The following profile is based on more than three months of telephone interviews conducted by the author with Phil Fillingham, Twirly Bird and helicopter pioneer, whose contributions are noted with much appreciation by a grateful industry.

Phil Fillingham was born on May 29, 1918, in the small village of Cobham in Surrey, England. His mother, Beatrice Gorsuch, and father, Frank Cutler Fillingham, along with his older sister, Grace, younger sister, Joy, and brother, Bernard, had moved 20 miles southwest of London to get away from the constant Zeppelin bombings by the Germans during World War I.

The elder Fillingham was a clerk, or as Fillingham describes it “a paper shuffler,” much like Bob Cratchit in Charles Dickens’s novel, A Christmas Carol. Like Bob Cratchit, he did not make much money; the family got by from day to day. When the stock market crashed in 1929, his boss said he could no longer afford to pay him and was letting him go. Fillingham’s father pleaded that he had a wife and four children to support. So his boss instead reduced his pay from 16 pounds to four. The family’s situation got tighter still.

An Aviator is Born

As a young boy, Fillingham had an early fascination with aviation. On his fifth birthday, he received a balsa wooden model airplane. The airplane flew backwards, propelled by an elastic band. On his next birthday, he received a proper one with the propeller up front.
Fillingham could not get airplanes out of his head. As a child, he followed the Schneider Trophy Cup races of seaplanes with great eagerness. These were actually international time trials sponsored by Jacques Schneider, a French financier balloonist and aircraft enthusiast to encourage technical advances in civil aviation.

One day when he was about 10, he heard a great noise overhead. Looking up, Fillingham saw a huge R34 dirigible flying low over his house, blotting out the sky. There were four people in a nacelle, waving to him.

Fillingham’s mother and father felt their children should have a religious foundation. They met a Franciscan monk who persuaded them to join the Catholic faith. Mass was held in the corner of the White Lion Hotel garage with a dirt floor. A motorcycle-riding priest would stop by to celebrate the mass, and then everyone would go back to the Fillingham house for breakfast.

At age 14, thinking that he would like to become a priest, Fillingham attended a junior seminary for four years studying elementary math, Latin, Greek, French, and English literature.

In 1936, on his 18th birthday, he went to the Royal Air Force (RAF) to volunteer to become a pilot. However, he was told a university degree was required to apply. His father told him about a job “shuffling papers.” After only a month, Fillingham realized he could not continue and resigned.

He scanned the want ads and found two that interested him. Both were clerk positions that stated they would train. One was for a Japanese shipping line, Nippon Yusen Kayshi, looking for someone who could handle English correspondence in Tokyo. The other was for the Bank of London in South America. He took the Bank of London job.

Looking back, Fillingham recalls it as a good choice, considering World War II started only a few short years later. Instead of working in South America, Fillingham spent the next three years working for the bank in London. Meanwhile, war clouds were gathering in Europe. The bank made a decision to ship its overseas staff to South America to protect its interests. Fillingham left after only a two-week course in Spanish.

World Travels Begin
On May 5, 1939, Fillingham’s parents were at the dock waving goodbye as he began a five-year contractual assignment aboard the Highland Brigade. According to Fillingham, everyone had their own cabin and there was a swimming pool on board. Their destination was Buenos Aires, Argentina, which Fillingham reached on his 21st birthday.

From Buenos Aires, it was off to Rio Gallegos, the capital and largest settlement of the province of Santa Cruz, in Argentina’s Patagonian region, aboard the Jose Menendez. The trip took 18 days. To complicate things, no one else on board could speak English, and Fillingham’s Spanish was very limited.

Eventually, they arrived at Rio Gallegos. A barge came to debark them to shore, where Fillingham’s colleague from London, Mr. Pocock, was there to greet him. Fillingham describes the town as a scene out of the Old West: two blocks of buildings, dirt roads, no trees, and a constantly blowing wind. Unlike the Old West, there were no cattle; instead, the town was the center of the sheep industry. Most ranchers were English speakers.

During his time in Rio Gallegos, Fillingham fell in love with Helen McQuibban, the bank manager’s daughter. They dated for four years and often socialized with Helen’s
friend, Valerie Allen, whose nickname was Binx. After four years, Fillingham proposed marriage to Helen, but she told him, “No. Not only never, but never ever.”

In order to move on from this disappointment, Fillingham decided to leave Rio Gallegos. He headed out for Buenos Aires, where he went to the British Embassy, telling them that he was ready to return to England and fight. But the Bank of London denied his request to leave his job, saying he still owed five months on his five-year contract.

As Fillingham tells it, all was not lost. The majority of eligible men had left for England, and he was one of the few eligible men in Buenos Aires. There was dancing every Wednesday and Saturday night, and he would often invite different ladies out to dance on those nights.

Finally, in May 1944, Fillingham’s contract time was up and he headed out by boat across the Atlantic, stopping at Accra, Ghana, in West Africa. He went ashore not knowing that his brother Bernard, an RAF sergeant, was there, installing radios in Spitfires and other aircraft.

After a brief stop, the boat shoved off for Liverpool, England. From there, he went home to Worcester Park for a reunion with his mother, father, and older sister. The following day, he took the train to London, intending to join the RAF as a pilot. However, he was told that the RAF was not accepting applications for pilots; only air crew applications were being considered.

