



More Than a Vision: Carl Brady, Sr., and the Founding of Alaskan Aviation

by *Randall Nielson*



On June 18, 1948, a DC-4 cargo plane touched down in Juneau, Alaska, and offloaded a Bell 47-B helicopter. It was the first of its kind in the territory (Alaska wouldn't become a state for eleven more years), and must have drawn a few stares. As was typical in the '40s, not many people had heard of a helicopter. Probably fewer had seen one. So it's reasonable to think at least a few of them cut a wager that day on how long it would take for the new contraption and whoever was flying it to fall out of the sky.

If they did, it was the wrong bet. The helicopter and the man who owned it went swiftly to work, flying missions over mountains and tundra that fixed-wings simply couldn't, eventually carving a niche out of the wilderness that became so vital to the region's commerce, so critical to the growth of industry there, that his name in Alaska has become synonymous with progress. In fact, if Carl Brady, Sr. did one thing when he shipped that Bell to Juneau, it was to merge Alaska's destiny with his own. The oil industry, the commuter airline industry, the survey and mapping industries — all players in Alaska's commercial development — would grow simultaneously with the services he provided. As his friend Senator Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) has said, "We were living in the third dimension. Carl brought us into the fourth dimension."

So he was duly honored. On August 22, 2003, the company that Brady founded with partners Roy Falconer and Joe Seward in 1948, Era Aviation, brought some of the biggest names in aviation and politics together to dedicate an immaculately restored Bell 47-B in Brady's honor

at the Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport. Attending were Era Aviation President Chuck Johnson; former Alaska governors Walter Hickel and Tony Knowles; Senator Stevens; General Joseph Ralston (Ret.), former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; former Bell Helicopters Chairman and CEO, Lloyd Schoppa; and former Era Aviation President Wilbur O'Brien, and a crowd of family and well-wishers.

With the flick of a switch, the bright orange 47 was illuminated above the airport terminal door. Brady's oldest son, Carl, Jr., delivered a touching set of remarks.

"This aircraft you see above us was the result of a dream and a thought," said Mr. Brady, Chairman and CEO of Brady and Company in Anchorage. "My father, who was barnstorming and crop dusting in Washington, met some gentlemen who had spent the last seven years mapping the southern half of Chichigof Island in Alaska. He convinced them that with a helicopter they could do it in less time. They hired him, and then surveyed the northern half of the island in three months. That was the start of a long relationship with the U.S. Geological Survey in Alaska."

He noted the many firsts in his father's career, such as the first use of a commercial helicopter in Alaska, first use of a turbine helicopter in Alaska, and becoming the first Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) approved operator in the state. He credited former Bell CEO Lloyd Schoppa as having provided the aircraft and support services that made those achievements possible.

Carol Brady, to whom Carl, Sr.,

has been married for 63 years, told the crowd that while she loved helping her husband run his early businesses in the 1940s, "the best thing that ever happened was when Bell came to Yakima, Washington because we could sell our restaurant." The helicopter business brought challenges, she said, citing the 12 years during which Brady ran Era in Alaska while she remained with the children in Washington, but that it was "a wonderful thing for our family."

Senator Stevens performed the dedication. He spoke with characteristic wit about his long friendship with Brady, recounting their years in the Alaska House and Senate and time spent fishing the Kenai Peninsula. He credited Brady with helping open Alaska to industry and opportunity, and challenged the crowd to "think about what this machine did for the state!" As he spoke, Brady rose and made his way to the podium, where the two men stood arm in arm, each with a hand on the microphone. At the dedication, the crowd gave him a thrilling ovation. Brady immediately seemed more interested in their curiosity.

"Does anyone have any questions?" he said. "What did you do when it rained?" someone said, pointing to the Bell's open cockpit.

"You got wet," Brady said. The crowd chuckled. Stevens then asked him, "Carl, why'd you do it all?"

"Because you took my place in the Senate," he said. The crowd roared, and Stevens beamed, happily upstaged.

