

Peter Wright, Sr.

HELICOPTER INDUSTRY GIANT

All photos courtesy of Peter Wright, Sr.



Peter Wright, Sr. is a major figure in the development of the commercial helicopter industry. He is founder of Keystone Helicopters in Coatesville, Pennsylvania and the American Helicopter Museum and Education Center, in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The following interview with Peter Wright, Sr. was conducted by Martin J. Pociask, HAI's Communications Director and Editor of *ROTOR* magazine, accompanied by HAI Public Relations Assistant, Amanda Gustafson during a five-hour visit at Mr. Wright's home in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, on December 13, 2006.

ROTOR: Tell us about your early years. Where were you born? Where did you go to school?

Wright: I was born in Portland, Oregon. I moved away with my family when I was about three months old. We went to Duluth, Minnesota, and then Chicago, and then we moved to Philadelphia. The first school I remember — I guess I was about six years old — was the Charles Henry Public School in Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania. We lived in Mt. Airy for a while, then we moved to Meadowbrook, and I went to the Meadowbrook School, which was a small private school. I graduated from there in 8th grade — it only went to 8th grade. I went to Penn Charter school for a couple of years.

ROTOR: What kind of student were you?

Wright: I didn't do very well at Penn Charter. I enjoyed myself and didn't work very hard. Then I went to Abingdon High School. I didn't work very hard there either, but it was a

little easier, and I graduated from there. I had decided that I didn't want to go to college. However, a couple of friends of mine were going to apply to Penn (University of Pennsylvania). They were going down to see what their prospects were for getting in, and I went with them. On the way they told me how wonderful Penn would be — a lot of fun, and fraternities, girls, and all that good college stuff — so I applied to Penn. Well they turned me down, said my marks weren't good enough for them. That made me mad, and I decided I was too smart for college — I'd just have to go to work.

ROTOR: Tell us about your first job.

Wright: I asked my father where he thought I might get a job. My father's job was selling transformers. He was selling some material to Westinghouse in Philadelphia and said, "Let me ask Westinghouse if they have anything." A couple of days later, he called me up and said, "I got you a job at Westinghouse for the summer — it's sort of a blue-collar job but

you'll get some good experience." I said fine. It was pretty darn blue, I must say, but I went down there with my old clothes on and I was the best-dressed person in the factory. It was at Walnut and 30th Street in Philadelphia. The job was overhauling big oil-filled transformers, which they manufactured and sold. They'd take them back; clean and overhaul them; then put them out again. So I started working, cleaning transformers for almost a year.

ROTOR: What did the job entail?

Wright: The transformer is a big steel box. I took the lid off and there was coolant inside — creamy white stuff, that looked like whipped cream. They drained out the coolant, then lifted out the cores which were a bunch of sheets of copper and brass, cleaned them off and put them back. A lot of the coolant was stuck on the inside and wouldn't drain out. I had to get inside and scrape it off. The transformers were as high as the ceiling. I'd go up a wooden ladder to the top and then

they'd hand me another ladder to go down inside, and I'd be in there all day long scraping this stuff, which happened to be toxic. It was very poisonous. In those days they didn't know much about that. I'd come out just soaked with this stuff; it's a wonder I didn't die from exposure to that toxic coolant. Every time the manager would walk by he'd bang on the side of the transformer, and if I didn't bang back, they'd literally go up the steps and look in to see if I was alive or not, or passed out. People would pass out from this stuff. It was a hell of a job — a lousy job — but it paid 29-and a half cents an hour, five and half days a week. I remember my first paycheck was \$11 and some odd cents.

ROTOR: You were in the money!

Wright: A little brown envelope. But it was all mine and so I was pleased about that. But I decided I'd like to get out of there as soon as I could. In the meantime my father, who was a chief electrical engineer for the Reading Railroad, moved out to Pittsburgh to go to work for Westinghouse. While he was in Pittsburgh getting checked out in the job, he found out they had a very good private school there called Shadyside Academy — an old school and a good school. He said, "I called them up and they said they'd be glad to take you for a year in the senior class." He said, "If you're going to expect to get into college, I would suggest that you take another year of school and maybe you can get into a better college or wherever you want to go." So I said, "Okay, fine, I'll go there." I went to Shadyside Academy and graduated and then I went to Yale.

ROTOR: You were at Yale for two years?

Wright: Yes.

