



The First Helicop

Contrary to popular fable some areas of Britain in the years immediately after the Second World War were less tranquil than memories have suggested. As the indigenous population came to terms with the unfamiliar peace so did a number of foreign groups, large and small, ranging from those formerly in the military to refugees and displaced persons faced with making important decisions about their future without the stability of a home base. With Europe ravaged by the effects of the recent conflict housing, any housing, was at a premium and many were starving. In addition, many of the more distant states, including Poland, were falling under the iron grip of Stalin's Communists and large numbers were unsure whether to leave Britain even though at that time the situation was bleak and the amount of financial support represented a massive contrast to the degree of support offered to migrants from the same region sixty years later under European Union rules. This situation led to a number of the temporary population resorting to crime merely to survive.

On Monday June 2, 1947 it was announced that three Polish soldiers had escaped from Norwich Prison during the previous Friday night and Saturday morning [May 30-31] and were on the run in East Anglia. The three, were Teodor KUTCZ who was awaiting deportation, Władysław BEIJECKI and 22 years old Stanisław ZOBROWSKI a battle hardened young soldier who had recently been sentenced to 9 months imprisonment at Suffolk Assizes for theft of tobacco at Livermore near High Ash, Suffolk.

The following day it was reported that police officers keeping watch on an abandoned stolen car were fired at when they approached it. A STEN light machine gun was thought to have been used. KUTCZ was subsequently recaptured and arms were issued to officers engaged on the search. For officers unused to arming themselves for their civil policing duties these weapons were an ad-hoc range of country weapons, mainly shotguns, and war surplus revolvers and not well suited for taking on a battle hardened ex-soldier with an automatic weapon.

On Wednesday June 11 two Norfolk police officers, including PC Walter Brown of Weeting, were fired at in Mundham. One man, Ronald SPALEK, was arrested and taken to Methwold police station. He was remanded at Methwold Court on June 17, charged with shooting PC Brown with intent to murder. It appears that he joined up with the others at some stage after the break-out but this is unclear and there may have been no connection other than an assumption on the part of the newspaper. On the same day as the shooting was taking place in Norfolk events in South London were to bring about the employment of a helicopter in support of the police in England for the first time. It is probable that this was also to be the first operational use of a developed helicopter by police in the world.

Helicopters were new to the world at large. Although the German's had flown a helicopter before the war they had seen relatively little use during the conflict. In January 1944 a Sikorsky helicopter based in Brooklyn, New York was used by the Coast Guard to fly blood plasma to injured crewmen to the USS Turner after the destroyer suffered an explosion off the coast of New Jersey. Later in the same year another helicopter had rescued a youth marooned on a sand bar off New York and undertaken combat rescue missions in the Far East, in these instances the helicopter had landed to take on the additional passengers.



One of the early helicopter designs—the Sikorsky R4 designated the HNS-1 in US Coast Guard Service [CG 39040].

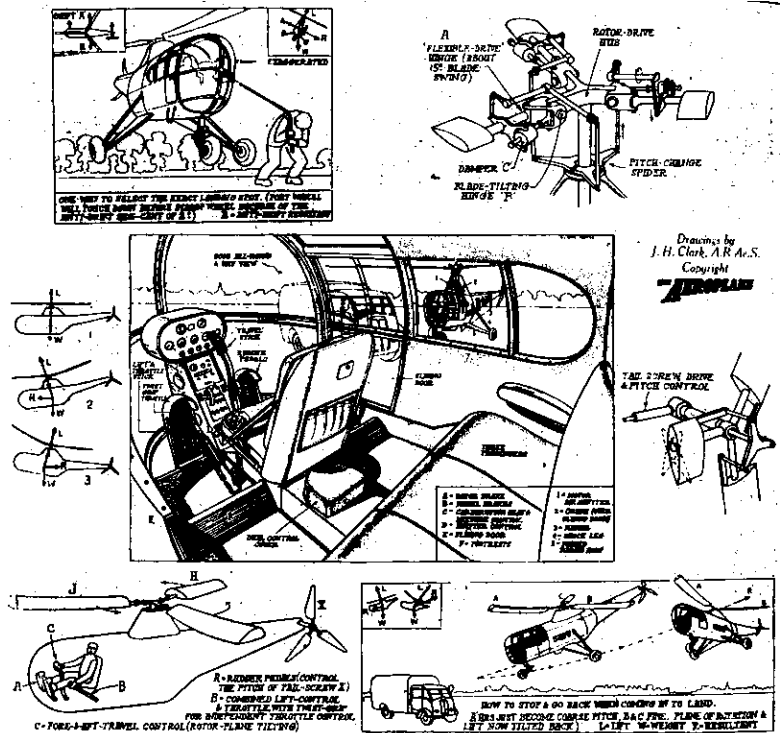
Presaging one of the primary roles undertaken by the helicopter in the future, in late November 1945 a Sikorsky R-5 used a winch and simple loop harness to undertake the first civilian rescue of two men stranded on an oil barge which had struck a reef in Long Island Sound off Fairfield, Connecticut. The technique was then so new that the machine used was one operating experimentally from the manufacturer's factory nearby. This was its first operational use. Significantly, although they did not take a direct part in it, the operation was undertaken at the bidding of the local police.

