

Wes Lematta

by Martin J. Pociask

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WES LEMATTA, COLUMBIA HELICOPTERS
EXCEPT AS OTHERWISE NOTED



From left: Wes Lematta in 2001, immediately following the dredge rescue in 1957 and at a logging job in 1980.

The following HAI Heritage Series interview was conducted with Mr. Wes Lematta, founder of Columbia Helicopters and Martin J. Pociask, HAI's Communications Director and Editor of ROTOR magazine, accompanied by David Osborne, HAI's videographer, who recorded the interview, which took place on June 12, 2007 at Columbia Helicopter's headquarters in Portland, Oregon.

ROTOR: Wes, thank you for taking time for this interview. Let's begin. Can you tell us when and where you were born, and a little bit about your childhood?

Lematta: I was born in Allendale, North Dakota on a farm. We lived in North Dakota until I was eight, and then we moved out here [Washington]. We had a pretty good-size farm there, but the dust storm finally took over and we just couldn't take it anymore. So dad and mom loaded us kids into the small vehicle and moved out here in 1934. I've been out here ever since.

ROTOR: I know you served as an infantryman in 1945. Can you tell us about this and how that impacted

your decision to get involved in the helicopter industry?



Wes Lematta with Marty Pociask, HAI's Communications Director and Editor of ROTOR.

Lematta: Naturally I was drafted in 1944 and got out in 1946. I went and got infantry training, basic training, in Texas, and got shipped over as

an infantry replacement in the Philippines. It just ended up at the tail end of World War II. While I was over there, I ended up on a foot line for a couple of weeks. A bunch of field buddies got killed from mortars and hand grenades. Then I ended up in a kind of basic training, or radio school, and I didn't have to go back to the front lines. But what led me to think about flying was while I was down there in the fox hole, planes were striking the Japanese on the far side of the hill. It got in my mind that while I'm here in this fox hole, that pilot is going to be sleeping in a bunk with sheets. So I decided I was going to learn to fly. I took flight training on the GI bill after I got out of the service and I got my commercial license. I figured I could get a job, but

there were so many high time pilots out of World War II that there was no way to get into it. Before going into the service, I ended up living on the farm with mom and dad and cutting a little wood. I quit school after eighth grade and ended up cutting wood for a living. I went to work in shipyards for a while. I earned enough money in the shipyards to buy a truck to haul wood with. So, I actually ended up making a fair amount of money for a kid, 16/17 years old. I ended up getting overly anxious and bought a log truck. It wasn't a very good piece of equipment and wished I had just stayed away from it, but I ended up actually paying for the rest of that truck while I was still in the service as a private. I got out of the service and I owned the truck for a little while and hauled railroad ties with it. Then, I went to work for a produce company driving to California and back. While I was driving and listening to the radio one day, I heard where they needed helicopter pilots down in the southeast at one of the bases. So I thought I've got a commercial, maybe I can learn to fly a helicopter. I called flight schools around here. I remember calling Skyways at Troutdale. The lady who answered the phone said there's nobody that gives helicopter training here, but there is a fellow in McMinnville named Dean Johnson who does. She said it's quite costly because airplane instruction was about



Clockwise from left: Wes Lematta (standing) with brothers Ed, Bill and Jim in 1966.

\$15 to \$20 an hour, and they were charging \$75 an hour at that time. I had a car that was pretty well paid for — well, it was paid for period. Anyway, Dean Johnson made me the offer of 60 hours of flight training for \$3,700. I went ahead and financed the car and got enough money to do that and I learned to fly with Dean Johnson. But it took a couple of years to get all the flight training in because I'd drive six to eight days and then I'd be out three or four days. I'd go out there and learn to fly. He was also doing other work. He kept me busy crop dusting and stuff. Anyway, it was quite a while before I got my helicopter rating or my hours. After I got so many hours I was able to take a person up when I went solo. I took my brother up for a ride and told him if Dean Johnson's not a millionaire already, he's going to be very soon because he makes so many dollars an hour. My brother [Ed] said why don't we buy a helicopter?