As Fillingham was leaving, he noticed a Royal Navy recruiting office across the street. At that office, he was told that the navy was looking for pilots and observers and to leave a phone number where he could be reached.

Fillingham returned to his parents’ house to await the call. Early on June 6, 1944, he heard a loud noise and rushed out to see one of Germany’s V-1 missiles, which were fiery, flying bombs that traveled more than 400 miles per hour. They were the world’s first crude cruise missiles. Later came the V-2, which was a predecessor to the ballistic missile. At the height of the German missile campaign, 100 were launched daily at southeast England. The total number directed at England was 9,521.

A Navy Pilot
At the end of June, Fillingham received the call from the Royal Navy. In September 1944, he went to the Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) in Portsmouth, England for training on the HMS St. Vincent. There were 164 students in the three-month pilot training program, which included some very nonpilot exercises, like learning how to tie knots and how to march. They were also given exams on aircraft recognition, on which Fillingham received the fourth-highest mark in the class.

At the completion of the class, 25 students were sent to Pensacola, Florida, to train with the U.S. Navy, and 25 were to go to Canada to train with the Royal Canadian Air Force. The remainder would not be pilots and were instead assigned to maintenance. Fillingham was in the group headed for Canada because the U.S. Navy restricted pilot trainees to be below age 21.

Fillingham and his class were put on the Queen Mary at Southampton, headed for New York. There were thousands of Americans on the ship, many with wounds from D-Day, and some missing arms and legs. Once in New York, Fillingham and his classmates got on a train and departed for a 24-hour ride north to the transit camp at Moncton, New Brunswick.

The pilot trainees were under curfew and had to be in by 10 p.m. every night. Every Wednesday and Saturday night, the local Knights of Pythias lodge held dances from 7 to 10. The aspiring pilots attended frequently.

There, Fillingham noticed a beautiful woman in a long blue dress and asked her for the first dance. Her name was Monica Holohan; she was a nurse and lived in a boarding house. They danced every dance that night. For the next six nights, Fillingham would meet her when she got off duty and they would sit and talk until his curfew time.

On the seventh morning, the men got the orders, “OK, pack up!” Off they went for instruction at the No. 13 Elementary Flying Training School in St. Eugene, Ontario, for their initial flight training.

Many of Fillingham’s missions were performed in the wilderness across Canada and the United States.
On January 5, 1945, Fillingham had his first solo flight on a Royal
Canadian Air Force Fairchild PT-19 Cornell. The training aircraft was
quite fragile; it was constructed of wood because there was no extra
metal around. If too much strain or stress was put on the wings, they
would simply fall out of the sky. That happened at least twice. Fillingham
says there were four coffins at the airport, waiting on shelves for the
spring thaw so they could be buried. Despite the danger, Fillingham
flew for the next three months, accumulating 60 solo hours and 40
hours of dual instruction.

Fillingham soon qualified to fly all-metal planes. Night flights required
flying with instruments. He also received additional flight training on
a North American AT-6 Harvard. On June 11, 1945, he got his wings, pinned
to the cuffs of his sleeves. He also received the Admiralty Award as the
best all-around trainee on the #129 Pilots Course in Kingston, Ontario.

Starting a Family
Fillingham had the foresight to get Monica’s mailing address before he
left abruptly for training. The two would exchange what he described
as love letters once or twice a week. Eventually, he proposed to Monica by
letter, suggesting that she consult with her mother and family. She replied
with one word: “YES.”

When he arrived at the station, she was at the platform waiting for him.
Last-minute arrangements were made, and the two were married right away.
Monica in her beautiful wedding dress — which she had sewn herself — and
Fillingham in his sailor’s bell-bottom uniform made a handsome couple.

With the honeymoon over, Fillingham soon found himself on a
boat headed back to England for more advanced training at RAF Station
Ternhill in July 1945. Monica remained in Canada and gave birth to a baby girl
named Ann Beatrice back in Moncton. When the baby was three months old,
mother and daughter were finally able to catch transport on a ship to
England. Fillingham, who by this time was posted to Teplow and had been
commissioned to Officer Temporary Probationary Sub Lieutenant, was
waiting at the dock when she arrived. The three of them stayed with his
parents in Worcester Park.

In March of 1946, he was transferred to the No. 1 Operational
Flying School RNAS in Rattray,
Scotland, for flight training on the
Fairey Firefly Mk 1. He practiced
aircraft carrier landings for nearly
four months on a marked runway
and eventually graduated to landing
on actual Royal Navy carriers.
Eventually, Fillingham was able to find
accommodations for his wife and child
to join him in Scotland.

In one of the chance meetings
that happened during the war,
when millions of Britons were on
the move, Fillingham stopped in a
service club and, out of idle curiosity,
checked its roster of British Latin
America volunteers. He saw Helen
McQuibban’s name and address.
Unbeknownst to Fillingham, she
had left Argentina for England and
joined the Royal Army six months
after Fillingham had left Argentina.
After her training in Scotland, she was
assigned to the Army of Occupation in
Germany.

After exchanging some
communication and realizing they
would soon each be off in different
directions, they agreed to meet
halfway in Chester, England. The two
old friends, both in uniform, walked
and talked for three hours. Fillingham
asked a passerby to take their picture
before they parted ways on separate
buses.

