A Lifelong Career of Service: An Interview with Bill Yarber

By Martin J. “Marty” Pociask

HFI: Bill, when and where were you born?

Yarber: I was born William John Yarber on December 18, 1934 in Nampa, Idaho, a small rural farming community in the Boise Valley.

HFI: What did your parents do?

Yarber: My Dad, Grant Yarber, was a farmer that grew seed — carrot, onion and alfalfa. My mom, Cora, was a homemaker and sold eggs and other farm produce.

HFI: What interested you in aviation?

Yarber: My interest in aviation began at an early age, sometime between four and five years old. One of my earliest memories is sitting on the front porch of our house at night and watching and hearing an airplane fly over with its navigation lights flashing. My family lived in a very rural area a few miles west of King Hill, Idaho, that happened to be on the route of the lighted airways. The lighted airways were a series of rotating beacons mounted on towers that stretched across the country and provided an external navigation aid to the early night flying mail pilots. There was one beacon tower located between Boise and Mountain Home, Idaho that stood for many years after the lighted airways passed into aviation history.

My first flight in an aircraft occurred when I accompanied a high school friend to Los Angeles in 1954. His cousin took us for a flight in a Cessna 170 from Santa Monica to Whiteman Airpark. I was amazed at all the swimming pools in the area. I had never seen a private swimming
pool before, only the Nampa municipal pool and the one at Givens Hot Springs in Owyhee County. A few years later, I was spending the weekend in Pendleton, Oregon, with a college friend. We were at the airport, and I was offered a ride in a Piper Tri-Pacer. It was a windy spring day and as the aircraft was bounced around, I became very nauseous and flew with the side window open, hoping the pilot would land soon. It was the only time I came close to being airsick in my life.

**HFI:** You joined the Navy Cadet program in 1957, training in Pensacola, Florida. What were you doing between graduating from high school and entering the Navy Cadet program?

**Yarber:** I worked on the farm for several years. I also worked construction jobs with Morrison-Knudson as a powder monkey, hard rock driller, jackhammer operator and D8 Cat driver. I had started as a student at the University of Idaho but was more interested in joining the Navy.

**HFI:** In what aircraft was your first solo?

**Yarber:** My first fixed-wing solo was in a Beechcraft T-34 on March 21, 1958. My first helicopter solo was in a Bell HTL-6 on February 12, 1959.

**HFI:** You received your commission in March, 1959, and were assigned to Helicopter Anti-Sub Squadron One – HS-1 in Key West, Florida.

**Yarber:** I made two cruises on the USS Lake Champlain and flew the Sikorsky HSS-1 Seabat. The first cruise was a shakedown cruise in the Caribbean with port calls at Guantanamo Bay and Kingston, Jamaica. The second cruise was four months to the Mediterranean. When I transferred to HS-9 in Quonset Point, Rhode Island, I served aboard the USS Essex referred to as “The Oldest of the Boldest.”

In May 1961, the HS-9 squadron deployed on the USS Essex for a short two-week cruise. For some reason, I was scheduled to fly with the C.O. on several occasions in May and June. On one scheduled flight in June, we were suited up in anti-exposure suits, the aircraft had been pre-flighted, and we were strapped in ready to start the engine. The C.O. was the pilot in command in the right seat of the HSS-1. He used a faulty priming procedure and flooded the engine. As he continued to activate the starter, the engine finally caught and had an immediate over-speed due to all the excess fuel in the carburetor, which resulted in throwing all the 24 fan blades through the cowling and all over the flight deck.

I was sitting in the co-pilot’s seat on the left side of the aircraft and simultaneously heard the over-speed, saw a blur of metal, and felt the aircraft lurch suddenly to the left. As I leaned out of the cockpit, I noticed many gallons of purple fluid running down the flight deck, and a flat tire. One of the fan blades had sliced through the forward fuel cell, and the left tire had become instantly flat. Realizing the serious nature of the event, I moved the mixture lever to the cut-off position and then turned the magneto switch off, but could not understand why the engine continued to run. All the connecting wires had been cut, and the cockpit switches were inoperative. I unstrapped and prepared to make a hasty exit from the cockpit and noticed that the C.O. was still sitting and not making any move...
to leave the aircraft. I reached over and hit him on the arm and told him to get out of the aircraft.