ROTOR: What prompted you to leave?

Wright: Well, lack of money. Westinghouse was going through hard times — laying people off and so forth. So my father decided he'd move back to Philadelphia where my mother, was born and where she knew a lot of people. I stayed at Shadyside Academy as a boarder and when I got into Yale

my father said, "Well that's terrific, I'm very happy for you, but unfortunately I can't afford it, so you have to get a scholarship or else you can't go — why don't you talk to them?" So I did, and I got a \$400 scholarship — four hundred dollars a year for four years. But the total cost of going to Yale in the brochure they gave me was \$1,250 a year. That was everything except travel back and forth to your home. So \$400 was a good piece of it. It's amazing how inexpensive it was by today's standards. The rates are now about \$30,000 or \$35,000. So I got a scholarship and during my freshman year I worked hard and I got my scholarship renewed for my sophomore year. That year I moved into Trumbull College, one of Yale's new residential colleges, which was very nice. I had three roommates, all close buddies of each other who had been to the Kent School. They were smart and didn't have to work very hard. They liked to go out in the evening, chase girls, drink beer, and stuff like that. So I decided I better go with them because I was their roommate.

ROTOR: To keep them straight I'm sure.

Wright: Exactly. I had a very nice year but my marks weren't very good. I remember coming home at 11 or 12 at night and trying to study and that didn't work very well. I didn't think much about it until my junior year when I went back to New Haven. The Dean called me and said, "Mr. Wright, I've got a problem I want to talk to you about." I went into his office and he said, "I'm sorry but you're not going to get the scholarship this year, your marks weren't good enough last year. If you do well this year, you could perhaps get it for your senior year." So I said, "Okay." He said, "You've got to call your father and tell him to send a check for \$400." So I called collect. My father listened to the story and said, "Listen, I've got another suggestion — get on the train and come home." He said, "I don't have \$400, and I have no way of getting it. It's too much money."

ROTOR: You found out about an

aviation cadet program?

Wright: Before I went home I had lunch a couple of times with a bunch of guys. One of them had been an aviation cadet at Pensacola. He was telling us all his stories of flying and doing all this good stuff. It sounded interesting, so I asked, "What do you have to do to qualify?" He said, "You need two years of college and you have to pass a physical. The physical is pretty tough, and then you've got to progress through the procedure. If you don't make it they'll kick you out real fast."

ROTOR: When you went home what happened?

Wright: When I came home, my father asked, "Well what are you going to do now?" I said, "Well I don't know. I'm not going back to that job. I'll take my chances on getting a better one." I was unhappy with the Westinghouse job because, one time I sat down with my supervisor and asked him, "What's the future of this job?" He said, "The future is not here, it's out somewhere else — that's what I've learned." He was a nice guy. Very capable. He said, "I'm 55 years old." Then he asked how much I was making. I said, "29 and a half cents an hour." He said, "Well I'm making 50 cents an hour and it's been like that here for about 30 years. The pay is not good, and they're having problems." I told my father, I said, "I don't want to be 50 years old and working in the cellar of Westinghouse Electric cleaning transformers."

ROTOR: Did you tell your father about the aviation cadet program?

Wright: Yes, I told my father about the aviation cadet program. I said, "It sounds to me like I have the qualifications but I don't know if I can pass the physical." I asked him what he thought about it. And he said, "Well, gosh, I think that's terrific!" He was an old Navy guy himself — during World War I in Europe. He loved the Navy. At that time Hitler was taking over Poland. My father said, "I think we're going to get into the war sooner or later, but I don't really know much more about it than what I've read in the papers. If you get in now, you'd be way ahead. You would get the best

jobs and see the most action.” And I said, “You mean I’ll also get killed first.” He said, “No, probably not. Chances are you won’t. Don’t look at it that way. Look at it like you’re going to live through it. It might be a good job. You might become an airline captain afterwards.” So he said, “Let’s go down and see the head of the Navy Yard. I know all those guys. We’ll go down and talk to him.”