Experiencing Vertical Flight
In February 1947, Fillingham was
assigned to the 816 Squadron aboard
HMS Ocean out of Malta in the
Mediterranean Sea, where he went
on to perform 162 deck landings. His
wife and child could not come along,
as Malta had been severely bombed
by the Italians, destroying useable
housing. However, the relationship
between Monica and her mother-in-law
grew strained, and Monica
entreated her husband to find them
some kind of accommodations.

When Fillingham was finally able to
secure housing for his family in Malta,
they were disappointed to discover
that their new accommodation was a
small 6-ft-by-10-ft wooden shed. They
remained there until the landlord
was able to give them slightly better housing in the projection room of a movie house that was under construction. Finally, they moved into an apartment; however, it included a bath tub made of cement with a wooden stopper that that would not retain any water. Eventually, the family was able to obtain an apartment complete with bath and shower.

Eighteen months into his two-year posting on HMS Ocean with the 816 Squadron, Fillingham saw his first helicopter aboard a visiting carrier, the USS Philippine Sea. It was a U.S. Navy HO3S-1 (Sikorsky S-51). The British pilots were invited aboard to get a closer look and speak with their colleagues.

Fillingham returned on HMS Ocean with aircraft to St. Merryn in Cornwall, England, while Monica and the children (they now had two) returned to live with Fillingham’s parents. He was stationed on HMS Vulture II, which operated from 1939 to 1955 as an air-to-ground bombing and gunnery range, equipped with landing strips.

Fillingham also practiced American-style air carrier landings with a Fairey Firefly Mk 1 on the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious in the Irish Sea. Fillingham said that it took some getting used to, as these landings were done in reverse fashion from what he had been taught. Not only did he have to adjust to American signals, but as a training deck landing officer, he also had to practice around-and-around landings called “clockwork mouse duty.” In this exercise, one plane is landing while another is returning. He also went to an ABC (atomic, biological, and chemical) Warfare Course at Wimbury, near Plymouth, for a week, flying Fairey Firefly aircraft.

Next, Fillingham was sent to a one-day gliding course in Cornwall on September 16, 1948. Fillingham received a backseat checkout. The glider was attached to a deHavilland Tiger Moth, a RAF trainer biplane. After that ride, he flew solo in an Olympic glider, a one-seat competition-level glider. After a half hour in the air, he was called down and awarded a C-Certificate at St. Morgan Aerodrome in Cornwall.

In 1948, the 816 Squadron was disbanded. Fillingham requested rotary-wing aircraft instruction and was approved for conversion to helicopters. On November 2, 1948, Fillingham joined 705 Squadron, HMS Siskin (later renamed the HMS Sultan) at RNAS Gosport in England for initial helicopter training.

On November 17, 1948, Fillingham soloed after only 4½ hours of dual instruction and checkout at hover on a Sikorsky R-4 (or, as the Royal Navy called it, the Hoverfly). The solo checkout consisted of the instructor getting on and off the helicopter while Fillingham held it stable in hover. On February 1, 1947, his instructor had made the first official helicopter deck landing in an R-4B on a Royal Navy ship, the HMS Vanguard.

Six weeks later, Fillingham was assigned to the Royal Portland Dockyard-Detached Flight as officer in charge of the helicopter unit. The unit consisted of two Hoverflies, maintained by one petty officer and six ratings. There, he continued to gain experience on the R-4, conducting a variety of tests, trials, and exercises. These included torpedo trials, radar calibration, air and radio tests, personnel transport, and demonstrations. Fillingham practiced autorotation, conducted dual helicopter flights involved in search and rescue, and responded to photography requests. Wearing a parachute and dinghy pack added additional weight to the R-4, requiring wind to help lift the helicopter off the ground.

In August 1949, Fillingham was assigned to RAF Station Beaufieu Airborne Forces Experimental Establishment in Hampshire, England, where he carried out additional flight testing on the Sikorsky R-4, R-6, and S-51; the Bristol Type 171 Sycamore helicopter; and the Cierva Air Horse helicopter. Fillingham also provided R-6 flight instruction to several new Navy students. During this time, he conducted autorotation tests in both R-4 and R-6 helicopters, and test-flew an instrumented R-4 under the hood.

**Flying the Canadian Bush**

In 1950, Fillingham’s service time ended with nearly 300 accumulated hours of helicopter flight time. He was given the option to leave and receive 500 pounds. He could get an additional 50 pounds if he turned in his uniform. Fillingham did not want to surrender his uniform, and to this day regrets doing so — but he needed the money.

Fillingham and his wife and children stayed with his parents for three months, during which time Fillingham was unsuccessful in locating work or a house to live in. Many servicemen were coming out of the military and looking for work, and so there was little opportunity to find pilot work — and the housing situation was worse. Some housing waiting lists had seven-year waits. The Fillinghams decided to emigrate to Canada.

Fillingham began looking for a job, with little success. At the time, there were only six helicopters in all of Canada, and he applied to all of those companies.

Just before he was to start a job as a truck driver for Sears, he received a call from Spartan Air Services, a company based in Ottawa, Ontario. Founded in 1946 by two Royal Canadian Air Force veterans who saw the increasing need for air survey projects, the company had been looking for a pilot since one of their former pilots had quit after landing on a lake and overturning his aircraft. Fillingham began working for Spartan on July 13, 1950.