When I exited the aircraft and hit the flight deck, I ran forward past the still running engine. I did not want to run aft through all the gallons of fuel that were still draining from the ruptured fuel cell. This entire sequence, from over-speed to being on deck, was a matter of seconds. Fortunately, with all the flight deck crew running up and down the flight deck, no one was hit or injured by the shrapnel. The cowling was opened up like someone had used a giant can opener.

**HFI:** You were involved in a rescue.

**Yarber:** In July 1960, I transferred to HS-9 in Quonset Point, Rhode Island. I made several cruises on the USS Essex flying the Sikorsky SH-34J. From November 26-29, the ship squadron participated with the British antisubmarine warfare forces (ASW) in a joint exercise called LIME JUG II. On the second day, I was involved in one of my most memorable flights in the Navy. To learn new helicopter ASW methods, pilots from the British Navy flew in the HSS-1 with our pilots, and our pilots flew in the British aircraft with their pilots. The HS-9 squadron C.O. CDR Stetson Hills was assigned to fly with the British on one of the ASW training missions.

After the four-plane launch, we took our assigned screening spots several miles ahead of the USS Essex. I was the pilot in command and my co-pilot was Ltjg. Larry McGuire, a good friend from Oklahoma. Our position was the number two spot, which is the right of left in the four-plane screen. During the flight transit from one hover and dip to the next, I could not see the helicopter on our left side. I noticed an unusual slight spray near the ocean's surface. We had heard nothing on the radio and were unable to contact that particular British aircraft. I decided to fly to the area and attempt to locate the aircraft. Not seeing anything, I told Larry that I thought the aircraft had gone into the water. Very shortly we noticed a smoke flare, and saw one survivor in the life raft and another who was many yards from the raft. I decided that he needed to be rescued first.

Sometime during this search, we called a Mayday (the call that an aircraft has crashed or is about to crash). I established a hover near the floating survivor, the object of our rescue attempt. The rescue horse collar was lowered and it soon became apparent that the survivor was injured and could not get into the horse collar. The North Atlantic is very cold, and even wearing an anti-exposure suit, survival time is numbered in minutes. Larry watched the gauges as I watched the man in the water and attempted to hover over him. I told the two crewmen aboard the aircraft that the survivor was injured, getting noticeably weak, and could not get into the rescue collar by himself and that one of them would have to go down and get him.

One of the crewmen offered to go and descended on the hoist and was successful in getting the survivor into the horse collar. The hoist was only strong enough to hoist one person at a time. The survivor was hoisted into the aircraft. I then learned that the man we had rescued was Cdr. Hills, the HS-9 C.O. At the same time, another helicopter picked up the British pilot who was in the raft and a surface ship retrieved the two Brit crewman. All survived. We returned to the Essex to drop off the injured C.O. and returned to our ASW mission. Larry and I logged 2.5 flight hours that day.

**HFI:** You were released from active duty in August 1962.

**Yarber:** I returned to the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho, to complete my degree and immediately affiliated with the Naval Reserve HS squadron located at Sandpoint, Washington.

**HFI:** In January 1961, you married Bettie Crockett. Tell us about her and how you met.

**Yarber:** Bettie and I met the summer of 1957. She was a beautiful, sensitive, humorous, brown-eyed Texas girl. Bettie was a graduate of Baylor University and was a RN in Dallas. Her friend, Eva, had parents who lived in Nampa. So, the girls made a road trip to Idaho. I worked with Eva’s Dad and we had rescued was Cdr. Hills, the HS-9 C.O. At the same time, another helicopter picked up the British pilot who was in the raft and a surface ship retrieved the two Brit crewman. All survived. We returned to the Essex to drop off the injured C.O. and returned to our ASW mission. Larry and I logged 2.5 flight hours that day.

