

March 2016



Fellow Twirly Birds:

Louisville, Kentucky was the scene for our most recent Twirly Bird reception following the opening day of Heli-Expo.

Twirly Bird and HAI President Matt Zuccaro greeted Heli-Expo attendees at the opening membership breakfast. Matt, a native of Manhattan, was unable to properly pronounce Louisville although he received personal coaching from both the Kentucky Governor and Louisville Mayor.

The Twirly Bird reception attendance numbers were down from previous years for several reasons: overall Heli-Expo attendance was down, the weather turned dramatically colder just before the reception, and Donald Trump held a rally at the Louisville Convention Center directly across the street from the Twirly Bird reception in the Marriott Hotel. For some reason "The Donald" forgot to check with the Twirly Birds before scheduling his rally.

Erstwhile Twirly Birds and official Twirly Bird photographers, Bob Petite and Jeff Evans, were turned away from the Marriott garage, by the Secret Service, presumably to protect Mr. Trump, but it may have been the prominently displayed Twirly Bird lapel pins that caused security concerns. In any case Jeff and Bob and several other Twirly Birds simply could not get to the meeting.

We opened the reception with the traditional silent toast to Twirly Birds who have gone west since the last Twirly Bird gathering including: Bobby Mulhall, Bill Gurley, Joe Gray, Jim Ricklefs and Eric "Winkle" Brown.

After returning home from Heli-Expo we were saddened to learn that Twirly Bird, Les Morris recipient, pioneer helicopter pilot and legendary helicopter test pilot, Leonard LaVassar passed away on February 29, 2016 in Philadelphia. Fortunately Twirly Bird and Helicopter Foundation Curator, Marty Pociask had recently completed a biography of Leonard, documenting some of his achievements and experiences. Part two of the article was published in the latest HAI ROTOR magazine.

Elling Halvorson received the Pathfinder Award for his significant contributions to the development of the aerospace industry. Elling was recognized for his early use of helicopters to support his construction projects, followed by his pioneering, and successful, effort to develop the helicopter tour industry. In true Twirly Bird tradition, Elling, and his wife Barbara, received a standing ovation by the Twirly Birds.

Two days prior to the reception, the FAA surprised Twirly Bird Gary Young, longtime instructor for the flight instructor refresher course (FIRC) at HAI HELI-EXPO, with the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award. FAA's James Viola, (who is also a Twirly Bird) and Steve Sparks presented the award to Gary during this year's FIRC.

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Gary Young earned his private pilot certificate on April 10, 1963, in a Cessna 150 in Amarillo, Texas. He served in Vietnam from 1965 to 1967. He joined Bell Helicopter upon his return, and worked at the Bell Training Academy until 2004. At Bell, Gary was an experimental/production pilot and chief flight instructor.

Young received the HAI Salute to Excellence award for flight instructor of the year in 1988. He has been the instructor for the HAI HELI-EXPO flight instructor refresher course since the 1990s.

After recognizing Gary, Twirly Bird, Bill Payne, Aviation Manager for Cal-Fire, (California's state fire fighting agency), reminded me that another Twirly Bird had recently received the Wright Master Pilot Award. Barry Lloyd has been a USFS/CDF fire carded pilot for over 33 years. He is a Certified Accident Investigator, an FAA Designated Pilot Examiner and A&P. He is also a CFI/CFII/ATP in both helicopters and fixed wing aircraft and is a recipient of the HAI 2008 Flight Instructor of the Year award

Barry served two eventful tours in Viet Nam, as an army helicopter pilot, where he acquired two purple hearts and numerous other medals.

The Wright Brothers **Master Pilot Award** recognizes pilots who have demonstrated professionalism, skill and aviation expertise by maintaining safe operations for 50 or more years.

In Louisville we recognized two new Twirly Bird Associate members: Mark Gibson, President and CEO of Timberland Helicopters in Ashland, Oregon, and Chris Erickson, the Chief Repair Station Officer/ Accountable Manager for Erickson Air Crane. Both Mark and Chris have served on the HAI Board and as Chairman of the HAI in addition to serving on numerous other boards and committees related to the Helicopter Industry.

The 50/50 raffle, organized by Twirly Bird Kelley Parlier, helps offset the cost of the reception expense. This year the "Gallant Leader" drew his own ticket, but knowing full well that he might suffer serious health problems if he helped himself to 50% of the raffle money, he drew another ticket. This ticket was held by Twirly Bird Sharon Desfor who graciously, (isn't she always gracious), donated her share of the raffle proceeds back to the Twirly Bird treasurer, Dennis, aka, honest John, MacBain so he would not have to pay for the reception out of his own pocket.

The 2016 Les Morris recipient is Mel O'Reilly, founder of Eagle Helicopters, Calgary, Alberta. Mel was introduced by the CEO of Eagle Helicopters, Barry Kohler. Barry did a great job of conveying the depth, integrity, and pioneering efforts of Mel as he built Eagle Helicopters while maintaining the attributes of a small family business. Several of Mel's supporters, friends, and employees joined us to honor Mel. Past HAI Chairman, Bob McNab, who has known Mel for several years, drove seven hours that day, just to be at the reception honoring Mel.