Fillingham’s previous helicopter work had primarily been in Sikorsky aircraft, so he received dual instruction on Spartan’s Bell 47D. On July 22, he was sent to Bell Aircraft’s factory in Niagara Falls, New York, for further instruction on the Bell 47. One of his instructions was Floyd Carlson.

After only nine hours of instruction, Fillingham headed off to Knob Lake in Labrador, flying Spartan’s Bell 47D, conducting topographical mapping survey operations under contract for the Canadian government. It was a hard way to earn a livelihood — the job required him to live in tents and drink and bathe in lake water.

His next assignment between February and March was flying a Bell 47D-1 under contract to Hollinger...
Ungava Transport Ltd., in Quebec during the early construction of the Quebec North Shore and Labrador Railway, the new rail line from Sept-Îles north to Labrador.

Winter conditions were difficult. The helicopter and blades had to be covered every night. A portable Herman-Nelson heater running a half hour each morning was required to thaw out the helicopter sufficiently for it to start. The helicopter had to land on wooden planks so the floats would not stick to the frozen ground. To complicate things, there were constant belt failures that required replacement, sometimes after only a few hours.

On one occasion, belt failure resulted in a forced landing in a forested area. Luckily, Fillingham was able to locate an open space and landed on a frozen lake. It took 10 days to obtain and fly in a set of replacement belts. By then, the helicopter was buried in almost 3 feet of snow. Nothing was easy.

That winter also included a heart-pounding take-off in an overloaded Noorduyn Norseman from a small lake; then a fire protection job at Maniwaki, Quebec for a first-time rooftop landing; and a barometer traverse job across uncharted Gaspé Peninsula on the way to Newfoundland to do a triangulation survey for a Canadian government topographical survey. Instead of a tent, Fillingham lodged in a caboose rented from the railroad.

In June 1951, while working in southwest end of Newfoundland, at the end of a railroad line, Fillingham experienced his second forced landing while conducting survey work. This time it was because of a fuel line break that occurred as he was flying toward the north shore over a heavily forested area. Fillingham, accompanied by Paul Atkinson, a surveyor, had landed the Bell 47D every two to three miles along their route. Normally, his tank of fuel would last two hours. Suddenly, the engine quit at 300 feet and Fillingham was forced to perform an autorotation into trees. The helicopter was destroyed and sank slowly to rest 4 feet above ground. Miraculously, Fillingham and his passenger were unhurt.

The pair were approximately 12 miles north of a bay. It was getting close to evening and they decided to begin their walk in the morning. Shortly after they began their trek, they heard a loud noise and thought that perhaps a crew was working nearby. They walked toward the noise and came upon a bear. The startled bear went one way, and Fillingham and his passenger ran in the other direction.

Around noon, they came to the north shore of the bay. They saw a small village approximately 5 miles on the other side. There was an old rickety pier with an old hand-crank telephone attached to a pole. They cranked the phone and shouted into it. They could hear someone answering, so both men began to scream “help!” A short time later, a boat came out and picked them up.

The loss of the helicopter cost Fillingham his job with Spartan Air Services, after two years working for the company. To make matters worse, the company labeled him as accident prone. There weren’t too many jobs with helicopters available, and no one would hire him. So he telephoned the Bell Company, which by this time had moved from Niagara Falls to Ft. Worth, Texas. Fillingham had heard that Bell had begun offshore oil work in partnership with Petroleum
Helicopter Inc. and New England Helicopters.

On December 9, 1951, Fillingham took a job with Pitts Construction Company in Sherridon, Manitoba, in Canada, to work on a railroad line stretching from Sherridon to Lynn Lake. The work was brutal. Daytime temperatures were between -10° to -25°. The helicopters had no heaters. It took about an hour to thaw out the frozen stabilizer bar reservoirs using a Herman-Nelson heater.

Fillingham would continue flying north until his fingers began to freeze. He would then set the helicopter down facing south to thaw out in the scant available sun, and repeat the process.

While working the line, two Bell 47Ds were based on a frozen lake in Sherridon. The company closed for Christmas vacation, suspending operations until March 15, 1952. When spring arrived, one of the helicopters was outfitted with skids and equipped to do sprayer work. This was Fillingham’s first experience with spray equipment and introduced him to the vicious northern black fly. Fillingham flew all that summer in a Bell 47D.

From Harsh Cold to Hot Jungle

On October 3, 1952 Fillingham got a phone call from Frank Lee of PHI Inc., who told Fillingham that he had a job for him in the Goajira Peninsula, north of Lake Maracaibo in Venezuela. Lee instructed Fillingham to go to Providence, Rhode Island, to New England Helicopters to get his commercial rating and his U.S. commercial training and his U.S. rating.

After receiving his commercial rating (#12512), and after transferring his family from Ottawa to New Brunswick, Fillingham flew south to Caracas, Venezuela. From there, he traveled to a base camp, which was a PHI and New England Helicopters operation in conjunction with Inter-American Geodetic Surveys. Formally a Canadian bush pilot, Fillingham now found himself conducting helicopter triangulation and gravity missions on geodetic surveys in the mosquito-infested jungles and mountains of Venezuela and Colombia, in a Bell 47D-1. Operating conditions were difficult. Flying in 106° heat over thick jungle canopies offered few open areas for landing, and the ever-present possibility of spark plug fouling on the No. 5 cylinder of the 186-horsepower Franklin engine prior to the introduction of TCP posed a constant challenge.