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at Fish Construction in Nampa. We dated mostly long distance until we married in 1961.

HFI: You had children.

Yarber: We have two daughters — Shannon, who was born in 1963, and Kirsten in 1966.

HFI: During the summers, you flew government contract missions.

Yarber: I worked for Clay Farnsworth in Boise. He contracted with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management and I flew on wildfire missions in Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon. My first civilian aviation job was spraying sagebrush with a 2-4-D in Wildhorse, Nevada. The summer of 1963 was very exciting with several major fires in the Oregon/Washington Bureau of Land Management (BLM) district, and I survived several close calls. I learned so much about flying an underpowered helicopter and how to operate in the mountains without crashing.

HFI: In 1966, you graduated from the University of Idaho with a B.S. in Agricultural Economics. What did you do after that?

Yarber: After graduation, I moved my family to Boise, Idaho, where I became a 49 percent share partner in a helicopter company named Helicopters, Inc. My main contribution was whatever aviation talents I had. This partnership lasted two years. We were busy contracting out with the BLM or the USFS, fighting fires, snow survey, aerial application, etc….

HFI: What mission stands out?

Yarber: Several! In 1966, we had a job in the Ruby Mountains south of Elko. This job provided a very scary flight for me. The BLM or USFS was building a horse trail along a very steep canyon. The material had to be sling-loaded to the site. The bottom of the canyon was at about 8700 feet, and the location of the trail was at 9350 feet. We did not have the correct sling gear and used a surplus B-47 drag chute. The material for the horse trail would be unloaded while I hovered, then large rocks were put in the chute to keep it out of the rotor system because it could not be released. On the last trip, as I hovered, the foreman of the crew grabbed the skid and managed to pull himself into the helicopter. This action immediately caused a loss of RPM, and the only thing I could do was fly straight ahead and rest the front part of the skid on the horse trail. Regaining RPM, I then noticed the main rotor was clipping grass or shrubs just inches above a rocky outcropping. Talk about being very scared and simultaneously angry at the man who nearly caused a crash and certain death. It took me a while to calm down and regain my composure. Again, God saved me from death. Many prayers of thanks!

In 1967, we scored on a major contract with Idaho Power to supply one helicopter in support of the construction of a transmission line from Hells Canyon Dam to Enterprise, Oregon. The first pilot assigned to the project quit after about a week and I replaced him for the balance of the contract, which lasted all summer and into early fall. This was the most hazardous flying that I ever experienced in my 42 years of flying helicopters. The job was to sling-load steel and concrete to several tower sites from the dam to the crest of the ridge. Each tower has a hole dug about 3-4 feet deep and steel grillage placed in each hole and then covered by several yards of concrete.

All the grillage was carried by helicopter in 600-700 pound loads. The terrain was so steep that roads could not be constructed in this area. An engine failure or sling load problem would have been catastrophic. The concrete was carried in a metal barrel a bit larger than a 50-gallon fuel drum at the end of a 20-foot cable hooked to the helicopter. The trap door on the bottom of the barrel was opened by the ground crewman pulling on a rope. The concrete loads were carried in 600-700 pound loads, as that (along with fuel and me) was about the limit of the carrying capacity of the Bell 47G-3B helicopter.

One nearly disastrous event occurred on about my second day of sling loading concrete to a tower site. There was a cable strung across the canyon close to where the first tower was being built that prevented a takeoff in that direction. The helicopter hook was configured with an electrical release switch located on the cyclic control and a manual push.
On one load, the wind was not in the right direction as I came into the area to dump the load. I started settling toward the rock outcropping and simultaneously was losing rotor RPM. I knew that the ground crew was nearly underneath but had to get rid of the bucket of concrete. I tried the electric switch and it did not release the load. I then pushed the manual release about the same time the full bucket hit the rock outcropping, which resulted in breaking the hook. I barely managed to maintain flying speed as the aircraft walloped clear of the rocks and into the canyon below. Again, God saved me from certain death. I was glad when that job was over.