It seemed that every mission by helicopters in the mid-1940s was producing “firsts”. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean helicopters were in limited service, but little known to the British public. The British police had become familiar with the autogyro before the war and the military were using small numbers of early helicopters designed by Sikorsky in the USA and brought over for operational trial. Westland's the Yeovil based aircraft manufacturer moved towards building helicopters designed by others and eventually became the sole major helicopter manufacturer in the UK. Not having its own design capability for the new aircraft it entered into an arrangement with Sikorsky in the USA to build their helicopters under licence.

The first Westland licence built example of the S51 was not to be airborne until 1948, before the UK manufacturer built its own version they bought a total of six from the US production line as

pattern aircraft. In June 1947 there were only two civil Sikorsky S-51s in the UK, one was G-AJHW and the other, G-AJOO. G-AJHW first flew in the USA on February 18, 1947 and, dismantled and crated, was delivered to England by sea, arriving at Westland's Yeovil factory on April 14th. As a tried and tested type already in the USA although it only first flew in the UK on April 18 it received its UK C of A on the 24th. From that point on the it was used for manufacturer's trials and as a demonstration aircraft. After brief military trials in 1948-49 it returned to civil use with BEA and eventually left the UK for Canada in 1957. The second example was re-flown in Britain on June 6, the S-51 was not to be delivered to a British civil operator - British European Airways [BEA] until August 21 1947, more than two months later.

The Aeroplane artists illustrated the main features of the WS51



As the police in Norfolk were under fire on that Wednesday June 11, Westland brought both of its new helicopters to land on the tennis courts of the Harrods Sports Club in Barnes, South London, to present them to the press. The first machine was flown by Squadron Leader Alan Bristow and the second by Squadron Leader LP "Pete" Garner, they were there for two days undertaking a number of trips over London for press photographers including those of the London based national the *Daily Express*. During this presentation Superintendent N Garner of the Norfolk Constabulary accompanied his son, Peter Garner, an ex-Mosquito night fighter pilot and assistant experimental test pilot with Westland Aircraft, in being flown over London in the Sikorsky S-51 G-AJHW by Alan Bristow the Chief Pilot for Westland. The air experience flight was to have far reaching effects. In this report the Superintendent was quoted as saying "Helicopters will be of wide value to the police in making arrests or rescues".



Soon made aware of dire twists involving the search taking place in his own police area and now aware of the potential capabilities of the helicopter, on June 14, Superintendent Garner broached the question of a possible loan of a helicopter by the Norfolk Police with Peter. The request was

passed on to the aircraft company and Westland promptly agreed to the free loan of their new machine as a public service and as a marketing exercise. Underlining the urgency of the situation, there were further news reports on June 14 and 16 which relate to break-ins at Methwold and Thetford. At the latter incident shots were fired when a man was disturbed attempting to steal a car.