That exchange was a reference to a well-known political legend in the state. In December 1968, after the U.S. Senator for Alaska E.L. Bartlett died in office, then-Governor Walter Hickel offered the empty seat to either Brady or Stevens. Left to arbitrate the matter themselves, they agreed that Stevens would go to Washington, D.C. As a token of loyalty, Stevens tore a dollar bill in half and insisted each man sign it. It was a "chip," he said, that Brady

could cash in whenever he needed. Stevens later framed the two halves of the bill, and they remain on display in the Brady's Anchorage home.

Helicopter Association International (HAI) was fortunate to have the opportunity to speak privately with Mr. and Mrs. Brady after the event, about the challenges and rewards they experienced building one of the country's finest aviation companies, and the gratitude they feel for having had the chance to do so.

HAI: One of the most interesting aspects of the ceremony yesterday was hearing about your early days as a businessman. We've read about ice cream shops, a restaurant in Yakima, and even heard something about a skating rink you drove around on the back of a flatbed truck. Where did your business career start? And how did helicopters figure in?

Carl Brady: Well, I jerked sodas most of my life, in high school and right after high school, and I ended up in Yakima, Washington doing that. When Bell Helicopters brought

the first commercial helicopter to Yakima, I became very interested in what the future of the helicopter would be; what it could be. So, I had myself and two partners start Economy Pest Control, and we crop dusted and did everything that could possibly be done with a helicopter. From landing on top of buildings, delivering mail and what not, to performing an air show, we did it.

HAI: What led you to work in Alaska?

Carl Brady: In 1948 the U.S. Geological Survey put out an experimental bid to map the northern half of Chichigof Island near Juneau. They had spent 7 years mapping the southern half, which is pretty smooth and level compared to the northern half, which is mostly peaks and valleys and that type of terrain. They offered me a contract to fly that area and carry the surveyors around. They did triangle mapping and had flat tables where they drew out the different directions of the landscape, and through the mountains and valleys and so forth. That was what they did

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in those days. They do it all by satellites these days, but that's how they did it back then.

HAI: Where did you get your first helicopter?

Carl Brady: There were two sons of farmers in Walla Walla, Washington, and their fathers had bought these two helicopters for them, to start their business with. For one reason or another, they failed.

We took over the helicopters from the parents, and told them we'd pay them 40 percent of the gross or something like that — it was a terrible amount — and of course we found out we couldn't do that. So we started on monthly payments, and did that and barely made it for a couple of years. We paid ourselves 300 dollars a month apiece, and that's what we lived on — my wife and I, and our family. Finally, in 1959 I had eleven helicopters in Alaska. My two partners each had one. They were tending to those two ships, and I was bringing in about 80 percent of the revenue from the ships in Alaska. Then I asked for some money off the top, after the division of the profits, and they refused, so that's the reason I started Economy Rotor Aids, which became Era.

HAI: Was it difficult to talk Roy Falconer and Joe Seward into that deal.

Carl Brady: No, they were very anxious to do it.

HAI: Were they already drilling for oil in Alaska at that time?

Carl Brady: Well mapping was the first reason we came. Then oil showed itself to be the developing future for Alaska, so we started working for the oil industry at that time, and we slowly got to where we were working one hundred percent for the industry. And, of course we ended up working full time with them.

HAI: How critical were helicopters to the development of the oil industry?

Carl Brady: In their seismic work and surface geology, it was the only way they could get around the country. I mean, there were no roads up here to speak of. There weren't in those days. We just continued to

service the industry by offering ourselves to the oil companies for the seismic programs and their surface geology programs.

HAI: Where did you find your pilots when you first started out?

Carl Brady: We actually depended on the military for the release of pilots, and there were some awfully good ones that came out of there. There were some pretty poor ones, too, but we screened them very closely, and eliminated those that didn't live up to our high standards.

HAI: What about mechanics? Was it hard to find good ones?

Carl Brady: Yes. The first ones we had were from Bell Helicopter, and they came with the product for the first year or so. Then we trained our own, primarily. We got ex-military mechanics who didn't have a license and we taught them how to get a license, and then used them as well.

