

# Robert E. Trimble—High Altitude Pioneer

by Verena Mertens



Photo courtesy of June Trimble

While mountain flying is usually associated with some of the most remarkable and secluded landscapes in the world, it is also one of the most demanding on both the aircraft and the pilot, requiring an immense amount of skill, knowledge, and experience. Countless communities rely on these pilots to assist in regions that are inaccessible by any other means. The "Salute to Excellence" Robert E. Trimble Memorial Award, presented every year at HELI-EXPO, honors a pilot distinguished in mountain flying.

The award was established 42 years ago, in memory of an extraordinary high altitude mountain pilot. It is presented to a pilot who has displayed exceptional ability and good judgment in high altitude flying, has provided outstanding service to others, contributed to high standards of safety, and brought credit and recognition to the helicopter industry. These demanding criteria mirror the skills and professionalism practiced by Robert E. Trimble throughout his career.

In 1961, while serving as Vice President for the Helicopter Association of America (HAA), the predecessor to HAI, tragedy struck when Robert Trimble was killed in the crash of an Alouette II helicopter during a mountain flight near Etna, California. As the story goes, the tail rotor of the helicopter failed in flight; he was able to safely autorotate to the ground, however, landing in a steep canyon, the helicopter flipped, killing both him and his passenger. It is in his honor that his widow, June Trimble, and HAA established the Robert E. Trimble Memorial award in 1961.

Robert Trimble had joined HAA just a few years before his death while simultaneously running Aetna Helicopters in Etna California. The creation of Aetna Helicopters came

out of pure coincidence. In 1954, Trimble, known for his expertise in high altitude mountain flying, was asked to fly fire patrol for the U.S. Forest Service in the Cascade Range of Northern California. After seeing the beauty of the region, he decided to move his wife, June, and children to the small town of Scott Valley and start a helicopter operation with Jess McMann. Scott Valley, a small town secluded in the middle of the wilderness provided an opportunity for endless work for a helicopter pilot. The region is part of the Klamath Mountains, bordered by the Trinity Alps to the South and the Siskiyou Mountains to the North. At first neighbors where worried about the "skeleton space ship" in Trimble's back yard, but they soon came to depend on it. Trimble became Scott Valley's one-man helicopter handyman. When somebody got sick or lost in the wilderness, Trimble was called upon to help.

Portrayed as the town's hero, Trimble was ready and willing to help wherever he and his helicopter could, whether he got paid or not. In the mid-1950s, while working under contract for the U.S. Forest Service, Trimble was asked to rescue a man who had fallen off a cliff and was stranded with a broken leg at 6,000 feet in the rugged terrain of the Marble Mountain Primitive Area. This man turned out to be Bill Matthews, a rancher in Scott Valley. Matthews was so impressed with the rescue, which would have taken hours without the helicopter that he immediately, while still in the hospital, called Erling Hjertoger, a lumber mill owner, and Dr. Granville Ashcraft, a physician, and explained the versatility and community benefits of the helicopter. They wanted in. Within a short period of time Erling Hjertoger, Bill "Pinky" Matthews, and Bob Trimble were partners. With

their financial support and Trimble's skills and valuable experience, Aetna Helicopters, Inc. was founded.

Bob Trimble had always wanted his own helicopter operation and had accumulated the necessary hours and experience over the years. According to June Trimble, Bob started flying (fixed-wing) with the U.S. Air Force in World War II and enjoyed it so much that he wanted to continue after he got out of the service. Immediately following the war, Bob worked as a fixed-wing Certified Flight Instructor (CFI) at a local flight school, as well as doing crop-dusting jobs on the side. He got married a few years later and decided it was time to go back to school. Bob went on to get his degree from San

**"I've landed to take snapshots of places that would bring tears of ecstasy to the eyes of a camera bug — atop 700-foot Pinnacle Rock, on the center of 309-foot-high Rainbow Bridge, in spectacular gorges."**

*Robert E. Trimble, 1956 Saturday Evening Post.*



Robert Trimble in his Allouette helicopter in the Trinity Alps of Northern California delivering gear and supplies to the fire fighting crews in July of 1959. Scott Carter, a 19-year old fire fighter at the time, took this picture after receiving his first helicopter ride from Trimble. Photo courtesy of Scott Carter

Jose College, with the initial intent of becoming a teacher. Unable to give up flying, however, he went to work for Hiller Helicopters where he was first introduced to helicopters.