As Westland's senior pilot, Alan Bristow was sent to Feltwell in S-51 G-AJHW on June 15 1947. Following three years as a Fleet Air Arm pilot and nearly two years in the Westland test piloting post, in a period when rotary wing pilots were rare Bristow was an experienced helicopter pilot. He qualified on the novel type at the US Coastguard base at Floyd Bennett Field in June/July 1944 on the Sikorsky YR4. At the time Idlewild Airport [later to be renamed John F Kennedy] was being built on a site immediately adjacent.



Alan Bristow, in the doorway of the helicopter, and the rest of the Westland Aircraft helicopter development team with the WS-51 as a backdrop. Alan's wife is standing in front of him. [Westland]

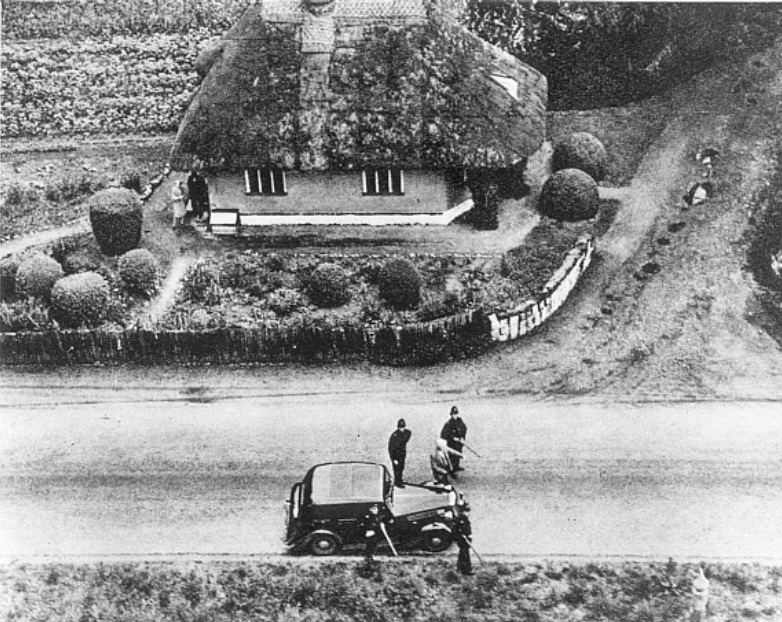
The novel police operation attracted the attention of *Daily Express* photographer Walter Bellamy and he accompanied Alan Bristow and Methwold based Inspector Brunson in the S-51 to search an area of East Anglia where the Poles were last reported. Brunson was armed with a .38 Webley revolver.

The search area decided, the trio flew a "creeping line ahead" flight pattern over the area. Alan Bristow saw smoke arising from a shack in a heavily wooded area. As it was unusual to see smoke coming from what appeared to be a gamekeepers shed in summer, the helicopter circled the site reducing altitude to about 150 feet above the shed until a suspect on the ground opened up with a 12 bore shotgun, fortunately without damaging the helicopter. The inspector called in ground support forces and the armed suspect, probably BEIJECKI, was captured shortly afterwards. Throughout two and a half days of searching for the renegade Poles the news photographer was on hand, event occurring on Sunday June 15 appearing on the front page of the following morning's paper. Other photographs taken from the helicopter of searching officers on the ground appeared in *The Sphere* June 28. These came to light in the papers of the late PC Mitchell who played a subsidiary part in the search. The *Daily Express* picture of Inspector Brunson sitting in the helicopter with his Webley .38 pistol to the fore originally came from his son, a retired sergeant with the police in Great Yarmouth.



On Wednesday June 18 local and military police raided a Polish re-settlement camp at High Ash and arrested 53 people. Twelve pistols were seized. The following day, June 19 it was reported that a dishevelled man, identified as Zabrowski, was seen with Polish soldiers at North Bodney Polish Camp. A green Polish Military motor-cycle and several army pay books were stolen from the camp. Armed police searched the military battle training area and a warning was put out that he was believed to be armed with a razor. The following day many of the newspapers carried a picture of the young fugitive.

