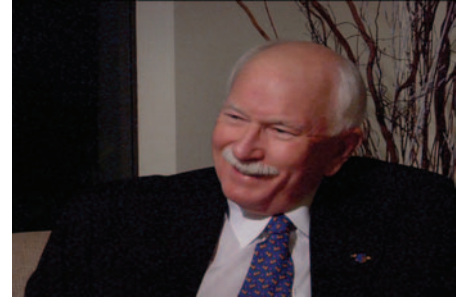


Steve Sullivan

by Martin J. Pociask



Martin J. Pociask, HAI's Communications Director and Editor of *ROTOR* magazine, interviewed Steve Sullivan, Founder of ARIS Helicopter Ltd. at his home in Saratoga, California.

Helping a young industry get off the ground

The following HAI Heritage Series interview was conducted with Mr. Steve Sullivan, founder of ARIS Helicopters Ltd., and Martin J. Pociask, HAI's Communications Director and Editor of *ROTOR* magazine, accompanied by David Osborne, HAI's videographer, who recorded the event. The interview took place on June 13, 2007, in Steve Sullivan's home in Saratoga, California. Mr. Sullivan has been a major figure in the development of the commercial helicopter industry and a supporter and contributor to the Helicopter Foundation Scholarship program.

ROTOR: Steve, thank you so much for taking time for this interview. Let's begin. Can you give us some kind of background as to where you were born, where you went to college, how you got into [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] ROTC?

Sullivan: Well, I'm a Montana kid. I went to school at Montana State. During that time period you were required to take two years of ROTC, and could take an additional two years to receive a commission as an officer. I signed up for the second two years because at that time most of us expected to serve in the military

after college. When I graduated from college I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant and a few months later reported for active duty to the Army.

ROTOR: How did you become a pilot?

Sullivan: Actually, I was very fortunate because we just started an ROTC flight training program at our school and I was able to get into that program. During my senior year, the Army paid for me to get enough flying lessons to obtain a private airplane license. It was a program to get us interested in aviation, and it worked for me. Once I reported for active duty, I was asked if I wanted to go



Lt. Sullivan Kon Tum Vietnam 1967 UH-1C.

on to flight school. By that time, I'd fallen in love with flying and I said "of course." The Army requires you to become branch qualified, and I was an engineer, so first I went to the Army Engineer School. Next I went to Army Airborne School, and then on to flight school, completing rotary wing flight school in early 1967.

ROTOR: Can you tell the readers about your tour in the Republic of Vietnam?

Sullivan: Well, I went to Vietnam after flight school. In my case I joined a unit that was forming, and after six months we deployed to Vietnam. We were sent to Kontum in the Central Highlands, which was a beautiful area. After a short time I became a platoon leader and was responsible for eight armed helicopters and 50 men. Most of the guys from my unit remain very close and we still stay in touch with each other.

ROTOR: You flew more than a thousand combat hours, right?

Sullivan: Right.

ROTOR: You formed lifelong friendships with some of the people you met over there. After ending your tour in Vietnam, where were you sent?

Sullivan: I was assigned to Panama, which was an unusual assignment. I



Sequoia National Park 1999.

was an Army Engineer by branch and they had flying slots for engineers in the Panama Canal Zone, so I was assigned to Inter-American Geodetic Survey. The mission for that unit was the mapping of the Americas. It was really a fascinating, interesting job. We flew helicopters and airplanes, supporting mapping throughout Central America and South America. I spent two years there, mostly flying helicopters.

ROTOR: What did you do after you left active duty in 1970?

Sullivan: I was released from active duty at the end of 1970 and came to the San Francisco Bay area where my wife's mother had moved. We were visiting her and someone in the family saw an ad in the paper for a helicopter instructor. I went for an interview and was offered a job with a small helicopter company as a helicopter flight instructor. It was a great job because I loved to train pilots.

ROTOR: And that was in San Carlos, I believe?

Sullivan: It was in San Carlos, which is now the home of the Hiller Aviation Museum.

ROTOR: Right. Okay, and were you still in the active reserves at the time?