Long time Twirly Bird and son of Twirly Bird founder member Igor Sikorsky was present to present the Les Morris award to Mel. Sergei knew Les Morris who was the first helicopter test pilot and the first helicopter instructor, if in Les's own words, "you do not count Sergei's father, Igor Sikorsky, who was truly the first helicopter test pilot and first helicopter flight instructor".

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The following two days at Heli-Expo several attendees sought me out and told me that they could not think of a person more deserving to be recognized for his contributions to helicopter industry than Mel O'Reilly.

Twirly Bird and Les Morris Award recipient, Hal Syms sent me a note expressing regret at not making his usual appearance at Heli-Expo and the Twirly Bird reception. Hal is making a slow recovering from cataract surgery. Hal notes that he took his 25 hours of helicopter training in "NC1H", the first helicopter off the Bell production line. Over his career, Hal acquire 15,000 helicopter hours and 2,500 hours in fixed wing. In his spare time, Hal flew in the Air Force Reserve where he attained the rank of Lt. Colonel.

All Twirly Birds should be aware that HAI offers a free subscription to ROTOR magazine and ROTOR Daily @ e-newsletter. You can subscribe at [rotor.org/subscribe](http://rotor.org/subscribe). The latest Rotor magazine offers part two of the Helicopter Heritage series featuring Twirly Bird, Leonard LaVassar. This issue (Winter 2016) also contains an obituary for Twirly Bird and HAI founder, Jim Ricklefs. Twirly Bird, Marty Pociask, Helicopter Foundation Curator, authored both of these articles as part of the HFI Heritage Series. Thanks Marty for putting so much time and effort into recognizing, interviewing, and documenting the lives of helicopter pioneers.

Twirly Bird, Jon Kettles, also contributes to ROTOR; "Your Aviation Lawyer". Jon will be available at future receptions to autograph copies of ROTOR.

And I would be remiss if I did not remind you at another Twirly Bird supporter and excellent source of industry news is VERTICAL magazine. Vertical also provides a daily update, ([Vertical Daily News dailynews@verticalmag.com](mailto:dailynews@verticalmag.com)]).

### LEONARD J. LAVASSAR

Leonard J. LaVassar, 97, a helicopter test pilot and aviation industry pioneer, died Monday, Feb. 29, of pneumonia at Brandywine Senior Living at Haverford Estates.

Mr. LaVassar learned to fly with the federal government's Civilian Pilot Training Program in 1938. He was a pilot for Pan American Ferries, transporting military equipment to Africa, before he joined the Navy in July 1942, hoping to see combat in World War II. Instead, the Navy trained him as a flight instructor, and he became so skilled that he was sent to train pilots at the Naval Air Station near Peru, Ind., said niece Margaret "Meg" Bowden Wolf.

He was honorably discharged in December 1946 with the rank of lieutenant.

Afterward, Mr. LaVassar and several Navy colleagues were hired by Bell Laboratories and sent to Argentina to work for that country's president, Juan D. Perón, who had bought a fleet of helicopters. The Americans trained Argentine pilots to fly the choppers.

Mr. LaVassar's next job was at Piasecki Aircraft Corp., later renamed Boeing Vertol. He led a team of more than 100 employees working on the company's test flights, primarily for helicopters. After 33 years, he retired from Boeing in 1983.

It was dangerous work, and in one instance, the copter crashed, but neither he nor his copilot, whom Mr. LaVassar had urged to wear a helmet, was hurt. "He was careful," his niece said.

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Mr. LaVassar had 11 "first flights" on a variety of aircraft, from the Piasecki H-21 Workhorse "flying banana" tandem-rotor helicopter in 1952 to the Model 347 winged Chinook prototype in 1972.

In 1957, Mr. LaVassar made the first test flight of the Vertol VZ-2 tilt-rotor aircraft, "conducted entirely in vertical flight mode," according to an online air and space history.

He followed that feat a year later with the first horizontal VZ-2 flight, and for the next several months continued to test the craft at Vertol's facilities in Morton. "During its initial flights, tufts of string covered much of the VZ-2's external surfaces to aid in the determination of airflow at various wing angles," according to the aviation history site.

Mr. LaVassar tested the earliest prototypes of the Ch-47 Chinook from 1958 to 1961, when he again made history.

"The second prototype for the Chinook 47A helicopter was finished in June 1961 and was the first Chinook to fly - first a hover on 21 September 1961 piloted by Vertol test pilot Leonard LaVassar, and its first official flight on 19 October from the Vertol Flight Test Facility at Philadelphia Airport," according to a history of Chinook development. The aircraft was delivered to the Army in 1964.

Born in Johnson City, N.Y., he was the son of Peter Napolian and Margaret Agnes LaVassar. Before taking up flying, he worked in accounting for International Business Machines Corp. in Endicott, N.Y.