Fillingham spent nights in rainforests and on hilltops, while based in remote jungle villages, swarmed by thousands of mosquitos. He relied on local “drugstores” to relieve itching from mosquito bites and cure his amoebic dysentery caused by contaminated water or food.

Another problem was that the local villagers had never seen a helicopter, and their curiosity, especially that of the children, caused him some anxious moments. They were constantly approaching the helicopter while the rotor blades and tail rotor were still turning. Fillingham said he had no choice but to carry a stick to ward off the curious villagers for their own protection.

Fillingham and the crew flew from Caracas to San Tome, where they took triangular surveys, spreading white powder called carbide. They then flew from San Tome to El Tigre, Colombia. They took a break for Christmas, then spent all January marking stations. They then flew on to Barranquilla, and continued to Puerto Lopez, Colombia.

Fillingham worked in Bogota, Colombia, for six months, flying prospecting survey missions over dense jungles, where the tree canopy exceeded 250 feet. Assembled out of Barranquilla, Colombia, he flew along Lake Maracaibo to the Venezuelan border, navigating around 18,700-ft Pico Cristobal Colon, the highest point in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Maria Mountains. Navigating around the large mountain required flying out 3 to 4 miles over the sea, which then took them to a desert outside Puerto Lopez.

On February 8, 1953, Fillingham was faced with a forced landing in a cactus forest because of engine failure. Some of the cacti were over 50 feet tall. Luckily he found a spot to land.

The forced landing was caused by a broken piston. Fillingham and his accompanying surveyor were forced to stay in a tent at Puerto Lopez while the engine was replaced. It was not until March 1 that Fillingham was able to fly out of the cactus forest.

His time there was awful. In addition to the extreme heat, Fillingham had to check his boots every morning for centipedes. The only water source was from a well that had been fouled by defecating cattle. The water had to be boiled and strained several times. He finally found some water dripping from a rock.

On another occasion, Fillingham was asked to transport a heavy individual who insisted on bringing a 50-pound bag of cement with him. The added weight nearly resulted in an accident, as the helicopter was flying low and into the trees, with the rotor blades barely above the tree tops. While flying survey work, Fillingham was often accompanied by military conscripts carrying a gun on board the helicopter as protection from bandits who operated in the area.

Making a Living in Louisiana

On July 15, 1953, the helicopters were crated and sent back to New England Helicopters. Fillingham transferred to PHI, located in Lafayette, Louisiana, on September 16, 1953. The company went through several name changes, beginning as Petroleum Bell, becoming Petroleum Helicopter Inc., and then simply PHI, an oil exploration services company.

Fillingham took his wife and three children, which now included a newborn son named John, and headed south to Lafayette. They were met in Lafayette by Frank Lee, PHI manager, who lent Fillingham his car and told him he needed to start working on Monday.

The company had been using Cessna 180s and had recently added some Bell 47s to fly to the rigs and navigate the marshes. Fillingham was flying gravity work in the areas around Gibbstown, Lake Charles, Houma, New Orleans, Theriot, and surrounding areas of Louisiana.

He also was involved in water-bottom testing. This test was conducted by lowering a meter.
through a hole in the floor of the helicopter into the marsh below. He also flew offshore ferry flights and conducted flights for Humble Oil. Flying to the rigs provided some challenging moments, like the time the rig heliport was unusable, and so he had to land on the back of a tug.

Because he could speak Spanish and now had altitude flight experience, on December 2, 1954, he was sent on a contract assignment in South America, to a location approximately 50 miles east of Caracas, Venezuela. From Caracas, it was on to the tiny airport at Las Cruces, Colombia, in the heart of the Magdalena River valley to support a jungle seismic survey team, arriving December 16.

Then it was off to Calima to do mountain flight work at Puerto Nino. The mountain contained 60 percent pure iron ore, and mining operations by Orinoco Mining Company was already under way. The extracted ore was to be sent out by river, but the river was too shallow. So work began on dredging 100 miles of river.

On his first recon flight, Fillingham found himself desperately looking for landing spots along the way. The route consisted of unbroken canopy, forcing him to fly nonstop for two hours, hoping the helicopter’s fan belts would not break.

Fillingham was assigned to fly Sikorsky S-55 and S-58 helicopters. He was told he needed to be checked out by one of their Venezuelan pilots. Problem was, the Venezuelan pilot had never seen an S-55. So Fillingham, who used to fly one back in the States on oil exploration missions, had to teach the Venezuelan pilot so he could then check Fillingham out.

Following the checkout, there was still another problem. There was no place on the dredge for the helicopter to land. So they dismantled the helicopter, and Fillingham flew back to Lafayette.

He was assigned to crew-change work out of Leeville, flying from dawn till dark, to and from drilling barges offshore in the Gulf of Mexico. During bad weather, the barges would pitch to and fro, making landings and takeoffs challenging. During rough seas, the helicopters could slide off into the Gulf. This problem was later corrected by the installation of a wooden platform system.

In July 1955, Fillingham was called to Porterville, California, to do some high-altitude flying, beyond the maximum. This meant removing everything that wasn’t absolutely necessary out of the helicopter, including battery and starter, to lighten the load. Porterville is located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The mountains range around 12,000 ft up to Mt. Whitney at 14,505 ft. Fillingham got the assignment because the former chief pilot was fired for refusing to fly above 10,000 feet. Because Fillingham was new man to the assignment, another pilot, Louie Bryn was put in charge.