We had lunch at the Officer’s Club. I thought boy, the Navy is pretty good, they have white tablecloths and white napkins, it really looked great, and the food was good. Of course he was the Captain, the head of the whole works. He listened to my story and said, “Well, we’d love to have you in the Navy, it’s a great job. If I was a younger man that’s what I’d do.” I said, “I’m not looking for a career in the Navy, I’m just looking for the next few years then, I’ll probably go back to college.” He said, “Okay, I’ll tell you what, I’ll call the head of the medical department here in the Navy Yard and ask him if he’ll give you a quick physical — this afternoon if you want.” I said, “Fine.” That was lunchtime, at about 2:00 or 2:30 I was walking over to the medical section. I was there a couple of hours, and given a physical, which I passed. By 4:00 I was in the Navy for four years.

ROTOR: That’s fast. What did you do after you graduated from the Pensacola Naval Flight School in 1940?

Wright: Well, I went directly to the fleet and was assigned to an aircraft carrier working out of Norfolk, Virginia. From Norfolk, I was sent to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to get checked out on carrier landings, which could take two or three months depending on how things went. I was assigned to a dive-bomber squadron. They were just replacing bi-planes with monoplane — single wing airplanes when I joined the fleet. I was assigned to Squadrons BF41, and BF42, two dive bomb squadrons. We cruised around the Caribbean for two months and went through a couple of hurricanes, which were very interesting. During one hurricane we were out on patrol, not flying, just moving away from the

storm. Waves came over the 65-foot high deck and washed away about 12 airplanes.

ROTOR: Oh my goodness. Then what happened?

Wright: President Roosevelt decided to help the British and we were sent down to Bermuda to open up a new U.S. naval facility. It was part of an arrangement where we gave the British destroyers and they gave us mostly facilities around the world where they had control of the country. In those days, there was no airport in Bermuda. We operated out of there for about nine months patrolling the mid-Atlantic area looking for German submarines.

ROTOR: U-boats and what else?

Wright: U-boat tenders. We’d fly out a couple hundred miles in the morning and then fly back again. We went in a big triangle in the Atlantic, and were gone for two months. We saw a lot of the countryside, a lot of water. If anything looked suspicious the radioman in the rear seat would open up in clear English over our very powerful radio and give latitude, longitude, speed, and direction along with anything else we could distinguish.

ROTOR: You were on the aircraft carriers, Ranger, Wasp, and Yorktown,

right?

Wright: Yes, that was all done on the Ranger. The Ranger I was attached to was the oldest carrier in the Navy. It was the first carrier that was built to be a carrier. Most of the carriers at that time were older ships, mostly cruisers that were modified into aircraft carriers while they were being built. Then they started building real aircraft carriers, like the Saratoga, Wasp, and Yorktown.

ROTOR: In 1941 you resigned from the Navy and joined General Chenault’s American Volunteer Group; also know as “The Flying Tigers.” Can you tell us about that?

Wright: When we got back to Norfolk, we heard about a retired Navy officer, Commander Irvine, who was soliciting pilots and ground personnel for a year’s experience going to China. The Japanese had decimated the Chinese Air Force. They held all of the ports along the Pacific, the Indian Sea, and the China Sea. There was no way to get material into China, except by going up the Burma Road, which started in Rangoon. Equipment and supplies were unloaded in Rangoon and transported by train or trucks to Lashio in northeastern Burma. The Burma Road was being bombed and strafed by the Japanese. The Chinese had no anti-aircraft weapons or anything. They needed help because a

The Flying Tigers second squadron stands in front of their P-40 before going into combat (China, 1941).



lot of supplies were coming from the United States and they wanted to get them into China. Irvine told us what we were to do, and what the mission was, and he said, "I doubt if you'll get in any combat, but you may."

ROTOR: Where did the fighter planes come from?

Wright: Chenault had to get some fighters. He went to Curtiss-Wright, which was already selling very profitably in China. Curtiss had recently placed an order for some older P-40s, with later model P-40-Bs for the British. The first one hundred of those older airplanes were slated to go to England but they didn't reach the altitude needed to fight the Germans. The British wanted the P-40-B with bigger guns and higher altitude. The P-40s, all brand new, were still being built. So Chenault asked Curtiss, "How about we take those off your hands?" They said, "That's up to the United States Government, we can't make that decision."

ROTOR: How did Chenault generate interest in the project?