In the early 1950s Trimble joined Armstrong-Flint Helicopters as a mechanic while Lyle Roethel, a pilot for Armstrong-Flint, taught him how to fly. Having logged 20 hours, Trimble was asked to join Lyle on a jungle job in New Guinea. After eight months and 500 hours of jungle flying consisting of flying dynamite out of tiny one-mile patches cleared out of the dense rain forest to seismological oil-survey blasting crews, Trimble headed back to California and learned all about power-line patrol flying while working for Elynor Rudnick of Kern Copters. Sam Thrasher, the chief pilot at Kern Copters, taught Trimble the tricks of the trade; how to stay close enough to the high-tension wires to do the needed work without having a gust of wind slam you into the wires.

In 1953, when an outbreak of mountain fires hit the Angeles National Forest in Los Angeles, California, Trimble was called upon to locate the fires, find a suitable landing spot, and transport crews and equipment as close to the fires as was safely feasible. In a 1956 article in the Saturday Evening Post, Trimble describes the difficulty of this job, "It takes a lot of control, I found, to land fire fighters on a mountain ridge in the path of a racing fire line with flames shooting a hundred feet into the sky. The blaze would suck in great drafts of rushing air that set up miniature windstorms. In a split second

that sudden wind could whip your cushion of air right from under you and bring on a crash landing." He goes on to say "I learned that the air cushion, or "ground effect," is the secret of a good mountain copter landing. In calm air, it's always right below you, where your rotor blades are forcing down a column of moving air. Add a little side wind and your air cushion can suddenly vanish, letting you drop hard enough to snap off a rotor blade. Sometimes I'd spend fifteen minutes circling a mountain peak, checking the wind before attempting to land."

After working for a Los Angeles businessman for a short period of time, Trimble went on to flying uranium prospectors and their delicate instruments into the Grand Canyon. Soon thereafter he was offered a job flying for the United States Geological Survey (USGS). In five months he helped the USGS map 5,000 square miles of some of America's wildest backcountry, a job that would have taken years without a helicopter. Trimble was thinking of settling down in the desert country, when in 1954 he received the emergency call to fly helicopter patrol during a rash of bad lighting fires in the Cascade Range of Northern California. Falling in love with the country, he settled down and after starting a small helicopter operation, founded Aetna Helicopters.

By the time Aetna Helicopters was created, Trimble had gained an enormous amount of helicopter experience in various types of jobs. He was known as an early pioneer in helicopter high altitude operations.

According to Joseph Seward, 1954 president of HAA, "Trimble was a distinguished mountain helicopter pilot in the 1950's. He flew rescues at 10,000 feet in small, low horsepower helicopters...this might not seem like much by today's standards, but with the helicopters of the '50s, it was a great accomplishment." Trimble was highly recognized for being a specialist in high altitude mountain flying. He was an experienced and respected CFI and check pilot. Pilots from all over the world came to California to receive training in mountain flying from one of the best. He trained many well-known pilots including Burt Train, Vice President of Redding Air Service. Aside from working with Trimble on a number of jobs for the U.S. Forest Service, Train completed his mountain-flying course with Trimble in 1958. In his words, "Bob was an excellent pilot, and a pleasure to work with."

Throughout the various jobs Robert E. Trimble performed during his exciting career, he was always willing to lend a hand and put his extraordinary skills to good use. It is a distinct honor for those pilots that have followed in his path to be awarded the Robert E. Trimble Memorial Award. Robert E. Trimble set up the high standards, which pilots today strive to attain. We are honored to give out this annual award in remembrance of the high altitude pioneer. **R**

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