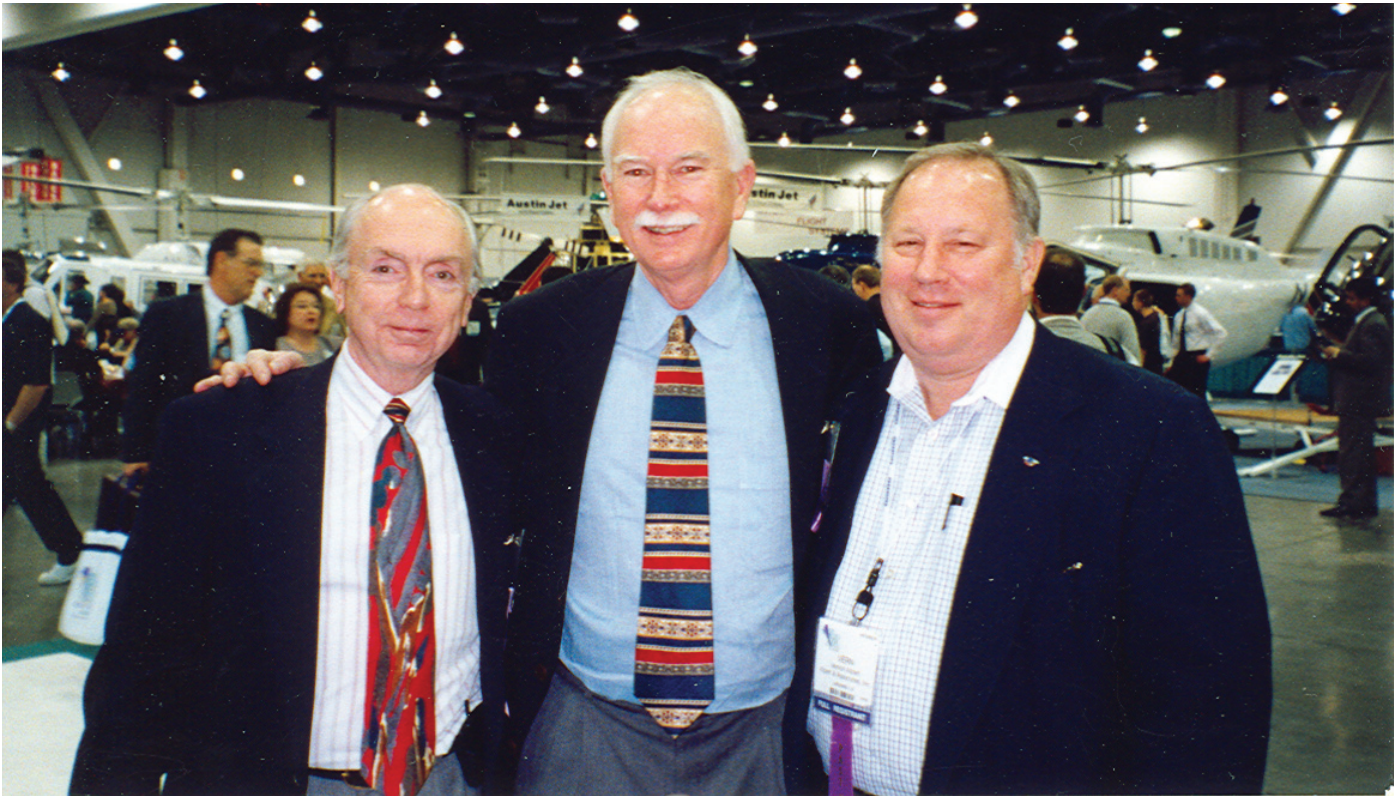
Sullivan: I stayed in the reserves for another ten years, and at that point our business was growing and I just couldn't put the time in to the reserves, so I dropped out. I had about 15 years of total service, ten in the reserves and five on active duty.

ROTOR: In May of 1972 your wife Nancy and you started the helicopter business with a small, used helicopter. A Schweitzer (then called a Hughes) 300 helicopter. Can you talk about that?

Sullivan: The owner of our flight school was getting ready to retire and losing interest in the business. We decided this might be the time for us to start our own business. We looked

Steve and Nancy Sullivan





Past HAI CEOs at HELI-EXPO (left) Chuck Johnson (center) Steve Sullivan (right) Vernon Albert.

at the San Jose, California area and the growth in that area. This was the period when Silicon Valley was starting to take off. Intel, Hewlett Packard, IBM, and several other similar companies were located in Santa Clara County. We bought a small helicopter and started the business at the San Jose Airport. With some luck and some hard work we managed to grow the business and continued to grow to the point that we were up to about 75 employees and 20 helicopters, providing all kinds of different helicopter services, instruction and firefighting, and construction work.

ROTOR: Tell me more about your business partner, Nancy, your wife, and how you worked together.

Sullivan: Nancy and I met at Montana State. When I returned from Vietnam in November 1968 we were married. She was with me in Panama. After I left the Army she held another job until we got the business going and then she became active in the business. We have always been partners in all our business ventures; we work very well together. She was the Chief Financial Officer and has been an integral part of the day-to-

day business. In fact, she really had the hard job of keeping everything together while I was out flying.