Wright: Chenault went to President Roosevelt, and got to know Frank Knox who was Secretary of the Navy, and became very interested in this project. He met with all the top people. Chenault was an interesting guy. Roosevelt asked Chenault, "What's your take on the Japanese pilots compared to U.S. pilots?" So Chenault said, "A lot of people think the Japanese pilots are probably no good at all." Japan in those days was famous for making toys and such, and copying U.S. products. He told Roosevelt, "If you think that way, you're going to have a lot of problems on your hands. They're as good as the Americans and they've had three years experience fighting the Chinese. The Japanese have shot down several hundred Chinese fighters and bombers. They've just decimated the air force. They don't fly at all anymore, mostly local training flights." Roosevelt said, "Well one of the reasons I'm interested in this project of yours is, we don't know how good the American pilots are, we think they're wonderful but we don't know,

they've never been in battle."

ROTOR: So Chenault got his funding?

Wright: Chenault got \$5 million for the whole project, a one-year project, hiring the people, paying the salaries, everything, buying the airplanes. He set up a company called Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company, CAMCO for short. They had a factory in China, just on the Burma Road, just over the northern border with China. They signed an agreement to repair the airplanes that were damaged and supply some help and maintenance. They did some repairs but not much. When we cracked up an airplane, it generally was demolished. The pilot would bail out and crash into the jungle, because the whole terrain was jungle — damndest jungle you've ever seen. The only thing going through it was the Burma Road for 600 or 700 miles from Burma to China. I was interested in studying all that, so I drove a truck up the Burma Road to see what it was like. That was one of the most interesting things I did the whole time I was there. Chenault got the airplanes shipped to Rangoon by boat. Curtiss-Wright supplied two mechanics to put them together because the wings and the propellers and so forth were off. The mechanics put them together in Rangoon and walked away from the project. From then on it was up to Chenault to take over.

ROTOR: Tell us about Chenault's arrangements.

Wright: Chenault arranged with the British to use an abandoned RAF base at Toungoo, Burma, halfway between Rangoon and Mandalay—about 150 miles north of Rangoon, where they had a hangar and some barracks made out of teakwood. We all ended up there. We had about five boatloads of people that went over there. I went over in a small Java-style ship with about 225 Americans and 50 missionaries out of San Francisco. We all took it pretty lightly. You know, we were going over there to have fun and see the world. If we didn't like it we'd come home, that's what we talked among ourselves. None of us had flown a P-40, none. Nobody on the

ship had flown a P-40.

ROTOR: You got our government's Distinguished Flying Cross for your part in all this, right?

Wright: Yes. I got the actual award just a couple years ago when the government finally got around to straightening out all the paperwork.

ROTOR: When did you develop your interest in commercial aviation?

Wright: I loved aviation, after I got home from the Flying Tigers; I wanted to stay in it. When the war was over, I was casting around for a job with a future. Some pilots had come home ahead of me. They worked for American Export Airline in New York, who had begun to compete with Pan American flying the Atlantic. A steamship company, American Export Lines, bought four or five flying boats made by Sikorsky and started hiring pilots. They hired a very experienced aviation guy, Charles Blair, to be the chief pilot. He heard about pilots coming back from China. He wanted to talk to them, so he sent his people to invite them up. They all signed up for an excellent deal. It was well run, and they were able to build up their flight time, which was important. When I got home, I looked them up. They encouraged me to come out and see what was going on and said I might like it. So I did that, I was offered a job as a copilot, and promised I'd be made a captain in a year. That sounded pretty good, and the pay was very good. I made 88 trips across the Atlantic for American Export Airlines. Those were the days when going across the Atlantic meant a long trip. We flew at 100 miles an hour from sundown until sunup. The longest trip I made was 26 hours

ROTOR: Peter, what got you interested in helicopters? I understand you worked as Vice President for Military Sales at Piasecki?

Wright: I worked for Frank Piasecki for about two years. Actually working directly for his Vice President in charge of marketing, Harry Pack. He was very enthusiastic, a full-energy guy. He put me to work trying to sell a model, which was just coming out

for use in Navy rescue operations. In the old days two destroyers followed carriers everywhere they went, particularly if they were launching or receiving airplanes. If you didn't make it, or spun in, or for whatever reasons landed in the water, the destroyers would pick you up. They figured a helicopter would be a lot faster. So the Navy put out a bid to develop a faster helicopter, specifically for that reason. Piasecki competed with Sikorsky. Piasecki's helicopter, won the competition. It was a model HUP that went into production for the U.S. Navy. It was the first one to have two rotors, fore and aft.

ROTOR: Tandem rotors.