HAI: Were there many pilots in Alaska when you got here?

Carl Brady: No. Most of the pilots wrote letters and applied for a job that way, sending in applications. We didn't run into too many of those pilots who were that great. We trained them particularly in mountain type flying, which we did a lot of, with sling loads, longline flying and firefighting, that type of thing.

HAI: One of the first things you notice when you look at that early Bell 47 at the airport is that it has wheels. Those wheels didn't have brakes did they? How did you land a helicopter with wheels on uneven terrain?

Carl Brady: Well, you had to find a level spot to land. The front wheels castered, the rear ones did not. And it would turn downhill no matter where you landed if there was any change in elevation.

HAI: Is that where the idea for skids came from?

Carl Brady: That was one of the main reasons they put skids on. As a matter of fact, we kind of invented the skids. In 1948, we had a sawmill operator in Pellican that cut us some 2 by 4s, and we wired them on with clothesline wire. We wired them wheel to wheel, forward to back, and

we landed on the tundra, on soft ground. I've got pictures somewhere of us landing on rock piles with the wheels 2 feet off the ground, supported by the 2 by 4 that was sitting on the rock. That became rather routine.

HAI: Did you start making your own skids?

Carl Brady: No, we got by with those until they started making their own.

HAI: What kind of challenges did the weather pose when you came to Alaska?

Carl Brady: The biggest problem was finding what direction the wind was from, because the helicopters were so underpowered that they couldn't land above five thousand feet without a possible turnover or accident of some kind. So you had to find where the wind was coming from at all times. We used to fly over rocks with water on them, or over a lake if we were near one, to look for ripples to see where the wind was coming from.

HAI: And the cold?

Carl Brady: Oh yeah. It was cold. (Laughs.) Especially in Southeast Alaska. It rained a lot. It was foggy a lot.

HAI: Did you have heat in the helicopter?

Carl Brady: We had our own heaters. We put a number 10 can over the exhaust with a flexible tubing coming into the cockpit that gave us some measure of heat. At least enough to keep the ice off of the windshield.

HAI: Could you fly in winter without heat in the aircraft?

Carl Brady: No, you couldn't. When we first started working on the North Slope — when we decided to make operations there — we'd take our oil to bed with us. In other words, we'd drain the oil out of the helicopter and put it near a stove. We took the batteries out and put them where it was warm. It took a couple of hours to get started in the mornings because of the things you had to watch out for. Particularly in the cold.

HAI: I guess there was a moose in one of the airport parking lots

recently. Given your range of operations in Alaska, have you had any run-ins with animals?

Carl Brady: Oh sure. Back in the days when we first started, we chased moose and black bear and brown bear all over the place. There were no rules against it in those days. I'll never forget, we have moving pictures of one moose that we chased that only had one horn. We chased him for over a mile.

And there were many a brown bear. I shot a bear once for a village when they were out of meat and couldn't afford to pay for meat that was coming in. They asked me when I was out looking for survey sites to shoot a bear, so I shot one and brought it in to camp, a quarter at a time. You couldn't carry much in a helicopter at that time.

In Yakima, Washington, I herded elk for several years, from 1950 to 1955. There's an article in an old mechanic's magazine somewhere calling me the helicopter cowboy for that.

HAI: Did you use counterweights in the aircraft in those days?

Carl Brady: Oh yeah, we did that in the Bell by moving the battery around. The back end, the front end, depending on the load. We did that quite a bit.

HAI: What about fuel?

Carl Brady: We carried that with us. We also had caches. The ex-governor of Alaska used to cache fuel for me. That was Jay Hammond, working for Exxon. We had fuel caches scattered around wherever we were working. You hired fixed wing to deliver those, usually. Then you'd carry a couple of 10-gallon cans with you all the time.

HAI: Was that regular gas?

Carl Brady: No, it was aviation fuel, although we used gas when we couldn't find anything else. On cross-country trips, for example. I've wheeled up to many a gas station to get gas for the helicopter, and then rolled it out on the highway and had somebody stop the traffic for me.

HAI: Have you ever run into some serious problems while

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