

## “Flying Finns”

“Flying Finns” is the story of the first 50 years of Columbia Helicopters.

Company founder, Wes Lematta, chose the title for two reasons: he wanted to salute his brothers for their contributions to Columbia Helicopters, and he wanted to honor their Finnish heritage. At home, the brothers spoke their native language before they spoke English—a not uncommon occurrence in first and second generation American families.

The brothers—Ed, Wes, Bill and Jim are the sons of Ed and Hilda Paso Lematta. Their father farmed near Ellendale, North Dakota for many years before ill winds born of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl forced the family to move west to Brush Prairie, near Vancouver, Washington in 1934.

The Lematta and Paso families emigrated from Finland to Minnesota—a popular destination for Finnish families—in the 1880s. Grandfather Herman Lematta and his brother Peter later immigrated to North Dakota. Grandsons Ed, Wes, and Bill were born on the family farm near Ellendale. Jim, the youngest, was born at Brush Prairie.

Wes, 8; Ed, 12; Bill, 6, and their sisters, Mabel, 11, and Evelyn, 9 rode with their uncles from North Dakota to Brush Prairie in the back of the family pickup. Wes remembers that their father fashioned a wooden canopy from lumber that was later used to construct a sauna—a Finnish staple—at Brush Prairie. Jim recalls that he accidentally burned the sauna to the ground when he was a boy.

Wes taught his brothers to fly helicopters—probably in hopes they would join him at Columbia. And for a time, they all did. Jim remembers that in 1965 all four were flying from the company’s Swan Island facility.

Ed, the oldest brother, loaned Wes the money to start Columbia Helicopters, but he later moved to Seattle’s Boeing Field where he formed Olympic Helicopters, a Columbia subsidiary until Ed bought out his brothers. He died in 2000.



*The Lematta brothers (clockwise from left) Wes, Ed, Bill and Jim*

Bill drove truck with Wes during the lean years when Columbia was in its infancy. When the company acquired the Hughes helicopter franchise, Bill took over sales, a job that included a good deal of flying. In later years, he worked for Hughes, again in sales. He was returning from a 1973 business trip to Coos Bay when he was stung by a bee and died on Interstate 5 near Coburg, Oregon.

Wes taught Jim to fly in 1959. Because he was not yet 21 years old, he had to get his puzzled father’s written permission to take flight lessons. Jim joined the company in 1963, after he got out of the Army. He holds the distinction of having flown at Light’s Creek in northern California and Lobster Creek in southern Oregon, Columbia’s first two helicopter logging jobs, both in 1971. Jim stepped out of his flying role in 1972 to start the company’s safety department, a post he held until he retired in 1996. He still sits on Columbia’s board of directors.

Marvin Edward, Glenn Wesley, George Willard and James Raymond Lematta were all pretty good helicopter pilots in their heyday, but “Flying Finns” is much more than a story about four Finnish brothers who flew helicopters into history. There are other fine ethnic names in this bloodline too: Simmons, Lazzaretti, Petersen, Dyche, Van Kempen, Stroup, Weir, Artache, Merlich, Coates, Van Wallegghem, Koehnke, Charlier, Vecchetti, Pittelkau, Steckmest, Fahey, Koschnick, Pyle, Horrax, Nicklaus, Patterson, Warren, Grage, Feaver, Artache, Schwartz, McCoy, Hagen, Cook, Immel, Sumerlin, Lance, Davey, Bailey, Briggs and on and on. So in the full sweep of life, this is a story about how Finns, Italians, Germans, Poles, Czechs, French, Hispanics, Swedes, Norwegians, Irishmen, Englishmen and many others became one in the crucible that is our country’s fabled melting pot—joined together to form something larger than themselves; and then, like eagles, soared on American wings to undreamed-of heights.

# Foreword

I met Wes Lematta over a bowl of clam chowder at a roadside café on the outskirts of Gold Beach, Oregon in the summer of 1971. I was there to gather information for a story I was writing on helicopter logging. He was there to make history.

Another helicopter legend-to-be joined us for lunch that fateful afternoon: Jack Erickson, the son of a larger-than-life California logger named Axel Erickson, the first logger I ever knew who owned an airplane.

Wes and Jack were partners in a venture created to test the feasibility of logging with Sikorsky's giant S-64 Skycrane. They had leased one of the machines from Sikorsky and intended to put it to work on a federal timber sale on Lobster Creek, several miles up the Rogue River from Gold Beach.