Wright: Yes, tandem rotors. The rear rotor was higher than the lower rotor, which made it much more compact. It could go down the deck elevator of an aircraft carrier to the deck where they did all the maintenance, and stored the aircraft. Today, carriers are even larger. They have side elevators that go out and down and come back. But none of them could handle a big tandem with expanded rotors. All the tandems built since then have been overlapping. They weren't sure how the overlapping would work because the turbulence from the front rotor would go in through the rear rotor. They thought it would affect the lift of the rear rotor, and might even do a loop. Some people were worried about the rotors hitting each other, even though they were all positioned so that wouldn't happen.

ROTOR: The U.S. Navy bought the HUP.

Wright: The Navy bought the HUP and Piasecki went into production on it. I think they sold three or four hundred of them. We have one in the museum over here. They're not flying them anymore, but some of the museums are picking them up. It was a pretty successful helicopter and I became very familiar with it in order to sell it. I didn't fly it. I've never been checked out as a helicopter pilot. I can fly them and I have flown them, land and take-off, but I don't have an FAA license. I have an airline transport rating for fixed-wing airplanes both land and sea.

ROTOR: What got you started in the helicopter business?

Wright: American Export Airlines decided to sell the airline to American Airlines. They laid off a lot of people. They laid me off for short periods of time and finally they were going to lay me off completely. So I came home to Philadelphia. By that time I was married and had four children. My wife wanted to go back to Pittsburgh or Philadelphia because she knew people there. I was unemployed with no prospects. I had a good friend by the name of Peter Fetterolf. We liked to shoot trap, and skeet. My wife and I were at his house having dinner and I said to him, "I'd like to ask you a question. I'd like to know if you have any money you'd like to invest in a new company, I'm thinking of starting one up." He said, "Well, last week I sold a small paint company we had owned over in New Jersey, and I've got \$50,000. If that'll help, you can have that." I said, "That will get me going but not very far. I've got to get more than that. I've got to buy at least one helicopter." I never thought of renting one. We didn't do much of that in those days. My friend gave me the money and asked, "Now what do I get for this?" I said, "First of all you've just been elected vice president of the company. What I'd like you to do is travel around with me and learn the business—I was going to New York about two days a week and down to Texas and Florida and all over the place trying to sell people on financing a helicopter company—I've got to buy a helicopter and I want you to come with me when I buy it." He was a good businessman, good with figures, and a good golfer. "I'll take you down to Bell Helicopter Company in Ft. Worth, Texas to talk to them. They've got a brand new Bell 47G for sale. It was selling for around \$45,000 in those days. I won't be going for two or three weeks because I've got some other people I want to see before we go down there. I want to be able to tell them that we have \$50,000 in the bank. Although that's enough to buy the helicopter it won't leave us any operating cash. So I want to raise a little bit more money before I go down there." I bought the Bell helicopter. I

had to hire a pilot. I was friends with a pilot who worked for Bell, by the name of Godfrey Rockefeller. He was a wonderful guy, a great guy. I made him chief pilot because I knew we had to hire some more, and he knew a lot of pilots, he had been in the Marine Corp and flew in Korea. Godfrey said, "Let's go over and see Jack Dorrance," who was a major stockholder in the Campbell Soup Company and one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia, and I said, "Okay." Godfrey said, "I'll call him up and ask him to lunch." When we got there I said, "There must be a hundred acres of land but it's all trees. Where can we land?" Godfrey said, "We'll land on his tennis court." I said, "That's pretty small isn't it? The Bell 47 is 32 feet, and the width of a court is about 40 feet so that only leaves about 8 feet between the two high wires." I said, "Why don't we land on the lawn?" Godfrey said, "He's worried that the helicopter will damage the lawn." The only place to land was on the tennis court. He had to take the net down, which sort of annoyed him. So we landed on the tennis court, and I must admit it was pretty close. But anyhow, we went in. We took Jack for a ride and flew around and looked over Philadelphia. We were up about half an hour and he just loved it. And I said, "Jack, I want to talk to you about investing. Fetterolf is one of our major stockholders." He immediately said, "Well how much did he put in?" I said, "\$50,000." He said, "Well I thought you said he was a major stockholder?" I replied, "Well he is." Jack said, "Well I could become a major stockholder pretty easy." So he became an investor.

ROTOR: Where did you base the operation?