Mr. LaVassar married Elizabeth Rigney. They moved to Media and, later, West Chester. She died in 2003. The couple's only child, Lisbeth Ann, 21, died in 1977 in a car accident in St. Joseph County, Ind. At the time, she was a senior French major at St. Mary's College there.

He spent the initial years of his retirement at Hershey's Mill, where he was known as "the most elegant gentleman, beautifully dressed with a tie, always helping people. He was known as the Fred Astaire of Hershey's Mill," his niece said.

There were no other survivors.

A visitation will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday, March 3, at the Donohue Funeral Home, 1627 West Chester Pike, West Chester. Burial is private.

Contributions may be made to Helicopter Foundation International, 1920 Ballenger Ave., Alexandria, Va. 22314, for ongoing research into Mr. LaVassar's career

## CAPT ERIC "WINKLE" BROWN

The Royal Navy's most decorated pilot, Capt Eric "Winkle" Brown, has died at the age of 97.

Capt Brown also held the world record for flying the greatest number of different types of aircraft - 487.

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During World War Two, Capt Brown, who was born in Leith in 1919, flew fighter aircraft and witnessed the liberation of Bergen Belsen concentration camp.

The pilot, who had been appointed MBE, OBE and CBE, died at East Surrey Hospital after a short illness.

A statement released by his family said: "It is with deep regret that the passing of Captain Eric Melrose Brown CBE DSC AFC is announced.

"Eric was the most decorated pilot of the Fleet Air Arm in which service he was universally known as 'Winkle' on account of his diminutive stature.

"He also held three absolute Guinness World Records, including for the number of aircraft carrier deck landings and types of aeroplane flown."

Capt Brown was educated at Edinburgh's Royal High School, before studying at the University of Edinburgh, where he learned to fly.

He had caught the bug for flying at the age of eight when his father, a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps during World War One, took him up in a bi-plane.

"There was no second seat, but I sat on his lap and he let me handle the stick," he told the BBC in 2014.

"It was exhilarating. You saw the earth from a completely different standpoint."

He retired from the Royal Navy in 1970 but became the director general of the British Helicopter Advisory Board and later the president of the Royal Aeronautical Society in 1982.

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### **Landmark life**

- Flew 487 different types of aircraft, a world record that is unlikely ever to be matched
- Piloted 2,407 aircraft carrier landings
- Appointed MBE, OBE and CBE
- Survived 11 plane crashes and the sinking of HMS Audacity in 1941
- Met Churchill and King George VI numerous times
- Was at the liberation of Bergen Belsen
- Interrogated some of the leading Nazis after the war, including Heinrich Himmler, Hermann Goering and Belsen's chief guards Josef Kramer and Irma Grese

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Capt Brown wrote numerous books of his own and forewords for other authors on the theme of aviation, before and after his retirement.

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In March 2015 a bronze bust of him was unveiled at the Fleet Air Arm Museum in Somerset.

At his 97th birthday celebration in London on 27 January he was joined by more than 100 pilots, including the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir George Zambellas.

In 2014, the war veteran was picked as the subject for the **3,000th edition of Desert Island Discs**, during which he was described by presenter Kirsty Young as a "real life hero" and a "remarkable, dare-devil".

"When you read through his life story, it makes James Bond seem like a bit of a slacker," she said.

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Twirly Birds! Please introduce a qualified friend to the Twirly Birds.

"ASSOCIATE MEMBER: Those who have been selected by a duly appointed committee of General Members as having made significant and noteworthy contributions to helicopter or other vertical take-off flight through exemplary dedication and devotion."

Please nominate a qualified individual as an Associate member. There are many non pilots who have contributed so much to this industry. The Associate Committee will consider all who are nominated to join as Associate members.

Please send us your news, and updates for this newsletter. Your fellow pioneer helicopter pilots would appreciate hearing from you.

DUES: Annual dues are \$10.00. Dues are used to pay for mailing the newsletter to those Twirly Birds who do not have an e-mail address. Dues are also used to buy TB pins, TB certificates, and partially fund the reception at Heli-Expo. Please send your dues to Treasurer Dennis MacBain, 4525 Leon Street, San Diego, CA 92107

The Twirly Bird web site has a 16 page History entitled Looking Back At HELICOPTER PIONEERS And the Birth Of An Industry. It is a fascinating firsthand account written by Jim Ricklefs that should be required reading for all Twirly Birds.

Twirly Bird Roger Gould has devoted a huge amount of time, effort, and his money to develop the Twirly Bird web page, please take the time to open the web page and read about the Twirly Birds. ([twirlybirds.org](http://twirlybirds.org)). We should have the 2016 Louisville reception pictures posed in a few weeks.

If you are not receiving this newsletter via e-mail please send your e-mail address to Dennis MacBain, [macdennis@att.net](mailto:macdennis@att.net), so that we can add you to the e-mail list.

KEEP YOUR ROTOR IN THE GREEN!  
Steve Sullivan