Ken Johnston
A Badge, a Gun, and a Helicopter

By Martin J. Pociask

Helicopter pioneer Ken Johnston, shown here in 2012, never left aviation behind. He even campaigned to have a heliport added to plans for the Orlando Convention Center. Ken passed away October 11, 2013. He was 95.
Martin J. Pociask, vice president and curator for Helicopter Foundation International, interviewed helicopter pioneer Kenneth C. Johnston. Johnston spent much of his career in law enforcement and is a recipient of HAI’s MD Helicopters Law Enforcement Award.

HFI: Ken, tell us a little about where you were born and your early life growing up.

Johnston: I was born on March 18, 1918, on Monroe Street in Brooklyn, New York. As a young man, I worked in a fruit market, pulled dress racks in the garment district in Manhattan, and delivered box lunches.

My friend got me a paper route delivering the Canarsie Courier. My mother gave me 50 cents to buy 50 copies. We had 35 or 40 customers. We sold the papers for two cents each, and some customers paid five cents. I hawked the papers that were left at trolley stops. I also shined shoes, making five cents per shine. And I worked as an order boy for a grocery store.

On and off for two or three years, I worked for a milk company. I worked from 2:00 to 3:00 a.m. until 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. six days a week. I would wake up with sore, swollen hands and would sit at the side of the bed and ask, “Is this the way I am going to spend my life?”

We rode in chain-drive Mack trucks with oil lamps, an open cabin, and no wipers for rain and snow. I loaded 130 to 140 cases onto the truck. We would then go to the icehouse and pick up seven or eight 300-pound blocks of ice. When the milk was placed in front of a store, a block of ice was placed on top.

HFI: You grew up in New York City during the middle of the Great Depression. What do you remember about that time?

Johnston: We did not realize there was a Depression until I was about 13 years old. We always had food and clothing. Meat was scarce, however, so my mother made soups of every description. I worked as a shoeshine boy and had paper and magazine routes.

In 1932, after graduation from middle school, I worked the entire summer from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon for 50 cents a day and a good meal from a German deli. My mother needed money as my father was an alcoholic and not very helpful during these times.

HFI: Can you tell us about your time with the Roosevelt Civilian Conservation Corps?

Johnston: I joined the CCC in July 1934 when I was only 16 because we needed the money; I told them I was 18. The CCC was a good place to work. There were camps all over the country, but I ended up relatively close to home.

I was sent to Fort Slocum in New Rochelle, New York, to be outfitted. We got Army winter clothing in July! Then we went to Sloatsburg in New York State. Most of the people who joined were shipped out of state. I was able to get home occasionally for a $1.00 round trip.

Other parents wondered why their sons could not get in and must have complained that I was underage, so in March of 1935 I was discharged to return to school.

HFI: In 1942, you enlisted in the Army Air Corps. What prompted you to join the military?

Johnston: At the time, I was married, with a lovely wife and a three-room apartment. I knew I would be drafted and was very concerned. However, both of my grandfathers had served in the Civil War, so I felt it was my patriotic duty to join as well.

In March of 1942, I enlisted in the Army Air Corps. I was sworn in and given a ticket to Camp Upton on Long Island. I started with the usual KP [kitchen police] tour. I took a test with 25 others, and there were five or six of us left afterward. We took a physical, and there were three left. I was one of those. Then we had the oral test, with five examiners who were officers from different branches of the military. It was one of the most stressful and hardest tests I have ever taken, and I will never forget it.

I enlisted in the paratroopers for an extra $50 a month, so that we could keep our three-room apartment. I got my wife a job at Schrader Valve Company, which became a defense plant during World War II. My wife was a “Rosie the Riveter” in the drill press department.

HFI: Tell us about your military career.

Johnston: I was trained to be a pilot at Helena, Arkansas; Montgomery, Alabama; and Columbus, Mississippi. Having never flown before, it was like a dream come true. After eight
weeks of preflight training, I went through primary, basic, and advanced flight training. These three areas were approximately two months each. The training was great. I was flying with cadet navigation students and landed at about 50 percent of the airports in the U.S.

I was then sent to a navigation school and trained cadet navigation students. More than 50 percent of these missions were day-night flights. We would be out flying for four hours, land, have dinner, and then be out for four hours of night flying. Most of the students I trained were going directly into combat, and many of them did not come back. The Army Air Corps was the big daddy of pursuits in military careers.

HFI: Are there any student training flights that particularly stand out in your mind?

Johnston: One time I was in a terrible thunderstorm and had to make a forced landing. We were flying a Lockheed C-60 Lodestar from Louisiana to San Antonio, Texas. The crew consisted of the pilot (me), a navigation instructor, and three students.