The sale was strictly experimental, part of the U.S. Forest Service's Falcon program. Falcon was an acronym for Forest Advanced Logging and Conservation Program, a much ballyhooed effort to identify new, more visually pleasing logging systems it could deploy in Oregon, Washington and California, then the nation's wood basket.

At the time, I was a government reporter for the *Daily Courier* in Grants Pass, Oregon. I'd just completed a ten-part series of forest practices in the Douglas-fir region, and now, for reasons then not entirely clear to me, industry doors normally closed to the press had swung wide for me.

I was there as the invited guest of the late Bill Ronayne, the scholarly supervisor of the Siskiyou National Forest. In his later retirement years, we became friends, but on this day he was looking for all the publicity he could get, and he correctly reasoned that I'd be interested in being in on history's ground floor. It was a cordial meeting. Bill, Wes, and Jack went over some project details while I made notes for my story, which ran in the *Courier* Tuesday, Nov. 9, 1971. The S-64 had performed well, despite lift problems caused by unseasonably warm afternoon temperatures.

What I remember most about our lunch meeting was that Jack did most of the talking. I was nonetheless quite taken by Wes' warm smile and his keen interest in hearing what others had to say before he said anything. Like my own solitary father, he didn't appear to miss much. But it would be another 30 years before we got to know each other, and I was able to confirm my earlier reading. In the interim, Wes built the world's largest heavy-lift helicopter company, built it in his own image in his own time in his own quiet way, out of a vision that first flashed across his sky while he was huddled in a foxhole in the South Pacific in 1945.

Lobster Creek was not the first Lematta-Erickson venture. The two men had partnered in January of 1971 on Light's Creek in northern California's Plumas National Forest. Light's Creek



*Wes Lematta*

was originally a long span skyline sale, but there were problems with the way it had been designed that led Jack to conclude the work could be done for less money with a helicopter, so the Forest Service modified the sale at his request—a decision that gave the agency's logging engineers the opportunity to collect never before gathered data they later used in planning the Lobster Creek sale.

Early press accounts credit Jack with being the first to envision helicopter logging, but Wes' first inquiry came in 1962—nine years before Light's Creek—from a group of Japanese businessmen interested in airlifting spruce from remote Alaska forests. Wes reluctantly concluded the Bell helicopters that were then his workhorses were no match for big Alaska spruce. But he never forgot the encounter and the unmet technical challenge it posed. There had to be a way to log with helicopters.

The answer came in the spring of 1972 when reconfigured Columbia 107s purchased from Pan American World Airways in 1969 worked the Grayback Skylift Sale near the Oregon Caves, south of Cave Junction. It was the first helicopter sale ever sold by the Forest Service at oral auction. My old friend Don Johnson, who was then a timber buyer for Cabax Mills, bought the sale in the fall of 1971. He vividly recalls negotiating a per-thousand log price with Wes—a first given the fact that both Light's and Lobster Creek had been experimental, which meant Uncle Sam had paid Jack and Wes on a time and materials basis. But not on Grayback; this time the Forest Service got

its money from Cabax—leaving Wes and Don to write the first chapter in helicopter logging history.

I called Don to ask him how he and Wes, strangers before Grayback, got along in a moment when clearly both of them had a great deal riding on an unproven idea, “Cabax always used Columbia,” he said simply. Four words, worth their weight in gold, that sum up what has become the Columbia legacy.

As if to vindicate himself 34 years after the fact, Don also told me that the late Don Barker, who owned Cabax and was a sawmilling legend in Oregon, was so worried about the Grayback sale that he drove from his Eugene office to the Illinois Valley to see it for himself. After the 107s made their third trip to the log landing he turned to his young timber buyer and said, “Well, I guess the damn things work!”

“That was the end of it,” Don laughed. “Barker was satisfied. He never asked me about Columbia Helicopters again.”

In retrospect, questions about who first logged with helicopters cloud a profoundly important difference in what drove its two pioneers: Jack Erickson was a logger in pursuit of a harvesting system that would give his father's company access to timber it might not otherwise get; Wes Lematta was a helicopter pilot out to change the world of helicopters. Both men succeeded magnificently.

It took a long time for helicopter logging to gain respectability, in no small measure because sawmill owners of that era balked at the extraordinary costs associated with their use. As late as 1990—years after the helicopter had proven itself to be a worthy alternative to publicly controversial logging roads—mill owners were still bemoaning their higher operating costs, despite the fact that neither Wes nor Jack has ever advocated helicopter use where conventional logging systems could do the work more efficiently or at lower cost.