Both pilots practiced high-altitude landings on mountain tops. Once they got used to altitude work, they began working on the government survey contract. They accomplished the survey work in three months by using helicopters. The previous survey had been completed using mules and took five years to complete.

There were many challenges. Because of weight restrictions, the battery and starter were removed and the helicopter’s engines had to be hand-cranked. Takeoff starts from mountain elevations are affected by a lack of oxygen. Sometimes cranking took 20 minutes or more to get started, and sometimes it required a backward jump takeoff.

In April 1957, Fillingham was assigned to fly from the Gulf of Mexico to Wyoming for the U.S. Geological Survey. There he flew both Sikorsky and Bell helicopters. In June of 1958, he was working in Morgan City, Louisiana — back to gravity flights and seismic jobs.

PHI had a contract with Hiller that required a pilot to fly the Hiller UH-12E. Though Fillingham had never flown a Hiller before, he received some instruction and traveled to Houston. Along the way he made numerous designated stops to demonstrate the helicopter, landing in farmer’s fields from September through November 1958.

At one demonstration stop, he met a man who had flown three earlier Hiller models and asked if he could take a look at the UH-12E. Upon inspection, he discovered a crack in the wash plate. Fillingham left the helicopter and returned to Lafayette.

In May of 1959, Fillingham was sent to work flying Bell helicopters on a government survey and mapping contract in Alaska for PHI. The crews took two helicopters by cargo ship to Anchorage, where they assembled the helicopters. The crews consisted of two pilots, two mechanics, some surveyors from Washington, D.C., and a cook. The surveyors were in one tent, the pilots each had a tent, the mechanics shared a tent, and the cook had a tent. They set up next to a coast guard station. There were bears throughout the area, and often came to their campsite. Crew members were warned not to take food into their tent, not even as much as a sandwich. The first night the bears ripped the cook’s tent apart. At night before they went to bed, both pilots flew their helicopter to scare the bears away, but it didn’t help much.

They flew along the west coast and along mountains. Fillingham recalls that from late May through August 1959, he flew about 190 hours.

On one occasion, working a mountain survey assignment near Cordova, Alaska, the two pilots had to wait out low cloud cover over a mountain for six days. On the seventh day it cleared, so they went up. About 1:00 p.m., after five hours of mapping, the surveyor had completed his work. The cloud cover was coming in fast. They began to descend, down the side of the 7,000-ft mountain, using the mountain side as a reference until losing sight of it, which required Fillingham to autorotate into clear air at around 5,000 ft.

When the Alaska assignment was over, Fillingham returned to Lafayette. In his absence, someone else had taken his previous assignments. So he found himself working in the sales office as an administrative assistant to Frank Lee, to help acquire contractual work for PHI’s fleet, which at the time consisted of about 30 helicopters.

From September through November 1959, Fillingham worked in Intracoastal City, Louisiana,
conducting offshore work, transporting passengers to oil rigs in a Bell 47-J2A. It was a difficult assignment as some of the rigs were 150 miles out in the Gulf. Trying to locate the rigs with a limited amount of fuel was challenging. Sometimes Fillingham had to do a square search in order to locate the rig so that he could refuel and fly back to base. During this time, Fillingham flew a number of different aircraft, including various Bell 47 models, Sikorsky S-55s and S-62s, the Sud Aviation Allouete II, and the Hiller UH-12E. In all, Fillingham worked 11 years for PHI.

In 1964, at the age of 45, Fillingham went to work for Tenneco (Tennessee Gas Transmission Company) in Houma, Louisiana. At Tenneco, Fillingham began flying Bell 47J-2As on a variety of missions, including pipeline patrol and offshore and local transport. In 1967, the company replaced the Bell 47s with new turbine Bell 206 JetRangers. He also flew Cessna 185 Amphibian on duty relief.

From January 4 to 5, 1965, Fillingham attended the Bell maintenance factory school. He passed with a 91 percent rating. In all, he would qualify as an instructor and hold a commercial fixed-wing and commercial rotorcraft rating, Sikorsky S-58 rating, and a gliding “C” certificate #1935. In 1973, he flew the newly purchased twin-engine MBB Bo 105, and became base chief pilot.

On one occasion, while flying in the MBB Bo 105, his No. 1 engine failed and he was forced to land in a marsh about an hour from base. Unable to reach the base by phone, Fillingham decided to try to lift off with his No. 2 engine. He started slowly and skimmed the marsh and then lifted off and successfully cleared a line of trees. About 10 miles from base, he called in and told them of his situation. The airport was shut down and the runway cleared. The helicopter made it to the hangar.

Another recollection that Fillingham had was of flying over an area that was dotted with large mounds in the marsh. He later found out that these mounds were created by alligators as a nest for them to lay their eggs. They built a pond at one end of the mound. There the alligator lay in wait, protecting the eggs. Fillingham, while transporting people to the rigs, would occasionally stop by and fly low over the nests, prompting the alligators to come out of their hiding places to defend their nests.