Wright: We first moved into Fetterolf's family's office in one of the big buildings in Philadelphia. They gave us a desk and we took turns using it. Our helicopter was based at Philadelphia International Airport.

ROTOR: Those early years were pretty lean weren't they?

Wright: My role was to be the salesman—making cold calls, securing contracts. The first contract we got was



Young Peter Wright climbs into his P-40 with a parachute strapped to his back as he prepares to head into combat (China, 1941).

landing Santa Claus up in Connecticut, for a thousand dollars, and next we flew the Easter Bunny. We did a lot of publicity, public relations, store openings, gas stations and all kinds of stuff. When we started, we were the only helicopter charter company between Washington and New York and there was none in either of those two cities. We used to fly down to Washington to do some work, land on the Mall, and that was a pain in the neck getting permission to do that. We were looking for long-term contracts. Most of the work we had was charged by the flight hour. Business grew slowly and on many paydays we only had enough cash to pay our employees. I had to wait until the next week or longer for my paycheck!

ROTOR: You also did some survey work in Canada?

Wright: One of our significant contracts was with a large Canadian utility company surveying power lines in a remote area on the Hamilton River in Labrador.

ROTOR: What types of contract work followed this?

Wright: By 1954 we were working on high-altitude mapping projects in Mojave, Utah, and Grand Junction, Colorado for the U.S. Department of the Interior Geological Survey. Helicopters were being used for agriculture, spraying and dusting, and surveys of all kinds. The electric utilities by that time were using helicopters all over the country. We had yearly contracts with 22 utilities.

By that time a number of other helicopter operating companies had started up and of course they all went after the same customers.

ROTOR: In 1955 you began supplying the Standard Oil Company of California with three helicopters to do survey work in Colombia, South America?

Wright: Yes, we provided helicopters for airborne geophysical surveys.

ROTOR: And that was your introduction to some South American work. You also started new companies in South America.

Wright: We formed Helicol in partnership with Colombia based Avianca. It became the largest rotorcraft operator in South America. We also started Helikey in Guatemala. Both companies supported the oil industry, flying workers and equipment in and out of remote jungle areas.

ROTOR: The work in South America ended around 1960. What happened?

Wright: The Colombian government had changed its regulations for the petroleum industry. The new oil laws affected our operations there and we decided to stop operating in Columbia. After some interesting negotiations we sold our share of Helicol to our business partner, Avianca Airlines. We also stopped operating in Guatemala about the same time. We had an interesting contract there with Texaco, supporting an extensive remote area seismographic survey with three Bell 47 helicopters and a Grumman Goose twin-engine floatplane. Unfortunately, Texaco did not get good survey results and so decided to terminate the project after about two years.

ROTOR: Briefly describe Keystone's business after South America.

Wright: We re-started operations based out of Philadelphia focusing on power and pipeline patrol, right-of-way spraying, and in the late 60s and the 70s, construction with Sikorsky S-58s. Our first turbines were Bell 206As used for bank transportation. All our revenue was from flying until we started maintaining other people's helicopters in the mid 70s. Over the

years maintenance grew to become about 75 percent of our revenue and included Rolls Royce 250 repair and overhaul, new and used helicopter completions, and new helicopter assembly.

We started air medical operations in 1981 with a MBB BO105 that had some spare time available from its regular bank support mission. Eventually we operated 35 twin-engine helicopters supporting hospitals throughout the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions.

ROTOR: In 1993 you were one of the founders of the American Helicopter Museum and Education Center, in Brandywine, at the airport. Tell us how that came about?

Wright: The American Helicopter Society (AHS) wanted to do something to celebrate their 50th anniversary. Someone I knew there called and asked if I would be interested in talking to them about an idea for this 50th anniversary. AHS wanted something important and lasting. They were thinking about a helicopter museum, because at the time there wasn't one in the

United States. Though there were several aviation museums around the world, helicopters received second-class treatment. They were usually parked in the back under the wing of a DC-3 or something. They were not very prominently displayed. The AHS thought it was time to have a first-class helicopter museum that properly displayed its helicopters. About 30 helicopter professionals including Frank Piasecki sat around a table. They said, "We ought to start a helicopter museum, in Philadelphia, the birthplace of rotary wing in the United States." They said, "We notice that you've been collecting some old helicopters, and we thought we'd talk to you about it. Have you ever thought about starting a museum?" I said, "Yes, I have, and as a matter of fact, that's what I plan to do if I get any more helicopters." I had about six or eight old Bells and Sikorskys, and later we got a Sikorsky F-51. They said, "The first thing we want to do is choose a president and find a location to rent a hangar or a building. Would you be willing to donate your antique helicopters, and become president of the museum?" I told the group that I'd

be glad to do it.