I hadn't even thought about it. Ed ended up selling his service station so that we could buy our first helicopter.

ROTOR: Was anybody instrumental in helping you get your operation started up and booming?

Lematta: Aside from Ed, my younger brother Jim helped as well. He's 13 years younger than I am. He had just graduated from high school, and he worked with me for a little while and then decided to go become a cowboy and went to work on a ranch. I worked out of the house first. I had an empty area behind the house, and I kept the helicopter there in Southeast Portland. Then I moved to Troutdale and rented space from a fellow there. It was fairly tight quarters. I was there for a while until I was able to move to Portland.

ROTOR: You and your brothers were all flying from your Swan Island facility. Where did that come in? Was it earlier?

Lematta: That would have been in 1961/1962.

ROTOR: Well, like any business, starting out wasn't easy for you and you continued to drive your truck and your wife was cleaning Columbia's offices because there was no money in the budget for a janitor. What kept you motivated back then, facing all those hard times?

Lematta: I enjoyed the flying and there was more of a future in that than in driving a truck. If you were working as a temporary worker you got the dirtiest job, too.

ROTOR: What location did you fly your Hiller 12-B from?

Lematta: Well, the first location was actually within three or four blocks of the house where I kept the helicopter behind the building there. There was an empty lot next to a busy corner. I talked people into letting me fly from their lot. It was interesting, because I did it on weekends, because on weekdays there wouldn't be enough traffic. I caused a couple of accidents there with people watching the helicopter come in and land. There's

Wes (left) with brothers Jim and Bill at Swan Island circa 1967.



a stop sign there. It was a couple of small accidents, no serious ones. Then the police came out to see if it was legal. I was legal. I was licensed, and I had permission to do it.

ROTOR: You also were flying as the Easter Bunny, Hoppity-Copter, and Santa Claus?

Lematta: Yes, right.

ROTOR: That's amazing. You were part of a flying trapeze act too?

Lematta: Yes, we tried that in the eastern region. It was one weekend and we didn't get enough participation. We had to hold it next to a post while a fellow stepped out. Then we also raced with a car. But it wasn't enough. We were just trying to make a living.

ROTOR: You did something with a trapeze?

Lematta: We were hired to do a trapeze act in Montana. We did that for one year and then they had us come join them on a tour. We went clear back as far as Nashville, Tennessee. We traveled to Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Nashville, Tennessee; and Virginia. The interesting thing was that it wasn't real high pay, but it was something. But then we got paid — it ended up that the last fair we worked at was in Nashville, Tennessee. I think the check was for \$1,300 for the final payment on it. Stupidly, I didn't cash that right then. So [later] we put it in the bank and it bounced. I needed that very badly.

ROTOR: Well, here's a question. There was apparently a rotten egg smell coming from a paper pulp company in Toledo. It was placing a lingering odor in the air and across the beaches. Can you tell us about Operation Reef Blow?

Lematta: Yes, it was interesting because we had to do some blasting on some of the little reefs. I would fly the fellows out there and hover next to it, and they'd fall off into the water. Slip off into it. I had to bring the dynamite

out to them and they'd set that. Then I'd bring them back to shore. I'm trying to think how we brought them back, but anyway, then they would set the dynamite to blast. We'd see what it was like. It got a lot of publicity and it was fairly good pay. It was successful.

ROTOR: In 1957 you made a very important heroic rescue. Can you tell the *ROTOR* readers about that?