That weekend, Saturday June 21 the newspaper carried a first report on the resettlement camp



raid and reported that the search area was being widened with officers now working from their own beats rather than assembling at Thetford daily as had been the case previously. At this stage the newspapers stated that army had not been called in although there had been reports of military personnel volunteering their services. One such was that an RAF warrant officer and a corporal from the 14/20th Hussars had started searching in their own time using an ex-US Army command vehicle.

Stanislaw Zabrowski had remained on the run for a total of 23 days, when he was finally recaptured in Essex on June 22. Zobrowski was captured in Rochford, Southend-on-Sea, following an thwarted attempt at breaking into a car. He had fired shots when disturbed attempting to steal a car at Southchurch and was later spotted by the local vicar in Rochford. The capture was affected by Detective Inspector Hempson assisted by around a dozen other officers. The detective jumped out of a car whilst passing him on the road. He offered no resistance, but when taken into custody he still possessed a German Luger pistol and six rounds of ammunition.



The following day he was in front of the Magistrates at Southend and remanded into the custody of DI Kybird and DC West from Norfolk. The next day he was remanded at Methwold Magistrates on the next stage of his return to prison.

Peter Garner, the pilot who appears to have facilitated this, the first recorded use of a helicopter in police work, was still acting as Test Pilot to the Westland company when he was killed on October 15, 1947. During an air-to air photographic sortie, Peter was piloting Westland Wyvern fighter prototype TS375 when the propeller failed. Alan Bristow was flying nearby in G-AJHW when Pete called him up and reported the failure and seizure of the translational bearing between the contra rotating propellers. Faced with the enormous drag presented by the six stationery propeller blades, Pete elected to stay with the aircraft and managed to bring the large aircraft into a perfect wheels up approach to a long narrow field near Yetminster as Alan headed towards his position. As the helicopter approached all appeared to be going well as the stricken Wyvern approached what was probably the best field in the area to put down in. The fighter rushed along the ground on its belly rapidly losing speed, crashed through a dividing hedge into an adjacent field. Unfortunately, one of the propeller blades came off and smashed through the windscreen and killed Pete. Alan landed nearby, but it was too late.





A few days after the Norfolk search, on June 19, Alan Bristow again accompanied the press photographer on a *Daily Express* chartered flight to a crime scene. On this occasion the pair set off from Croydon in G-AJHW in search of a man and a woman who were reported lying naked amongst the bracken and bushes somewhere unspecified on Epsom Downs. After two runs over the area they found the couple and directed members of the Metropolitan Police to the exact location. This incident featured searching police officers on the front page of the following days *Daily Express*. The incident was quickly resolved to have been a suicide pact. The photographs taken on this sortie were sped to London, delivered by air, when the pair landed on Horse Guards Parade immediately afterwards.

On August 12 1947 Bristow was again the pilot when G-AJHW was used in an abortive search for a prisoner reported to have escaped from Princetown Prison, Dartmoor. Accompanied by locally based Inspector Turner, Alan flew search patterns in a 20 mile radius around the prison before abandoning the task.

Continuing the police theme he also took the S51 to Number 4 Police Training centre Ryton-on-Dunsmore, Warwickshire, for demonstration on September 25, 1947. Alan gave the police officers at the training school a short talk on how he believed the helicopter could be an advantage to police in their work. Chief Constables Bond, Jackson and Young each took a demonstration flight in the helicopter. This recently re-established training school was situated in a former displaced person's camp and was tasked with the training of recruits and other ranks. Later there were to be other aerial visits to the same location which maintained an association with police aviation into the 21st Century.

Alan Bristow left Westland in 1949 and went on to work in France with the appropriately named Helicop Air from 1949-51. After a number of other adventures at the forefront of integrating helicopters into the flying community, in 1954 he set up the company that was to represent his life's work - Bristow Helicopters. In 1966 he was awarded the OBE and retired to Sussex until his death in 2009. It is worth noting that the pilots of the South East Regional Police Air Support Unit, which covered London and Surrey at that time were contracted from the company which Alan Bristow formed although by that time it was in American ownership.