ROTOR: You made a decision to sell Keystone, first to Keystone Ranger Holdings, and most recently to Sikorsky. That must have been a pretty difficult decision for you.

Wright: Well, we had been talking about it for a number of years. My two sons worked in the company. Peter Wright, Jr. became president in 1986, and was a very good businessman. My other son, Tim was vice president. I continued as chairman until the company was sold in 2002. About 2000 Peter and Tim started talking seriously about selling the company as none of their children were involved in the business. Eventually they started discussions with Steven Townes that led to his purchasing the majority of the company along with two local venture capital firms. After four years the company was sold again, this time to Sikorsky. Peter continued working until the second sale while Tim retired several years earlier. Peter and his wife moved out to Park City, Utah. They go skiing out west every year in the Rocky Mountains. So they decided to sell their house here and move out to ski country. Tim and his wife Ginny purchased a home on an island off British Columbia and spend quite a bit of time there.

ROTOR: You have been a big supporter of HAI.

Wright: Yes, I was on the Board of Directors for about six years. I was very bullish on HAI ever since I got into the helicopter industry. Because when I first started out, they were very helpful. Every time I'd go to Washington I'd look them up and we'd have lunch or do something like that. So I tried to get as much help as I could from them. I consider HAI to be a very well-run and effective organization that has contributed greatly to the overall strength and professionalism of our industry.

ROTOR: What are some things you disagreed with in terms of the helicopter industry over the years?

Wright: One thing, there are a lot of government regulations that work against helicopter operators. Another



Wright founded Keystone Helicopters 54 years ago. Here he receives a gift basket from Phil Landi of the New York Port Authority's Aviation Department.



Wright and the other Flying Tigers, including the crew's nurse get inducted in the American Combat Airman Hall of Fame located in the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio.

thing that has disappointed me for most of the 60 years I've been in the helicopter business is the issue of noise. I think it's inexcusable that something hasn't been done about noise. I understand it's hard to do, but so is landing on the moon. There are thousands of people who operate helicopters. After 33 years Keystone moved from its previous location primarily because of noise. The community asked us to stop operating or move away. They wanted us to shut down at night because they couldn't understand why helicopters were coming at 3:00 in the morning. We told them that the helicopters worked for local hospitals and were trying to save lives. They said, "Well tell them to come over here and save our life because we're going crazy with you making all that noise."

ROTOR: HAI is deeply involved in the issue of noise abatement.

Wright: Yes, it is. Noise is an engineering problem. Rotor blades, when they're spinning, make a lot of noise. They've put special tips on them and made other adjustments, which help quiet them but helicopters still annoy some people.

ROTOR: You were an officer/director of HAA before it became HAI. And you were also a trustee of the Helicopter Foundation International (HFI), and a long-time member of the Wings' Club of New York City, the American Helicopter Society, and the Twirly-Birds.

Wright: That's correct.

ROTOR: You have a long list of honors which include: in 1969 you were named, Man of the Year — for Outstanding Services in the field of helicopter operations, by the Air Club of Pennsylvania; in 1977 you received, an honorary award — for outstanding service in helicopter operations, from the Air Club of Chester County; in 1982, from HAA you were awarded, the Mack Schumacher Memorial Award for Distinguished Service in the Commercial Helicopter Industry — for the advancement and use of helicopters in urban area operations; in 1985 you received, the Distinguished Service Award, from the Aviation Council of Pennsylvania; in 1988 HAI again honored you with, the Lawrence D. Bell Memorial Award — which recognizes excellence in management in vertical flight industry;

in 1989 you received, a Fellow Award — for outstanding contributions to the goals and objectives of the vertical flight industry, from the American Helicopter Society; in 1992 you received, a Certificate of Honor award in recognition for a lifetime of distinguished service as a pilot, a patriot, and an international businessman, from the National Aeronautic Association.

Your service with the American Volunteer Group (AVG — the Flying Tigers) from 1941 to 42 was acknowledged by the following honors: in 1992 you were awarded, the Presidential Unit Citation, given to members of the AVG — for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy in South China and Southeast Asia; in 1996 when the Chinese Air Force honored the AVG, you were awarded, the Distinguished Flying Cross — for extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight from December 7, 1941 to July 1942.