In 1976, Fillingham volunteered to take over the Tenneco’s flight operation in Mahwah, New Jersey where he flew a Boelkow B105. While his previous flying experience had been in sparsely populated areas, he now was flying day and night flights in well-lit, high-density areas, including the New York-Boston-Washington corridor. He became familiar with Manhattan’s 60th Street heliport and the New York and New Jersey airports and heliports, and became accustomed to operating in high-density traffic and total radio control.

Retired but Still Flying

After a 15-year career with Tenneco, Fillingham, having reached his 60th birthday, was forced to retire on May 1, 1978. He thought about what he wanted to do and where he could continue to fly. He checked the papers regularly and was particularly hoping to find something in California. But nothing materialized.

A man named Charley Hoke was strip mining an area several hours from his home in Murray, Kentucky. So he hired a pilot and rented a helicopter to transport him back and forth, which cut his travel time in half. Eventually, he bought a new Bell 47D. Hoke attempted to fly it home by himself, and was told he needed to have a licensed pilot fly the aircraft.
People at Bell knew Fillingham was looking for work, and they recommended him to Hoke as his personal pilot. Fillingham flew the helicopter from Nashville to Murray. His assignment was to fly Hoke, who was now a millionaire coal miner, out to the site at 5:00 a.m. and back to Murray at 5:00 p.m. Hoke wanted Fillingham to fly in the dark, which Fillingham refused to do, telling Hoke it was not safe to do so without instruments.

Fillingham flew for Hoke for three months. During that time, he would dipstick check the helicopter’s oil level. One time, he discovered metal shavings in the oil, which resulted in the helicopter needing a new engine. Because it was a brand-new helicopter and under warranty, the engine was installed for free.

Moving West
Fillingham continued to have several disagreements with Hoke over safety issues, including night flights and poor weather conditions, such as flying in thick fog. Fillingham left that employment and found a job with Cascade Helicopters in Cashmere, Washington.

He drove up to Cashmere on June 23, 1978 for a check ride, which was performed by Bill Wells, the owner of the company. On June 29, he started on a U.S. Forest Service contract in Region 1. On July 1, he flew to Missoula, Montana for a Forest Service checkout and began flying a Bell 206B. Most of his assignments involved mountain flying at 4,000 to 6,000 ft and forest patrol. He also did a good bit of sling work, including carrying prize sheep to pastures. He also worked ambulance transport for a hospital in Great Falls, Montana.


In June and July 1979, Fillingham was working in Wyoming. The assignment involved laying a bridge over a stream from bank to bank. Fillingham wanted his family to join him, so he loaded his wife Monica and now six children (Ann, Susan, John, Philip Hugh, Frank, and Mary) into their 1953 station wagon, and followed the truck. They drove to Rock Springs and stayed at a Motel 6 (in those days, Fillingham says, Motel 6 charged just $6 per night). Along the way, they stopped in Yellowstone National Park and Cody, Wyoming, where they enjoyed many historically significant sites.

Diving right into work, Fillingham flew a number of varied missions and assignments, including landing on top of Mt. Hood at 11,245 ft above sea level on August 8, 1979. In September, he was flying contract work out of Government Camp, Oregon, in Clackamas County for the U.S. Geophysical Survey in Region 6. The missions included gravity work in wilderness areas, surveying cherry orchards, and meteorological survey work on Park Ridge and Foggy Dew Falls in Oregon’s Cascade Mountains.

Also in September, he flew from Grand Junction, Colorado, to Gateway and Douglas Pass in Colorado, working under a contract with the Bureau of Land Management. While on assignment, Fillingham flew to the top of Eagle Mountain (9,937 ft).

In June 1980, he was flying a Bell 206B-3 on numerous missions throughout Colorado. One assignment Fillingham recalls with chagrin involved wild horse management. He flew pasture evaluation and was asked to conduct a wild horse count. After flying for five hours, he only sighted four wild horses.

He also was asked to check water lines and water tanks in Douglass Pass and Lookout Mountain. These were mountainous areas with a varied altitude of 4,800 to 7,200 ft. Other Colorado assignments included flight checks in the Demaree Wilderness, Bangs Canyon; sheep hauls at Monument and Mee Canyon; flying recon for water resources and checking fences for the U.S. Forest Service’s in Collbran; and flights to Grand Mesa Lakes and Brush Canyon. On some of these contracts, Fillingham worked with his daughter Mary, who drove a refueling truck and served as his crew chief.

From June 26, 1980, to the end of August of that year, Fillingham worked on a number of helicopter assignments throughout Colorado for the Bureau of Land Management, including landing on Horsefly Peak at 10,353 ft above sea level. He flew again.

After he quit flying, Fillingham took up photography as a profession.
several missions in the mountains and in wild horse areas, and conducted naval oil shale exploration flights.

On March 12, 1981, Fillingham headed to Spring Valley, New York, to begin a brief flying stint for DECair. He made flights to Providence and Warwick, Rhode Island; Albany, New York; and Camden, New Jersey.

After leaving DECair, Fillingham went to work for Reeder Flying Service, Inc., in Twin Falls, Idaho. He had his check ride with Vern Haley on June 10, 1981, and on the 15th he began to fly some local flights, practicing flying a Bell 206 with water buckets. The next day he flew to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, on assignment for Reeder, and on June 21, 1981 he was sent to Lupine Meadows, Wyoming to conduct a search and retrieval that involved the pick-up and transport of a dead body at an altitude of 10,600 feet above sea level.