Lematta: We were flying for the Corps of Engineers and I had flown with Colonel Graham, on previous trips, and assisted with ocean going barge dredges. It didn't have a heliport on it, so I would hover next to the clear spot on the dredge, and the colonel would step off onto the skid, and then off onto the dredge. At an arranged time, I would go back and hover next to it and pick him off that way. Actually, I had done that a few times on different ships in different places. But this time it was in Coos Bay, and we had trailered down there. I had put Colonel Graham aboard the *Rossell*, which was the ship that got sunk. About 10:00 in the morning, 9:30 or 10:00, he was there for about a half hour, and gave people on the ship an award — it was a safety citation. Then we flew around the rock quarries where they were using jetty rock for building jetties. We came back to Coos Bay where we had picked him up earlier. The first thing the Colonel said was 'I think we've lost a dredge.' Small boats were streaming out of the harbor. A ship was passing this dredge and lost its steering. It broadsided and sunk in a few minutes. It was shallow enough. The ship superstructure was still out. We figured the small boats would be able to get the people off the ship there. We flew around on



In 1957, Wes carried the trapeze act of Sandy Winters and Larry Ruhl on a tour throughout the Midwestern U.S.

the ocean side of it, and it was full of debris and life jackets and things floating around. We found one body that was floating face down. We still figured the boats would get them, but the wind was up fairly strong and they were right in the rough seas. The boats weren't able to get to him, so the Colonel was wondering if I could get some of them off of there. I put him ashore so that I could do the same thing as what we had done together. I would hover next to that person and they could step on the skid and slip in and out of the seat. Well, the first person I was hovering next to sits in the straddle of the skid, which was okay, but still out in the Center of Gravity (CG) quite a ways, which was okay for taking most of them — well, all of them actually, but one fellow was a little bit on the heavy side and it was right at the [weight] limit. On CG I remember having to be very cautious on the controls so that I wouldn't bump the mast and it all worked out. I actually brought 12 or 13 of them off that way. But some of them wouldn't climb up or I couldn't get in close enough to pick them up. So I was telling the Colonel that I couldn't get in any closer. We fashioned a rope — a line, tied it off on the side of the ship

and went back in and got the guys that were higher up to put it around them. I ended up in *LIFE* magazine, if I remember right, because I hauled about three of them off that way. One of them died that evening, after the rescue, of a heart attack. Another one of the fellows was a cook, or somebody dressed in white and got washed overboard and drowned. My brother was stationed at that Coast Guard station and had fuel there, but it was car gas. We ended up breaking the lock on the car gas drum and putting it in the ship to finish the rescue because I was getting too low on fuel. I was hovering next to the vessel when a wave hit the side of the boat and the wave came up to the rotor. My brother who was on shore mentioned the fact that it was noisy. They thought I was a hero. I thought to myself no. The difference between a hero and a dummy is if it's successful.

ROTOR: What a story!

Lematta: So that turned out well. I got a lot of good publicity out of it.

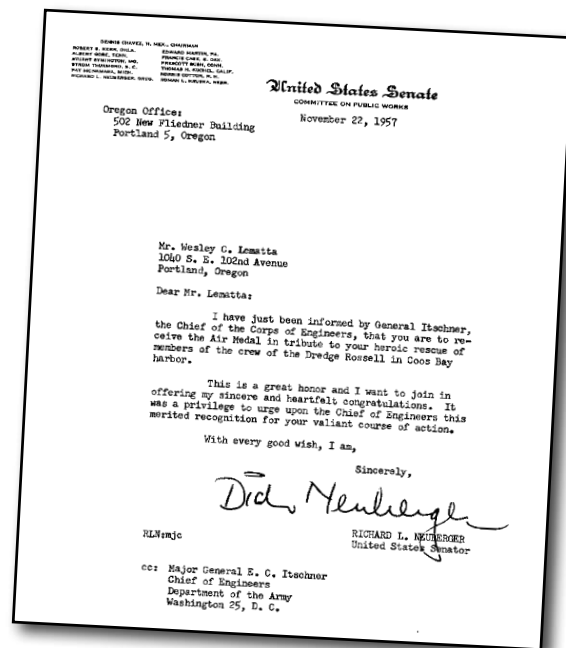
ROTOR: Changed your perspective on the industry in any way?

Lematta: Yes, well, as a good rescue tool as it's turned out before and after. The helicopter has saved many lives.