The recognition continued: In 1997 the National Aeronautics Association honored you with the Elder Statesmen of Aviation Award. In 2000, you

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"Encounter in Washington" (December 1992).

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received the Man of the Year Award from the Northeast Era Historians, and Overhaul and Maintenance Magazine honored you with its Lifetime Achievement Award. It doesn't stop there, because in 2004 you along with Joe Soloy became honorary lifetime members of HAI at the 43rd Annual Salute to Excellence Awards banquet on March 16 in Las Vegas, Nevada. That award was given for dynamic leadership, dedicated service, and lasting contributions which advance the goals and objectives of HAI in the helicopter industry. Two of your lifelong friends attended that gathering; one was Carroll Voss, founder of AGROTORS in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, who I've also interviewed, and Wes Lematta, the founder and CEO of Columbia Helicopters. All three men share your values and philosophy for success—honesty, safety, and taking care of your employees.

Wright: Well that's the way to be successful. My philosophy is that if you live long enough you will receive recognition from your peers.

ROTOR: A bit of personal information. Your first wife passed away. You have since remarried, and live in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania with your wife, Simone. You have four children and seven grandchildren. Is that correct?

Wright: Yes, I also have two great-grandchildren.

ROTOR: Your son, Peter Wright, Jr., became chairman of HAI in 1999. On the same night that you received your Lifetime Membership Award from HAI at HELI-EXPO 2004 in Las Vegas, Peter Jr. received the 2003 Lawrence D. Bell Memorial Award at the "Salute to Excellence" banquet. That's the same award you received a few years earlier.

Wright: It's very satisfying to build a successful company and have your children become

involved. I was very proud of Peter. We both were honored to receive the awards. It was a special night.

ROTOR: You were recently honored by Keystone. They had built a new facility and they dedicated the boardroom to the Wright Family.

Wright: Well, Dave Ford, the president of Keystone, called me up and asked me if I was available for a dinner or a lunch in a week or two, and I said yes. He put together a program with all the employees that had been there at least 15 years that were available, and the three of us, myself, Peter, and Tim. All three of us went over to the new facility. We had a lovely lunch and everybody cheered and clapped. We had a good time. They gave me an award that was about two feet square. It was a big bronze or brass plaque with my picture on it, and then underneath the details of the company. They dedicated the boardroom to me.

ROTOR: What's the most memorable moment of your remarkable career?

Wright: The first few days of March in 1942. I was in Burma. The Japanese were bombing Rangoon with large fleets of bombers. We only had 12 airplanes that were flight ready. We'd take them up against 150 Japanese planes and shoot down 25 or 30 of their planes. Normally we wouldn't have any damage except some bullet holes in the airplanes, thanks to

Chenault's training. The Japanese were trying to take Rangoon by air, and making their bombing runs at night. They were bombing the docks. We did not have any anti-aircraft capabilities. So we would take our 12 fighters to an outlying airfield to keep them safe. Although the city was supposed to be blacked out, the local people continued to light cooking fires outside their homes. There was enough light for the Japanese pilots to locate Rangoon.

ROTOR: Peter, do you have any words of wisdom or advice for the upcoming pilots and people getting into the helicopter industry as a career?

Wright: Well, I think it's a terrific industry, very interesting, a lot going on. The manufacturers have forward-thinking people, who spend their time thinking about what's going to happen ten years from now. I'm very bullish on the industry.

ROTOR: Sounds like you believe this industry offers a lot of opportunity.

Wright: Yes, I think so. In the past, very highly experienced pilots ran most operations. Some didn't want to stay in the business. Instead of hiring somebody to run it, they ran it themselves. Some were very good at it and some were not.

ROTOR: You've had a terrific career and you have done so much for this industry.

Wright: The industry has done a lot for me. I started out with a small amount of money. Well I put it in and built up this business which somebody thought was worth buying. I have thoroughly enjoyed my career. There are some wonderful people in this business.

ROTOR: The readers of *ROTOR* Magazine will be very interested in your story, and very appreciative of your contributions.

Wright: Thank you, I'm glad to be of help, anyway I can. **R**

Martin J. Pociask is Director of Communications for HAI.