From the end of June 1981 through September 1981, Fillingham’s logbook had him flying suppression flights and park rescues at a dizzying pace from fire to fire, spanning Wyoming, Arizona, and Utah. He flew sling loads and water bucket flights from water resources to combat a number of fire spots that had broken out and spread throughout the areas.

A rescue of particular interest took place on September 8, 1981, on the Nez Perce Peak in Grand Teton National Forest. Fillingham was asked to help save a man who had been climbing the mountain and slipped to a ledge, estimated to be 11,700 feet up, with no way out.

Fillingham flew to assess the situation and came up with a plan that he felt just might work. During all his fire suppression work, he had developed his sling load skills. He requested that a 100-foot line and stretcher be attached to the helicopter. He then lifted off, careful not to get his rotor blades too close to the mountain.

Fillingham hovered for a while, but he could not get the stretcher close enough for the two climbers who had come up to help. After some thought, he decided to rock the cabin back and forth, swinging the line and litter until the two men were able to grab hold.

Fillingham then ceased rocking the helicopter and lowered the aircraft to create some slack. The two men were able to get the injured climber onto the stretcher and tied him down securely. Fillingham swung the litter containing the climber away from the mountain and gently lowered him to a waiting ambulance on the ground. Fillingham later received a commendation from the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service for his daring and skillful rescue.

Fillingham continued to work fire suppression missions through the end of September 1981. At the end of September, Reeder’s government contract ended and Fillingham returned to his new home in Monroe, New York, capping a career that logged 13,674 helicopter and 581 fixed-wing hours.

Pilot Turned Photographer

In 1984, Fillingham suffered a heart attack, resulting in a six-week stay in a local hospital. Undaunted by the episode and confident that his flying days were not over, he began his second career as a staff photographer for his local weekly newspaper. One of his news photos was awarded third prize in New York State in 1981.
An avid photographer, Fillingham over the years amassed a collection of more than 75 very large albums of his work; documenting all his stops along the way, including his early days in England, Argentina, and Canada; his South America and Alaska exploration work; and his fire suppression flights. In fact, during his employment with Tenneco in Houma, Louisiana, Fillingham supplemented his income with Saturday and Sunday photography assignments. He would later remark that he made a better living being a photographer than as a pilot.

Fillingham’s wife Monica had been suffering for several years from Parkinson’s disease. In the later stages, the disease began to affect her movement. They were able to find her a facility in Monroe; however, after a couple of months, her health had deteriorated to the extent that she was admitted to a hospital. Sadly, Monica passed away on June 10, 2000, with her sister Carol and her husband at her side.

Adventures in Australia
In February 2002, Fillingham was at his desk planning future photographic work when the phone rang. Who should it be, but his old friend, Helen McQuibban Andrews, the girl who rejected Fillingham’s proposal in 1943 while in Patagonia, Argentina. Recently widowed and now living in Lincolnshire, England, Helen asked Fillingham if he would accompany her on a trip to Australia. Fillingham had some photography commitments and told her he couldn’t go until June. Helen said she would wait.

On June 30, 2002, Fillingham flew from JFK Airport in New York to Heathrow Airport in London. Helen met him at the airport and the two had some tea, leaving three hours later for Brisbane, Australia. The plan was to stay at Helen’s friend Binx’s house, who Fillingham knew from his days in Argentina. They spent three weeks in Brisbane, one of the oldest cities in Australia and also traveled elsewhere in Australia and New Zealand.

Although Helen returned to England, she and Fillingham decided to rekindle their relationship. Although they lived apart for long stretches, both traveled for extended visits with each other. Fillingham says that he would typically visit for half a year and then return to spend time with his children and grandchildren. In 2007, Fillingham and Helen made a nostalgic return trip to tour Chester. Sixty-one years earlier, they had walked the same path and visited the same bridge — she in her army uniform and he in his Royal Navy uniform.

This arrangement worked for several years until neither could travel because of age and health concerns. They kept in touch regularly by phone, until Helen could no longer hear well. These days, their relationship and communication is largely conducted through letters.

Advice from a Pioneer Pilot
Fillingham lives with his daughter Mary in Monroe, New York. He is a Twirly Bird member and a 2004 recipient of the prestigious Les Morris Award, the organization’s highest honor, reserved for members who have made an exemplary contribution to the helicopter community over their lifetime.

Fillingham attended his first Twirly Bird meeting in 1968, which was held in conjunction with Helicopter Association International’s HAI HELI-EXPO. He attended every meeting thereafter until 2007, when he attended his last meeting because of health-related travel restrictions at the age of 89. While attending the Twirly Bird meetings, Fillingham used his considerable photography talents to help document the annual gatherings.

Based on his own experiences, Fillingham encourages young people to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves during one’s lifetime — opportunities that if not acted upon, can be missed and life altering. He offers the following words of wisdom to life’s travelers who may find themselves at some critical crossroads: “We all start life as a blank slate. As time goes on, various opportunities occur to each of us. Some tuck them away in their memory as a positive, others do not. None of us know what’s around the next corner.

Growing up poor, I couldn’t even imagine that I would spend five years in South America and a year in Canada being taught to fly — my life’s ambition — be married to a beautiful woman, and experience fatherhood, all before I was 30. It happened because I took advantage of every opportunity presented to me.”

Martin J. Pociask
is curator for Helicopter Foundation International.