I had tried to skirt the storm but instead we ran into the worst part. Myairspeed was going from 0 to 300 miles per hour and I thought the wings were going to tear off! Fuel was getting low, and I was looking for a safe place to land. I saw what I thought was scrub oak and dropped a smoke bomb for wind direction.

We did manage to land safely, and after we landed we came upon a sheriff and an Indian on horseback. They sent a car to pick us up and
brought us into a small town nearby.

**HFI**: What did you do after leaving the service?

**Johnston**: Having always wanted to be a police officer and having lived through the Great Depression, I wanted a civil service job with security. I attended Delahanty Institute, which was a school that specialized in all types of civil service jobs, such as the police department and fire department. Over 90 percent of New York City cops were Delhanty graduates.

I attended Delahanty for about eight months before the police test was given. Almost 15,000 men took the test — the first time a test like this was given. The top 5,000 of those would be eligible to take the physical. The top 3,000 would be put on the hiring list, and all others would be gone. I was No. 164 on the list of 3,000 — one of my proudest accomplishments!

**HFI**: After joining the New York City Police Department, where was your beat?

**Johnston**: I was appointed on September 16, 1946, and assigned to the 13th Precinct at East 22nd Street between 1st and 2nd Avenue. This location was the site of the Civil War Draft Riots of 1863 and was abandoned during the riots.

My first post was a day tour — 4:00 p.m. to midnight — in front of the S. Klein Department Store, East 14th Street and 4th Avenue. This was a very busy intersection with three subway lines and Union Square Park across the street. We had peddlers, wild men, burglars, stickup men, prowlers, and accidents. I worked this beat for three-and-a-half years.

**HFI**: In 1950, you were assigned to the Aviation Bureau. That year, you received an award from the Life Saving Benevolent Association of New York for saving a drowning man. Can you tell us about that?

**Johnston**: My partner and I got a call about a man in the East River at the location of the sanitation piers. Of the four cars that responded, we lucked out and went to the right pier. I should note that these police cars had only one-way radios and did not have blue flashing lights. We had to use the siren, blink the headlights, and slow down at intersections.

Upon arriving at the pier, my partner, the driver, got out and jumped into the water with his gun belt, hat, wallet, and the keys to the police car! It was standard procedure for the driver to remove the keys. When I got out, I observed police cars on the other piers, so I fired three warning shots in the air to get their attention. I then jumped in, and the other police cars responded and pulled all three of us out. I could have used a rope and life ring, but they were in the trunk of the police car and I didn’t have the keys.

**HFI**: When did New York City begin using helicopters as part of its law enforcement efforts?

**Johnston**: They bought a Bell 47D in 1947 and three more in 1949. The commanding officer of emergency medical services, the honorary aviation aide to Police Commissioner Rodman Wannamaker, and Assistant Chief Walter E. Klotzback were big factors in the decision.

I had 2,800 flight hours at the time and was quickly accepted. First I was a sergeant and then I became a lieutenant. Then, in 1953, I was promoted to commanding officer of the Aviation Bureau. I was the officer in charge for 15 years until I retired in 1968. This unit was considered...
the most elite unit in the police department.

**HFI:** How did you eventually become the head of the Aviation Bureau?

**Johnston:** In 1953, Capt. Gus Crawford suddenly retired. I was a sergeant at the time and was immediately placed in charge. In 1958, I was made lieutenant and remained in charge for a further 10 years.

**HFI:** What were some of the most serious crimes helicopter pilots had to be on the lookout for?

**Johnston:** We had to watch for incoming ships in the harbor dropping objects, swimmers in trouble, boats in bathing areas, and boats towing other boats that many times were stolen from marinas on Long Island. Stolen cars were sometimes spotted in remote areas such as marshes. Also, we watched for kids on the ice in winter, which was very common.

**HFI:** Tell us about Thomas Fitzpatrick, who landed a plane on the street in 1956.

**Johnston:** This is a long and colorful story, but basically a guy was in a bar bragging about flying lessons. Bar patrons were razzing him. He took a cab to Teterboro, New Jersey, stole a plane, flew it, and parked it outside the bar. He said to the bar patrons, “I can’t fly? There’s the plane!”

I was called to the scene and found streets blocked off. I went with the detectives who were searching for him at other bars he frequented, but we had no luck. Months later he tried it again and was busted!

**HFI:** You were charged, in part, with maintaining FAA regulations on advertising from aircraft. What did that entail?

**Johnston:** We investigated complaints of low-flying planes all over the city. There was a law against banner towing and dropping leaflets, which we had to enforce.

Besides JFK and LaGuardia, there were approximately 10 airports and seaplane bases in the New York City area that had to be inspected to make sure that they were in compliance with FAA and city regulations, especially regarding gas storage.