ROTOR: After this rescue you used your Hiller 12B to tow a pair of water skiers from Portland, Oregon to Astoria, Oregon. That's quite a distance.

Lematta: I think we could have made it into the Guinness Book of Records. But I got within ten miles of coming back in and I got so low on fuel that I had to finally land. I know they were sure disappointed because they had traveled over 175 miles, I think.

ROTOR: How did you get into that?

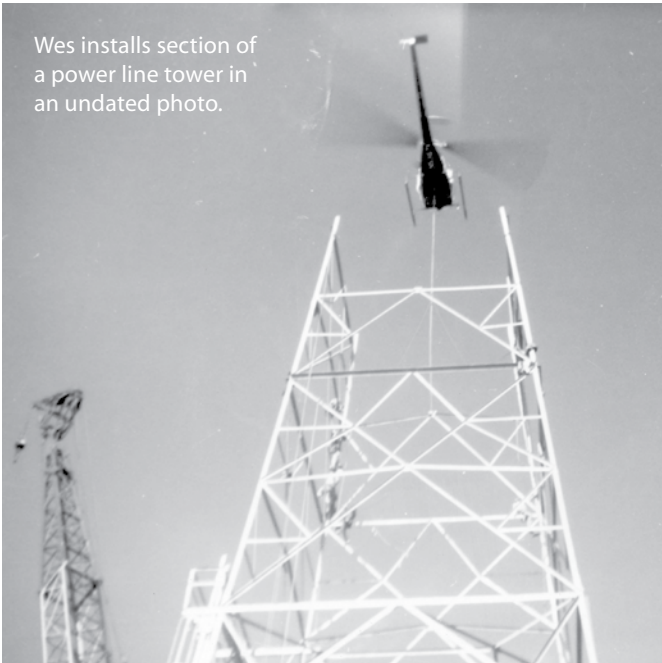


Lematta: They contacted me to see if I could do it. I told them that I can sure try. So it worked out. The fellows were dressed in plastic suits and when we finally had to quit there, the plastic suits were mostly shredded up to their waists.

On September 10, 1957, Wes rescued 15 sailors from a sinking dredge near Coos Bay, Oregon. In the process, Wes brought his Hiller 12B perilously close to the mast and lines on the ship, and close enough to the ocean that waves splashed the rear rotor blades at least once.



Wes installs section of a power line tower in an undated photo.



ROTOR: Did you struggle with how much to charge in order to make a profit way back when?

Lematta: Yes, when you quit at the eighth grade you're not very sharp on economics — so it is trial and error to a great degree in learning to hire people that talked about cash flow. When the ship is busy, it's going to be making money for me. So that's where I've learned the value of other people. When you have only got an eighth grade education, you don't need anymore — well, education is excellent now. We certainly look for that in people we hire.

ROTOR: In 1959 you decided to expand your fleet. Can you talk about that?

Lematta: Centennial — we had the Oregon Centennial over here in North Portland, over by the Columbia River. We wanted to give rides there. We made arrangements to have a heliport and gave rides from there. We wanted a second aircraft. We needed it at busy times. That worked out quite well for us. At the same time I was doing that, I had gotten enough hours to fly with the forest service on fire contracts and stuff. So, I could take the second shift at times and go fight fires.

ROTOR: Construction is not really

an easy task for a helicopter. Can you tell our readers about the system that you developed that helped pilots do construction work?

Lematta: Yes, we called it the DVOC system, direct visual operational control. It adds a great deal of safety to an operation. Setting poles with a 12-V, which had enough power to lift about 900 pounds or so. I had dual controls

in the helicopter. I just flew with the left dual control and then was able to see to place these things visually. We had radios also; it sped things up and made it a lot safer. In fact, I know times they told me to go ahead on up, Wes, it's okay, and there are guys standing in the loop of things. A good example of safety was buckets with the mixer in it. He's flying out to drop it into a hole for the powerline. The sun is shining so he can see the shadow of his helicopter as he's against the hill. There's a guy hanging underneath the helicopter. His glove had gotten caught as he was changing buckets. Luckily he turned around and was able to safely let the guy down.