HFI: In March 1968, you joined Bell Helicopter Textron and relocated to Bedford, Texas. You worked as a production test pilot flying the Huey and Cobra. During this time, you affiliated with the Naval Dallas Reserve and served on a cruise in the Gulf of Mexico with HS-64D2, flying the Sikorsky SH-34J and SH-3A. On this cruise, you performed another rescue.

Yarber: I continued my weekend flying with the Naval Air Reserve at NAS Dallas. My annual active duty started March 16 in Key West, Florida, flying the Sikorsky SH-3A. The following dark night was a familiarization hop around the Florida Keys. During the flight, I had moved over to the pilot’s position, and a few minutes later, I saw an explosion about 10-12 miles away and immediately turned to investigate what may have been the cause. We soon discovered another SH-3A had crashed in the shark-infested waters and was slowly sinking, inverted. There were a few helmet strobe lights flashing, but most of the area was illuminated by the burning fuel on the water.

I flew directly over the wreckage and made a left hand turn to come into the wind and set up a manual hover to start rescuing the survivors. The aircraft was equipped with an automatic hover system that takes a few minutes to get engaged, but we did not have enough time to go through all the procedures. I had no problem with a manual hover and was able to maintain a steady aircraft position in reference to the flames. The crew managed to hoist four survivors, one with a compound fracture of his leg. Unfortunately, one crewman was trapped in the wreckage and did not survive. Sometime later, in about 1971, I received an Air Medal for this rescue.

HFI: In July 1969, you transferred to the Bell Helicopter marketing department, moving your family to Vancouver, Washington. Your sales territory covered Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana. Who were your customers?

Yarber: I sold to operators, corporations, the logging industry, the construction industry, and VIPs. Some of my customers were Morrison-Knudsen, Pack River Timber, Co., Johnson Flying Service, Evergreen Helicopters, Henderson Aviation, Rambling Rotors, Grote Aviation, Emory Hall Construction, Frank Gilmore and Murray Duffy.

HFI: In 1971, while you were marketing in the Pacific Northwest, you had another close call.

Yarber: On a December flight flying a 206B from Oakland to Vancouver, I encountered bad weather the entire route. A few miles north of Grants Pass, Oregon, is Sexton Summit, which is the lowest point of the highway. Gaining altitude and working through the low-hanging clouds caused much reduced visibility. Having flown the route in good weather, I knew there were power lines across the highway near the top of the summit. Flying very slowly, I suddenly saw the power lines in front of me as I crossed over them. Clear of the wires, I immediately dropped to the highway and planned to land on the side of the road. I had unknowingly flown under another set of wires that I had not seen. The immediate prayer was, “Please God, let me not crash. I will not do this again.” I was saved and learned a lasting lesson about pushing too far in bad weather.

HFI: There was a change regarding your reserve duty.

Yarber: After rejoining HS-892, it became decommissioned, and I was assigned to NAS Whidbey Island flying the Lockheed SP-2H Neptune with squadron VP-60T1. I later became a plank holder in VP-69 (crewmember present at the ship’s first commissioning).

HFI: In August 1974, you were promoted to Western Division manager, relocating to Van Nuys, California.

Yarber: My territory covered 11 western states from El Paso, Texas, to Barrow, Alaska, and Hawaii. I managed five sales representatives, performed flight demos, ferried aircraft and gave corporate, law enforcement, and operator presentations.

HFI: In 1987, Bell Helicopter closed the Western Division and you became the regional marketing manager until 1992.