**HFI:** What do you remember about the Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcar crash in November of 1958?

**Johnston:** The pilot, copilot, and engineer were killed. Lieutenant Westerberg was the only survivor of the four-person crew. The plane crashed short of the runway and ended up in Jamaica Bay during an instrument landing in a terrible fog.

We got the call from the Floyd Bennett Field tower. We always took a raft on all calls of plane crashes or boat accidents.

Patrolman Doyle jumped in the water and swam 30 to 40 feet. Westerberg was dazed and hanging on to the landing gear of the plane. He was pulled over to the pontoon by Doyle, who hung on with Westerberg. I then taxied to the shore where the Navy, Coast Guard, and other rescuers were waiting.

**HFI:** Tell us about the incident with the USS Constellation in 1960.

**Johnston:** Accidents were our major concern. In December of that year, I was flying along near the Brooklyn Navy Yard during the time of the fire aboard the Constellation. It was snowing, and fire units were coming from many different areas. I circled the area while observing traffic on bridges to let emergency responders know the best routes to get to Brooklyn.

During this bad weather, a news photographer was the only plane in the air and I was following him. His plane crashed at a tennis court on the Manhattan side of the East River. He and the pilot survived.

**HFI:** We have come across a picture of you with New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner and another one of you with Mayor John Lindsay.

**Johnston:** Mayor Wagner and Mayor Lindsay were especially friendly to helicopters. They helped expedite orders for helicopters and parts and were both real gentlemen. Mayor Wagner gave me cigarettes and even lit them for me!

One time, I had flown Mayor Wagner to Monticello, New York, to a large hotel at about midnight or 1:00 a.m. But something happened in New York City, and the mayor was called back. On the way to get the helicopter, I was in the back seat with the mayor. He told me he was out of cigarettes, and I only had two. The mayor and I gathered our change together. I got out and went into a cabaret. Just as I pulled the lever on the cigarette machine and got one pack, I heard a racket and realized there was a bar.
fight going on, so I ran out with the one pack!

**HFI:** You were featured in magazines like *Journal of American Pictorial Living* and *Boys’ Life*.

**Johnston:** I gave interviews and made public appearances about flying helicopters. This was to make young people aware of the use of helicopters in police work. I was very proud and thankful.

**HFI:** You received an offer to work for Bell in the summer of 1968. Can you tell us about that?

**Johnston:** I had made many visits to the Bell Helicopter Company in Fort Worth, Texas, on police business. Bell personnel had also been to the Aviation Bureau at Floyd Bennett Field. I was offered a position as a sales representative to demonstrate the use of helicopters to law enforcement and government agencies. I was the first law-enforcement helicopter pilot to be hired for this purpose.

**HFI:** What was it like to fly with [legendary Bell chief demonstration pilot] Joe Mashman at that time?

**Johnston:** Joe Mashman was a pioneer. It was a thrill and an honor to have him come and fly with me. He was the most knowledgeable person in the field of helicopter operations that I have ever had the pleasure to meet. His office was decorated with branches of trees in frames. These were the remnants of branches Joe had clipped when demonstrating helicopter use for the military. He once flew me around a parking lot in Washington, D.C., between light poles!

Joe was a legend and, most of all, a gentleman. I cannot say enough good things about him.

**HFI:** Tell us about managing the Pan Am Metroport in Manhattan.

**Johnston:** A shuttle service was started for Pan Am passengers at the 60th Street and East River Metroport. Pan Am employees, including me, would take passengers and their luggage, tag the luggage to their destination, and then the passengers and luggage would be taken to the Pan Am terminal. That was the last the passengers saw of their luggage until they arrived at their destination. It was very challenging to get tourist groups or corporations on board.

The Metroport was a corporate heliport open to the public. Corporate helicopters such as those belonging to then-Governor Rockefeller, Mack Truck Corporation, Ronson Corporation, Seagrams, and others would pick up or drop off passengers. Metroport became the busiest corporate heliport in the world.

**HFI:** You also worked for Island Helicopters in the sightseeing industry.

**Johnston:** The sightseeing industry was started from scratch. I pounded the pavement day after day, from hotel to hotel. As luck would have it, I met a tour guide who was a walking
inventory of the tour business. I spent days and nights meeting tour groups at various hotels and businesses. I also went to Europe to talk to other operators.

In this way, I built the business up to be one of the largest helicopter sightseeing companies in the world. I helped the company create more than $6 million worth of business.

HFI: Can you tell me more about your home life and your wife, Anne?