ROTOR: You moved your company from Troutdale Airport to Swan Island in 1962. What made you decide to make this move?

Lematta: It was a temporary place out at Troutdale and fairly limited. The port offered to lease land to us at Swan Island there. I was taking people, photographers, and reporters up and having to charge for the flight time from Troutdale to here. It worked out better for the customer. We were fairly busy at times, giving rides around the city. So it just worked out quite well that way.

ROTOR: Can you tell our readers about Ms. Rotorcraft inaugurating Swan Island?

Lematta: It was interesting. I think there's a picture in our book [*Flying Finns*] that shows a champagne bottle — she dropped the champagne bottle and broke it to initiate that heliport.

ROTOR: You obtained your first tandem rotor helicopter in 1969. There were three Boeing Vertol 107-IIs and they were from Pan Am. You have been a true pioneer in civil use of tandem rotors and heli-logging. Why did you choose to get involved in this particular type of operation?

Lematta: I had looked at it ten years earlier with the Japanese in Sitka, Alaska, but the helicopters weren't quite big enough to do logging. It

Wes presides over the grand opening of Columbia Helicopters' first official facility at Portland's Swan Island Heliport in 1961.



was something that I knew we could do easily and safely. We only limited hours on our flying when there were limits on weather and having commodity to move. It was such a good thing to transport the logs and be very selective in how you did it. You didn't have to tear up the countryside. When I was at Swan Island I was chatting with Jack Erickson, who I had been teaching to fly a little bit, and I told him about how we could do some logging with it. When his dad had the sawmill down in California and had a skyline sale — it was mostly logged by Skyline. But it was difficult. They weren't able to log it the way they wanted to log it. So, he asked if a helicopter would work at all. I was sure it would. We got together. They are in the same business as we are, and people ask why didn't they log it first? I always say we went there together because it was Jack's sale and his people that kept the logs. It was our people that flew them in and our maintenance people. So, we did it together. It was interesting. In 1961, I remember we were doing a sale in Greenville, California, and I was on my way to HAA [which is now HAI's HELI-EXPO] at that time, thinking about the logging site. When I was at the HAA I never did mention to anybody that we were doing logging because it was pioneering and I didn't want any competition.

ROTOR: You didn't need the competition. Can you tell us how you came up with your version of the fire bucket and how you improved on that over the years?

Lematta: In the first big bucket we took a culvert. It's about six feet in diameter. We put a gate on the bottom

of it that would operate with air. It had a compressor. So we did some dropping of water very early in the game. There again I think that got



Wes Lematta and Columbia Helicopters first began fighting fires in 1966.

into *LIFE* magazine. We had an S-58 Sikorsky at the time, and it was the first one that we used the bucket on. We could lift 3,000 some pounds with it.

ROTOR: Can you tell us about the day you purchased and flew the jet powered S-61A, which was the largest commercial available helicopter in the country at the time? You flew it home from Stratford, Connecticut?

Lematta: Yes, I had been talking to Sikorsky about the helicopter, and he had a 61A, which was the utility version. I got them to put new engines in it. We could operate restricted aircraft and so the first 61A that we had was restricted aircraft. But I remember dealing with Sikorsky — we did put the latest engines we could in that aircraft and I went out on a limb financially.

ROTOR: Can you describe to the *ROTOR* readers what direct visual operational control is?

Lematta: Direct visual operational control is leaning out and watching, looking down on what's happening

below you. It's done 100 percent in any helicopter construction work. It adds a lot of safety and greater speed to the operation.

ROTOR: Columbia Helicopters operates throughout the U.S., New Guinea, South America, and now in the Middle East. You also expanded operations in Alaska. Tell us what it took to start up and expand those operations.