The first police helicopter pilot Alan Bristow a few years before his death in 2009 [PAR]



OTHER CONTENDERS

Czechoslovakia was a country born out of political expediency. In 1993 the former nation split into two and became the Czech and Slovakian Republic's. Police aviation in the formerly united countries has been traced back to the use of a SPAD bi-plane fighter under unknown circumstances in 1920. Before the Second World War the nation had undertaken extensive law enforcement flying from the 1930s until the nation was engulfed by the Nazi war machine during March 1939. The aircraft employed by the military structured Czechoslovak Gendarmerie [Cetnicke Letecke hlfdky] included a number of aircraft types which clearly indicate a military background. The Skoda D-1, Aero AP-32, Avia B-534 and Letov S-328 were all types appropriate to military service as spotter planes and fighters.

After the cessation of hostilities the nation acquired a number of war surplus aircraft from the British, Russians and the Germans on which to build up a new defence and air police structure. In the immediate post war years Czechoslovakia allocated a number, at least five, Supermarine Spitfire LFIXe fighters for duties with the Bezpecnostni lectectvo [Frontier Patrol], operated as the type S-89. Flying alongside these were other war surplus types including the Avia S-99, S-199 and the S-97. The S-99 and the S-199 were better known as late production examples of the Messerschmitt Bf109 and the S-97 was actually the Russian Lavockin La-7.

Most of the aircraft used had been manufactured in Czechoslovakia in support of the war effort of the invaders. Where the S-89 was a complete and standard Spitfire imported from Britain the S-199 was a hybrid of the locally built Bf109 featuring a Junkers Jumo 211F engine in place of the original Daimler-Benz DB605 which was no longer available. Unfortunately the less powerful Jumo was more at home on a bomber, it was considerably heavier and the larger three blade propeller produced such increased torque that the original vertical stabiliser and rudder could barely cope, especially on take-off and landing. The S-199 was known locally as the Mezec - or Mule - a name which aptly described its capabilities. The change in engine reportedly resulted in the former 400mph fighter being restricted to around 200mph. Many of these Avia's, disliked by the Czech military, and clearly of little tactical use were supplied to the police. Other examples were sold to the fledgling Israeli Air Force in total disregard of an existing, UN-imposed, arms embargo. It can be assumed that this move was primarily to get rid of them, the customer in Israel having little choice in the types it acquired with the world against it. The aircraft were not a success there and were later replaced in Israeli service by Spitfires also supplied from Czech stocks.

The employment of these unusually aggressive types for police patrol was apparently out of place in peacetime but, in essence, they were only late 1940s equivalents of the military surplus types operated by the German and Austrian police in the immediate post Great War years and the obsolescent Bf109B fighters operating with the Germans earlier in the decade. The former combatant types remained in service alongside locally produced examples of other German aircraft including the Fiesler Fi-156C Storch spotter [the Mraz K-65 Kap] and the Arado Ar-96B trainer [the Avia C2B] into the early 1950s. Operating alongside these former fighting aircraft on police duties was an Avia VR-1 helicopter. As with the Avia fighter types the type designation hid the work of a German manufacturer.



The Focke-Wulf Fw 61 flew in 1936. The Germans came to the forefront of rotary wing flight with this machine, the world's first practical helicopter, which gave a convincing demonstration of helicopter flight. The designer, Doctor Focke, had gained rotary wing experience through the German building of Autogiro's under licence to Cierva. The Fw 61 was an ungainly but efficient craft featuring side-by-side fully articulated rotors on outriggers, a feature that removed the need for a tail rotor. Cyclic pitch was used for directional control and collective pitch for lateral control. The Fw 61 was developed into the Focke Achelis Fa 223 during the war years, most of the production examples being destroyed by Allied bombing.

At the end of the war the battered remains of the Nazi war machine was stripped bare and examples of any type displaying a modicum of technological advance were sent to the four corners of the earth. After the Allies had taken their fill of the nine year old Focke-Wulf helicopter production line Czechoslovakia was allowed to pick over the remains of a few examples. After the now dated helicopter design was re-worked by the former Avia aircraft factory technicians, now operating as Ceskoslovenske Zavody Letecke [CZL]. Two examples of the German design re-appeared in the air as the Avia VR-1 and VR-3. Overshadowed by later examples of helicopter technology, it was not a successful metamorphosis.