ROTOR: Great. Let's talk a bit about the early days of ARIS Helicopters. What was it like and what part of the business did you enjoy the most? What was the helicopter industry like in the 1970's?

Sullivan: Well the industry was interesting because it was pretty small and you knew most of the players. We were in the San Francisco area, which was a good market for a helicopter flight training school. As result of the Vietnam War, there was no shortage of people who were interested in helicopters — hoping to learn to fly them. Our customers included pilots who had airplane licenses and wished to add a helicopter rating. Another part of our customer base was returning military helicopter pilots who wanted or needed to get some advanced training. At that time, most Army pilots didn't have instrument ratings. Many ex-army pilots came to our school and received instrument ratings and other advanced ratings such as instructor ratings or airline transport ratings. Many of those

students went on to advance and grow with the industry, throughout the world. It was this area of the business that I really enjoyed. I always liked instructing; as a matter of fact I'm still giving some instruction. I currently have three students that I am training to fly helicopters.

ROTOR: Very nice. Besides being the owner and manager of ARIS Helicopters, what other business endeavors were you involved in?

Sullivan: In the 1980s, we got into the repair business. We still own a helicopter repair station. We maintain a couple of law enforcement helicopters and several other private and commercial aircraft. In the mid 1980s, we bought a company with a large inventory of Sikorsky parts. We saw some opportunities, and the owners were ready to retire, so we bought their company. The following year we bought three or four other parts and component inventories and combined all of those into a company called International Helicopter Parts, which we later called IHP Worldwide. We had customers all over the world, but the primary focus was in Southeast Asia. IHP became a component

overhaul facility and we subsequently developed a substantial airplane parts support group.

ROTOR: During the 1980s and 1990s your company developed a very strong construction support operation. Can you describe that operation?

Sullivan: Yes. We were in California where there has been incredibly rapid growth and industrial development. Many of the high-tech businesses required a lot of air conditioning, air handling and air purifying equipment, and we were able to develop a business of putting this equipment on rooftops and changing the equipment whenever needed. Using a helicopter to lift equipment on rooftops can be very cost effective to a customer who needs to minimize down time and business interruptions. The helicopter fit the role perfectly. In urban areas we planned our jobs so that we picked and set a load every 60-120 seconds.

Aerial Crane services became an important and big part of our business, both here in the San Francisco Bay area, and in Southern California. California's has the eighth largest economy in the world and fortunately we were able to take advantage of the opportunities in that economy.

ROTOR: What types of tasks and services do your helicopters perform now?

Sullivan: Well, at this point, we have sold the operating business. We still own a few aircraft that we are leasing, but we are no longer in the operating business. ARIS continues with construction work, firefighting, and a multitude of other interesting jobs, but we are no longer involved.

ROTOR: Besides California, where else do you operate?

Sullivan: Well on the operating side of the business, we worked throughout the United States, mostly on the West

Coast, but we've worked in several other states. We were in Atlanta for the Olympics, and conducted industrial external load operations in Florida and the Southeastern U.S. We worked extensively in Mexico for more than three years on mineral survey and mining support. We also worked in Central America on mineral survey. We were very involved, with power line construction, power line patrol, and insulator washing on power lines. We worked in Spain for two years on a joint venture to wash power line insulators.

ROTOR: How has the California Wire Strike Task Force, which has been very successful in improving safety in obstacle-rich environments, impacted you?

Sullivan: Well, I was lucky enough to be a part of that task force, and that was a really great effort, a joint effort, between the utility companies in

ARIS provides helicopter to Santa and elves for Christmas visit to Agnew State Hospital.





Nancy Sullivan on steps of ARIS' Sikorsky painted as the President's helicopter for a movie.

California and various operators and also members from the State Division of Aeronautics and the [Federal Aviation Administration] FAA. This group worked together and identified a number of high-risk areas in California and started marking wires. It was a great effort. Actually it's a continuing effort in California, although most of the marking has been completed, but it's still an ongoing effort.

ROTOR: You were a member of the Blue Team, and you were invited to speak at seminars in Tokyo and Japan.
Sullivan: The Blue Team was a group of operators advising MD Helicopters as they were developing the Explorer. Actually, they were just thinking about it when we first met as a team. MD really did an admirable job of calling together operators from all over the world and asking them to sit down and relate what they wanted in a



Steve Sullivan and Philippe Cousteau. Cousteau had just received private helicopter rating from Sullivan.

helicopter. We met several times in Mesa, Arizona. It was fascinating to hear people from all over the world, a lady from Switzerland and one person from Australia, law enforcement, EMS and of course guys from Alaska and the Gulf of Mexico who all came in with their own particular requirements. It was fascinating to see everyone work together. MD Helicopters really tried very hard to come up with an aircraft that would meet most of these requirements. It was a wonderful experience for me. The presentations in Japan occurred when I was Chairman of HAI [Helicopter Association International]. Frank Jensen and I traveled to Japan basically to promote heliports. The Japanese were considering an extensive and ambitious heliport system. I don't think that it went very far because their economy had such a significant downturn, but it was a great opportunity to go over and visit operators. Heliport promotion and development is still a continuing effort by HAI.