Lematta: Actually, for a while we worked up in Alaska through Rex Bishop and Alaska

Helicopters. We ended up merging with them and buying the company, and worked out of the North Slope there on oil work and other work as well.

ROTOR: You supported a logging venture in Canada about this time. You were literally all over the map. Was it hard to manage such a challenging schedule of operation spread over such a range?

Lematta: Yes, you have got to have good people. Like today in New Guinea, we have three aircraft — two big ones and a smaller one. By smaller one I mean 25 passengers, the 107, and then the Chinooks. Two of those are over there. But it's interesting when you're operating that far away from home and working for the oil companies. It's a seven day a week operation, and all maintenance is done at night. But also you could be down for an oil rig, or anything else. When we ship an aircraft over to foreign countries, we have more dollars in parts than we do in aircraft value. You have got to have it on-site. So we've worked very hard to get a reputation of dependability.

ROTOR: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers chartered your helicopter to take sound readings at the mouth of the Columbia River. It was the first time in the Pacific Northwest a helicopter had been used for this purpose. Can you talk about that?

Lematta: It was interesting because the Corps of Engineers needed to put these jetties out there and they needed to get a profile of the bottom. This was after I had worked with them on the rescue. I mounted these on an LG-2. We had a rod man for the Corps. But if it gets caught on a rock or something, you have got to be able to guillotine it, and cut it off, and stuff. You have got to make sure you don't get out of CG so I worked quite hard to develop how to do this. Then somebody with the Corps of Engineers said we should put it out for a bid. I said, what do you mean put it out for bid? I spent many hours on coming up with a plan and flew it and tested it. So they did let me have it for one or two soundings without having a bid on it. I was disappointed. Well, it worked out okay.

ROTOR: What is the torpedo recovery system that's still being used by the U.S. Navy torpedo testing range off the coast of Florida, and how was it first implemented?

Lematta: People in Washington, D.C. would build the torpedoes and put instruments in them, and they would want to test fire in Canada. We had signed a contract for carrying one torpedo at a time from Keyport into Canada. They would fire them, and then we would bring it back after

Most of the company's shop and headquarters employees pose in front of three of the company's Vertol 107-IIs shortly after moving to the Aurora State Airport in 1976.



us relocate there. But we would still be under port authority control, and we felt it would be nicer to be here. So we moved out here and built a facility.

ROTOR: In 1976 you bought four more Vertols, 107-IIs from the government of Thailand. That made you the largest civil operator of tandem rotors in the world. It's

quite an achievement. What happened there? What made you decide to leave?

Lematta: We were already operating seven of them, three that we had bought from Pan Am, and four that we had bought from different localities and were very pleased with the vertols. So these four were coming up for sale. They were not flyable. We had to trailer them for about 20 miles in Thailand. It was very difficult; it was a very long time in getting the contract together.

ROTOR: Columbia opened its first federal aviation administration approved maintenance facility about the same time, around the 1980s to perform outside maintenance. How hard was this approval process and tell us more about the facility you had?

Lematta: We would send a part out to a vendor or to Boeing for overhaul or something. It would sometimes be a while before they got back to us. We just discovered that we needed more control. This worked excellent for us. We started on Swan Island building the shops and then enlarged them as we got out here. It has worked out very well for us. Also, working with Boeing has worked very well. They were at first very reluctant — very cautious

they retrieved it. Well, anyway, we came up with the idea that we could retrieve it when the torpedo was spent. After they test fired it, it would float vertical. So we devised a sock that you put around it and it would tighten up as you lifted. We came up with that and demonstrated it a few times. Anyway, the complete contract got discontinued. We had a year's contract with the government and it was a rude awakening for us because we had spent quite a bit of time getting ready for this and counting on it to a great degree. I believe it was for the convenience of the government that they discontinued the program. We needed it very badly. When we got that notice, we thought, well maybe it isn't so bad. Maybe they'll have to pay us quite a bit because it was a year's contract. I learned very quickly that you don't put your neck out too far. Some of these big companies got in an argument with the government. They didn't need our services at that time.