In the spring of 1948, a single example, the VR-1 OK-BZX, was released to the Ministry of the Interior. From March 12, 1948 [some six months prior to the setting up of the NYPD helicopter operations] the Avia was made available for law enforcement duties with such as the Bezpecnostni lectectvo. It officially entered service in the April and was finally written off in 1949 - just as police helicopter operations were getting into full swing on the east coast of the USA. Another ten years were to pass before helicopters re-entered Czech law enforcement use.



In 1947 the New York Police Department [NYPD], arguably the first US air support unit formed, became the first recognised police air unit to seek to operate helicopters on a long term basis. A single Bell 47D, NC201B, equipped with large pontoon floats was delivered for trial operations from the NYPD facility on the edge of the US Navy Floyd Bennett air base, commencing in September 1948. The specifying of the pontoons on the new helicopter reflected both a long tradition of operating amphibious aircraft and an acknowledgement of a degree of uncertainty surrounding the reliability of the single piston engine powering the machine over a police area which included a large proportion of water. The last thing anyone wanted was to lose the pioneering craft in New York harbour through engine failure.

In the period when helicopters were being introduced the unit had a strength of seventeen, seven pilots and ten mechanics. Credit to being the first recognised civilian police helicopter pilot is given to Gustav "Gus" Crawford of the NYPD. Gus was born in New Brunswick, New York State, before the Great War but started his flying career in Kansas in 1929. Thwarted in his attempts to become an airline pilot by the stock market crash he returned to New York and, with many others, applied for a job with the newly formed NYPD aviation unit, or Air Bureau, in 1930. He failed, but finally secured a position as a foot patrol cop in 1932. When the air unit was re-activated after a brief closure in 1939, Gus tried again and this time was taken on as one of the six pilots, by 1945 he was the commanding officer of the Air Bureau.

In 1946 Gus Crawford was selected to go to Bell Aircraft Corporation in Niagara, New York State to learn about helicopters in order that he might advise the city officials about their possible uses for a variety of tasks - including mail transportation and police work. After a month he was back in the city, not only with a helicopter licence, but with an instructor certificate also. He was so convinced of their worth that it was not long before he set about convincing Mayor O'Dwyer that the police should have them on trial as a rescue craft. His recommendation was accepted. Initially three pilots were trained to fly the helicopter with others being added to the total. In 1949 the unit undertook 300 individual missions, including 63 responses to distress calls from boats.



Shortly after the introduction of this Bell helicopter, on March 30, 1949, four prisoners' escaped from the Riker's Island Penitentiary in the East River. Called in, the helicopter flew low over the island searching roofs, docks and exposed shores where the prisoners might have secreted themselves. A task that ordinarily took a large squad of men a whole day to accomplish, it took only fifteen minutes to search the whole of the island. A number of further irregular air searches were operated throughout the day. The following day the escapees surrendered to the authorities on the island. Although safely concealed from the prying eyes of the helicopter crew beneath a dock, they had been constantly aware of its presence and had been unable to make a run for it without fear of being spotted.

Although this incident did not in itself promote the observation capabilities of the helicopter above that already proven by fixed wing aircraft over twenty years of local operations, it was a good start. Even intermittent search patterns had an effect upon the target way in excess of the actual capabilities of the aircraft and crew. An ability to hover above a potential hiding place further heightened this perception of imminent discovery by the hunted.

In June 1950 the first helicopter was withdrawn from service and replaced by three newer Bell 47s offering a slightly enhanced specification. The three helicopters continued to operate alongside the fixed wing Grumman amphibians until November 1955, at which time the helicopter fleet had grown to a total of six. The helicopter having proven its overall supremacy, the fixed wing element of the NYPD operation was finally withdrawn.

For the best part of the last 50 years the introduction of the helicopter into NYPD service has been accepted without question as the world's first law enforcement helicopter operation to be set up. In the light of the other information there may be some doubt about this, but there remains no dispute that the NYPD remains the originator of the first successful long term use of the new type of aircraft in police service.