ROTOR: You mentioned that you were a past chairman of HAI. Can you tell our readers how you got involved with HAI?

Sullivan: We have been a member of HAI since we started the business, we thought then and still think it is a great organization. Over time, I became active on some committees. At one point I was asked if I was interested in running for the Board but at the time I thought I was simply too busy with our company. When I was asked again a year or two later, we had developed a stronger staff and I thought I could devote the time as a board member. I served two terms on the board and worked my way up through the chairs and eventually became Chairman. It was a marvelous experience. I would like to see every operator share that experience. I continually talk with operators and encourage them to work on the committees and move on to the Board. Even though participation in the HAI takes precious time, it helps the industry, and it also gives participating operators the opportunity to build relationships and business contacts that are invaluable. Several of the past HAI CEOs and I



Steve and Nancy Sullivan at the "Salute to Excellence" awards banquet at HELI-EXPO in Dallas, Texas, February 1990.

continue to identify members whom we think will contribute to the industry and maintain the necessary diversity on the board.

ROTOR: In addition to HAI, what other organizations have you been involved with?

Sullivan: Well, for several years I was on the Board of Directors of the Aero Club of Northern California, and I've been a member of the American Helicopter Society for years. I am a member of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association, Quiet Birdmen, and AOPA.

ROTOR: And also the International Society of Air Safety Investigators?

Sullivan: Yes, I remain active as a helicopter safety consultant to some government agencies, insurance companies, and law firms.

ROTOR: As you know, *ROTOR* magazine has a wide readership audience. People from all walks of life read *ROTOR*. They would be interested in knowing what has been the most memorable moment that you have had in the industry.

Sullivan: My wife Nancy and I have often said that in the helicopter business, there is never a shortage of memorable moments and you can go on and on for days talking about memorable experiences. What really sticks with us is the number of former

students and employees who stay in touch with us and how proud we are of them. Recently we had two former employees stop by the house, one from the maintenance side, one on the flying side as a pilot. Both of them started out with us and worked their way up the ranks. As we visited with them, we talked about industry in general, how they were doing, the old days and so on. They both thanked us for the opportunity to get into the business and for the opportunity to grow within our company. They are part of the ARIS "alumni," group who have gone on to do really great things. That's one of the reasons that during this last year Nancy was involved with the HAI scholarship program. She is part of the scholarship committee. She decided that we all need to do more for the young folks trying to break into this business. We have personally pledged to put money into the scholarship fund, which is under the auspices of the Helicopter Foundation International. I've also pledged to talk to every past CEO and solicit their support for the HAI scholarship program.

ROTOR: That's real involvement. What advice would you give to young aviators just starting out in this industry?

Sullivan: Whether you want to be

a pilot, or a mechanic, it's going to take a lot of sacrifice and a lot of hard work, and you've got to be prepared to really go for it. Anyone who wants to succeed in this business, or in any business for that matter, has got to be prepared to put in a lot of effort to get where they want to go. I think sometimes folks don't realize how much work is required.

ROTOR: Do you have any accomplishments that you are particularly proud of?

Sullivan: I think what we talked about, that we've had a number of people that have gone through our business. A lot of them have actually taken training with us and then gone on to be employed by us, then have moved on to other companies, other areas of the industry, and we're proud of all those people. There are a lot of people that have really made the sacrifices that I just talked about.

They've deferred a lot of gratification to get to where they're going, and we're very proud of those people.

ROTOR: What do you see as the future of the industry?

Sullivan: Oh I think there's a great future. I thought there was a great future in the 1970s when I got out of the Army and looked at the business. There are even more opportunities today. It's a fascinating business, really interesting. As I said, there's never a shortage of memorable events. Customers are glad to see you; you're performing a valuable service.

ROTOR: There are a lot of great people in this industry. Steve, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us today and for sharing your accomplishments and contributions to the industry. Would you care to make any closing comments?

Sullivan: Well, I want to encourage everyone in the industry to seriously consider contributing to the Helicopter Foundation International Scholarships. We all need to help the next generation realize their dreams. Helicopter flight training and maintenance training is not cheap. Education is getting more and more expensive and the Helicopter

(continued on page 75)

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