ROTOR: In 1976 you moved your headquarters to Aurora, Oregon. Why did you choose Aurora?

Lematta: A government agency wanted a spot office for a freightliner on Swan Island where we were. So they wanted to move us out to Hillsborough, and would have helped

I guess I should say in dealing with us, but they got better as they knew we weren't trying to do anything that would jeopardize lives or was illegal. It's interesting now to think that — to see a tandem rotor helicopter it's either the military or it's us.

ROTOR: In the summer of 1988, Columbia flew more than 2,000 flight hours fighting forest fires, which set a new company record. Where were most of these hours accumulated and what was that like?

Lematta: Well, it was a busy fire year. The one thing I learned a long time ago is you don't start depending totally on fire work because you can do well one year and go broke the next, which has happened to a number of helicopter operators.

ROTOR: You have been honored with so many awards throughout your astonishing career including HAI's Lawrence D. Bell Award, and HAI Operator's Safety Award, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Air Medal, Alaska Helicopter Society, William J. Kessler, U.S. Coast Guard Award, Oregon State Insurance Fund Outstanding Safety Achievement Award, the American Helicopter Society's Captain Kessler Award, which I mentioned earlier, the Pathfinder Award presented by the Boeing Museum of Flight in Seattle. You have also served on HAI's Board of Directors. You have been active with the Twirly Birds and the American Helicopter Society. Where do you get all of your energy?

Lematta: Accolades, again, I don't think I was deserving of all those awards.

ROTOR: You're way too modest. I read that Oregon State University has the Lematta Professorship in Forest Engineering. Can you tell our readers about that?

Lematta: Yes. Actually helicopters turned out to be a very valuable tool to the forest service under the Oregon Forestry School. We helped fund a program there a number of years ago. My wife actually surprised me because we were going to a convention that they held in Hawaii and she announced to them that we were going to be doing this. It caught me by surprise. The college has an engineering group and we work very closely with them. They have been very helpful because the helicopter can be a very good tool for selective logging and still leave a forest undisturbed because we don't drag the trees. We lift them straight out. You can log ten percent of the standing trees, or even take one hundred percent of them. So it's turned out to be a very valuable tool.

ROTOR: Tell us what kind of a role Nancy, your wife of 45 years has had on your business.

Lematta: Patience, I think. Nancy and I have three children. I think back to when our first girl was born. I was setting towers in the Eugene area, south of here. Nancy goes to the hospital and I'm the only pilot on the job, but the job comes to a halt. I wasn't there. So I'm trying to get back. She goes

to the hospital, and I'm trying to get back to see her. So, patience. When the second girl was born I was setting pipe down in Oregon. The third one was a boy. I'm in Cleveland, Ohio and I got the notice. So it's been patience on Nancy's part because, in order to

succeed, I had to be away from home quite a bit. One year I was keeping track and I was out of state 189 days out of the year. I was living aboard an airplane or a helicopter. So patience is one of the qualities that has been so great.



Wes receives the HAI "Lifetime Membership Award" from HAI Chairman (and former Columbia Helicopters President) Roy Simmons in 2005.

ROTOR: Columbia Helicopters employs nearly 700 people. How have the demands of the industry changed over the years?

Lematta: We have gotten heavier into the haul end of it as we were doing things on our own aircraft and other companies that needed our services. We've set up shops and the one thing I've learned is cleanliness. I don't know what the shop is like today because I haven't been out there today, but I think it's pretty spotless most of the time.

ROTOR: What's your current role at Columbia Helicopters, and what role has your family played in the success of your company?

Lematta: Well, luckily, a long time ago, I learned that I was only one man; you need to depend on people. So it's been just getting good people and recognizing their needs, and coming up with good plans, profiteer plans, and other benefit plans. We've got the best benefits in the industry.

ROTOR: You take care of your people.