Yarber: Later, Bell made another realignment and my sales territory became California, Alaska, Hawaii, and Nevada until I retired. We

Yarber at a naval change of command ceremony in Point Mugu, California, 1986.
worked closely with law enforcement, and sold to various fire departments and multiple industries such as oil, construction, and operators. In 1989, I received the Co-Salesman of the Year Award from Bell Helicopter for the Western Division. From 1993 to 2000, I continued to sell helicopters and attend conferences and conventions, where I presented information on the various Bell Helicopter models.

**HFI:** Ross Fay, one of six Bell Helicopter regional marketing managers who worked under you in the 70s and 80s, had this to say about you: “He was genuinely interested in his people and how he could help with their success. I would say Bill became our friend and mentor. And he taught us by his example that the best sales tools are integrity and perseverance, and the relationships they cultivate. Our Western Division was recognized as Division of the Year in 1982, and Bell gave each member a gift certificate to an upscale men’s store in Arlington. So, the six of us pooled our gift certificates and got Bill a powder blue Ultrasuede sport coat as a token of our appreciation. It was kind of a joke, but Bill wore that coat proudly for years. He had the sense of humor to take a joke, and the class to understand that it represented our respect.”

**Yarber:** I thought it was such a nice gesture even though it was a hideous blue! I was proud of the guys and their hard work. To me, the coat represented our mutual respect for one another.

**HFI:** During your time in California, you served for several years on the board of directors for the Professional Helicopter Pilots Association of California.

**Yarber:** The organization worked to educate the helicopter community on how to fly neighborly, reduction of noise levels in specific areas, and flight safety. I also served on the Helicopter Foundation International board of directors for several years. During this time, the board decided to acquire the John Slattery model collection, which was displayed at Helicopter Association International’s headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia.

**HFI:** You also served in the Naval Reserves based out of Point Mugu, California, serving NARS U1, AirTyCom 219, VTU 7676 and as the executive officer and commanding officer of ComNavAirPac 376. Transferring to Readiness Command 19, San Diego, you served as executive officer of CincPacFlt 719.

**Yarber:** Yes. I was awarded the honorary title of Gray Eagle as the senior naval aviator assigned to the Naval Air Reserve Pt. Mugu until my retirement in 1989.

**HFI:** In December, 2000, you retired from Bell Helicopter. You were recognized by The Airborne Law Enforcement Industry for your support through the years. You were also the only marketing representative that the Los Angeles County Fire Department recognized upon retirement.

**Yarber:** A corporate client, Marie Callender’s, delivered a helicopter load of pies to my retirement party!

**HFI:** You became a member of the Twirly Bird Organization in 1985 and served as treasurer from 1999-2011.

**Yarber:** In 2011, I was awarded the Twirly Birds’ Les Morris Award for my contribution to the organization and to the helicopter industry. During this time, I established contact with the University of Texas Dallas (UTD) donating historical helicopter documents and industry information to the Eugene McDermott Library in the Special Collections and Archives Division. I also created a Twirly Birds fund at UTD to establish a department chair position for the Department of Aviation Archives. Other members have also contributed to the library. I continue to be the Twirly Birds’ historian, sending prepared documents for the Twirly Birds’ newsletter.

**HFI:** In August 2002, you and Bettie relocated to Plano, Texas. What are your other interests?

**Yarber:** My other interests include woodworking, genealogy research, Civil War Roundtable, naval history and other minor interests. I am also a member of Stonebriar Community Church. Bettie, my wife of 55 years, passed away in August 2016. I continue to live in my home and attend Twirly Bird meetings, as well as maintain contact with many individuals in the helicopter industry. I have four grandchildren, and both of my daughters reside with their families in Texas.

**HFI:** Thank you, Bill, for taking the time to share your wonderful career with us. Do you have any words of advice or encouragement for tomorrow’s young men and women entering the industry?

**Yarber:** I would tell them the following: love what you’re doing, work hard, stay focused, and remember that you’re not always right! 😄

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*Martin J. Pociask is curator for Helicopter Foundation International.*

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