Johnston: I met Anne in 1938 while I was working for a milk company in Brooklyn, New York. While we were dating, I would come home and set two alarm clocks so that I could take her to her job at Kaiser Glove because I worked nights and she worked days. In October of 1940 we eloped and were married in Snow Hill, Maryland. She was working at Schrader’s in Brooklyn from 1941 to 1944. Our picture was on the front page of the Schrader’s magazine at Christmas time in 1945 with the headline “Welcome Home to All Our Vets.”

In 1949 we bought our first house in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn where our three children, Jane Anne, Eileen Mary, and Kenneth, Jr., were born. In 1960 we moved to Old Bethpage, on Long Island. We lived in Bayshore, Long Island, for a few years, and then in February 1979 we moved to Orlando, Florida. For all those years my wife was a homemaker who loved her home, her family, and me. I lost my beloved wife in January 2008. We had been married for 67 years.

HFI: Did any of your three children follow you into aviation or into police work?

Johnston: None of my children are in law enforcement. My daughter Jane is a nurse, Eileen has done office work, and my son has been a cable installer. However, my granddaughter Jane is a corrections officer for the Suffolk County, Long Island, Sheriff’s Department.

HFI: I understand that you urged the Orange County Civic Center in Orlando, Florida, to build a heliport. What makes you so keen to continue advocating on behalf of the industry even though you are retired?

Johnston: I never lost interest in the helicopter industry. Back in 1981, when I heard about plans for the Orlando Convention Center, I contacted the area commissioner, who had the construction chief contact me and invite me to the site to talk it over for a possible location for a heliport. Unfortunately, that’s where it ended. I also tried to help several local operators get started in the sightseeing business.

HFI: How did you get to be involved with the Helicopter Association of America, as HAI was then called?

Johnston: Some time in the mid-50s I went to several helicopter conventions and had friends who were pilots. I decided then to join the HAA.

HFI: Tell us about some of the memorable moments with your long association with what is now HAI.

Johnston: In 1980, at the then HAA, I received the Law Enforcement Award for my promotion of helicopters in law enforcement. I had been visited by law enforcement people from all over the United States and around the world. I also attended many helicopter conventions to keep abreast of things going on in the industry and to talk to other helicopter operators.

HFI: You are a Twirly Bird member. When did you solo?

Johnston: It was in 1951 at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, New York, in a Bell 47D. The FAA examiner had very little helicopter time and he did not want me to do an autorotation. Most of the old-time helicopter pilots from the Navy and the Coast Guard soloed at Floyd Bennett Field.

HFI: What other organizations have you been associated with?

Johnston: I have been a member of the benevolent associations for police, sergeants, and lieutenants. I have
also been associated with the Retired Lieutenants Association, Honor Legion of the Police Department, 1013 Club, and American Legion Flying Post 501 in Manhattan. 1013 is a police call that indicates that a policeman is in distress. I was also a member of the Quiet Birdmen in New York and Orlando.

**HFI:** You were cited 11 times for bravery by the New York Police Department (NYPD). Which of these instances is the most memorable?

**Johnston:** It involved the apprehension of a person wanted for 39 stickups in Brooklyn. I was on patrol in a police car, with a one-way radio, because the driver’s partner was off duty. I was the recorder.

We observed three men standing under a street light looking at something in their possession. They did not see us glide up. We apprehended them, and one man with a gun took off running into an apartment house, followed by the police officer who was the driver. I placed the other two at gunpoint against the wall and was frisking them when I heard gunshots from the apartment building.

I immediately rushed to the building and was stopped by a French door that left no way to get in. I backed up to take a run at it and took out every pane of glass without getting a scratch! I continued up a flight of stairs and picked up a .45 automatic. My partner was trying to force open a door through which the person in question had fled. My partner had fired a shot at him as he closed the door.

As I arrived, a woman holding an infant opened a door and pointed to a darkened bedroom. We were then in a brightly lit kitchen with our guns drawn. I had two because I still had the .45 I picked up on the stairs. The woman is screaming, “My baby is in there.” We both rushed into the room. There were no lights on, but we could see the window to the fire escape was open.

I immediately started out the window, and my partner found the light switch. When the light came on, I saw two feet under the bed. The suspect was apprehended.

Another officer on patrol saw the other two criminals running and took them in for questioning. These men were part of a group that was wanted for numerous hotel and liquor store holdups and for renting out guns. A picture of this episode was on the front page of the *New York Daily News* showing a shot had gone through two lapels of the man’s suit.

**HFI:** What words of advice would you give to today’s young men and women considering a career in helicopter aviation?

**Johnston:** To get a job in the helicopter industry, you need flying time before anyone will hire you. I would advise young people to join a branch of the military, such as the National Guard or Reserves, and learn to fly helicopters there.

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