Wes and Nancy Lematta with a Model 234 Chinook in 2004.





(From Left) Columbia Helicopters' Marketing Representative Don Patterson, Aviation Pioneer Frank Piasecki, Wes Lematta, Columbia Helicopters' Vice President of Maintenance Jack Pyle, and Columbia Helicopters' Vice President of Safety Jim Lematta, at the 1990 Helicopter Association International HELI-EXPO.

Lematta: Naturally. It's interesting because people are transporting in New Guinea, they are transporting oil rigs. Here they're working logging. Overseas now it's 28 days on and 28 days off. But when they're off the 28 days, they can go anywhere they want in the world to either home or some other part. The logging end of it is two weeks on and two weeks off.

ROTOR: So what about your family, what role do they play in the development of the company?

Lematta: Marci works in Columbia's Marketing Department. Our other daughter, Betsy, is doing volunteer work for a charitable agency. Our son, Bart, is operating a toy store on the Oregon coast and works some for the company.

ROTOR: What about your role with the company? How much are you involved in the company's day-to-day operations now?

Lematta: Physically I'm only here one day a week now. But as far as that goes I am on the phone at times, and I've tried to stay in touch pretty much because it's so interesting.

ROTOR: You celebrated Columbia's 50th anniversary at HELI-EXPO in Orlando, Florida in March 2007. Congratulations on that accomplishment.

Lematta: Thank you.

ROTOR: I know you had a big celebration here at the facility. What advice can you give others who are just beginning in the business, 50 years looking down the road? What kind of advice can you give them?

Lematta: Have patience. Never plan on immediate success.

ROTOR: Wes, can you tell us how you came to decide to publish *Flying Finns*, the book celebrating Columbia's 50th anniversary? It's a beautiful book.

Lematta: Thank you. Well, actually, I learned to speak Finn before I learned English in North Dakota. We're 100 percent Finnish. There are only two of us left, Jim and I. My brother Willie died from a bee sting, he was allergic. But before that, he was working for Columbia for quite a while and was also working for Hughes selling Hughes helicopters. My other brother Eddie also passed away. He was the one who took the gamble and loaned me the money for the first helicopter. It was a number of years before I paid him off. He was financing it, and he's the one that's really the father of Columbia Helicopters. He's gone now. He died a couple of years ago. But that's why I wanted to recognize them, that's where the *Flying Finns* comes from. I thought it was kind of catchy.

ROTOR: It is catchy. The book notes that you named the first helicopter that you purchased Columbia Helicopters, but you only had one. Why the 's' if you only had one?

Lematta: Certainly figuring that we'd have more because we definitely weren't planning on just one.

ROTOR: Far-sighted. Your book mentions that you let great talent become greater by giving it all the room that it needed to succeed. You didn't micromanage. Tell us about your management style.

Lematta: I learned to let people to a great degree manage themselves. I don't question everything they do. People make mistakes, and they learn from their mistakes. If they do, then they're much better employees.

ROTOR: You have had a long association with HAI, and have been in the industry for 50 years. You have had a big impact on the industry. What prompted you to join HAI and what is the biggest benefit that you have seen in association with the Helicopter Association International?

Lematta: The association does a great job that is needed. HAI's convention is always interesting.

ROTOR: Yes, HELI-EXPO is big. It just keeps getting bigger. Wes, on behalf of HAI, I congratulate you on the truly remarkable career you have had. I thank you for taking time for this interview. Do you have any closing comments that you'd like to share?

Lematta: It was a pleasure chatting with you and I appreciate your time. A person couldn't work in a greater industry, a more interesting industry.

ROTOR: What kind of words of wisdom do you have for people who are coming up, the next generation? Do you have any advice for them?

Lematta: Don't be a 'know-it-all.'

ROTOR: All right. Very good. Thank you very much.

Lematta: It was a pleasure. Thank you for the time.

Martin J. Pociask is
Director of Communications for HAI.



Katrina Tribute

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helicopters are at their best.*



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