and an AI since about 1956.

ROTOR: I have been told that you can be characterized as being a very polite but humble, reserved pioneer of vertical flight. Would you agree with that?

York: Thank you, I would like to agree with that.

ROTOR: What else can you think back on that might be good advice for people wanting to get into this industry? Do you have any words of wisdom for the young people?

York: I do for helicopter pilots. They need to fly higher.

ROTOR: Fly higher. I hope the pilots out there are paying attention. Well Ozzie, I really appreciate you taking the time to sit down with me and share your experiences with the readers of *ROTOR*® Magazine and the people in the industry. Best of luck to you.

York: Thank you very much. 🙏

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

Ozzie sitting inside a Bell 47 at the hangar in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 2006.