Although mill owners were slow to embrace helicopters, the public was not. Even my hometown newspaper, the *Kellogg Evening News*, turned out for the big show when in July 1974 Columbia logged a Forest Service timber sale in the headwaters of northern Idaho's Coeur d'Alene River, near where Dad and I fished when I was a boy and where, on Crooked Ridge in the spring of 1934, my father joined a CCC planting crew, a watershed away from where his father built his first sawmill in 1908.

Wes and Jack parted company after they finished the Lobster Creek job, Jack to pursue his love affair with S-64's and Wes to build an empire around the unproven idea that Boeing's twin-rotor 107s and, later, 234s were the way to go. The truth be told both the Boeing Vertols and the Sikorsky Skycrane were built with the military in mind, built for use by people who had bottomless checkbooks at their disposal. Wes Lematta would change all that, would invent the commercial heavy lift helicopter industry out of sheer determination; build it with the help of an extraordinarily gifted cast of characters whose exquisite sense of timing is evidenced by the fact that each of them ar-

rived on the scene at the precise moment they were needed most. This book is the story of how they did it.

That the Evergreen Foundation, which I direct, became involved in this project is a story unto itself—and an outgrowth of the selfless generosity of both Wes and Nancy, his wife of 44 years. Several times in recent years their Lematta Foundation has made timely and important contributions to our forestry education work.

Our relationship led me back to their doorstep in May of 2005, this time to interview them for a book I'm writing on the post-World War II history of the West's family-owned sawmills. Columbia Helicopters has logged for many of these companies over the last 30 years and, more recently, it has been a member of a loose-knit mill owner group that supported several Bush Administration initiatives designed to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire in the West's at-risk federal forests.

In the course of the interview our conversation turned to the fact that 2007 is Columbia's 50<sup>th</sup> year. Wes had been thinking about having someone put together a book that would honor the contributions the company's employees have made to its extraordinary success. Was I interested in writing the Columbia story? His unexpected question took me completely by surprise. And I was thrilled, not just because I admire Wes and Nancy so much, but also because the research and writing would give me a chance to catch up with an unfinished story I left behind 35 years ago.

Alas, I soon discovered, there was far more to the Columbia story than one writer could possibly cover in the months leading to the company's April 2007 anniversary celebration. So I sought the help of two trusted colleagues: John Vezmar, a friend of nearly 30 years who, because of his considerable public relations experience, appreciates the nuances and sensitivities that bedevil all corporate histories; and Dave Skinner, who writes frequently for our *Evergreen* magazine, and is also a fine mechanic and an aviation buff. I knew I would need both of them because the Columbia story is much more than a rich history. It is also a global symphony conducted daily on three continents.

Thus the book you hold in your hands is actually two stories in one: a concise company history assembled and edited by John from corporate press releases, newspaper clippings, the company newsletter and interviews with more than 20 Columbia executives past and present, and a field operations story assembled by Dave Skinner from more than 50 interviews he conducted with Columbia's pilots, mechanics, machinists, foresters, loggers and myriad support personnel that keep the company's fleet airborne 24-7.

Although I've read and re-read these chapters many times over the last six months, I am still astonished by the sheer magnificence of the story and those who lived it. How anyone can create something from nothing—as Wes did Columbia—is a miracle unto itself. But how and why all of the others got involved—and did what they did to give this story its layered tapestry—is beyond any

reckoning John, Dave or I could fathom. Paraphrasing Nike's well-crafted message, they just did it.

It seems an understatement to say that this is a rags-to-riches story, but in some ways it is. Wes started out with nothing more than an idea. But as an old forester friend of mine once said of a self-made mill man he admired, "He never suffered the disadvantage of a college education." Neither did Wes. Like my father, he dropped out after the eighth grade and never went back. Although both of them lived to regret their decisions, there didn't seem to be a reason to stay then—out there where boys-turned-to-men-too-soon met life on the trailing edge of the Great Depression.



*Wes and Nancy*

There are some common threads in all of the "Wes stories" we heard during our research. One concerns his legendary moral compass; the other a lucky streak that even he concedes is a little over the top. Perhaps because I am not lucky, I prefer to think hard work had a lot more to do with his success than luck. So too did honesty. So did hiring well when it counted most; and so too did the fact that he is a natural born promoter. I know people with advanced degrees in marketing who do not possess his instincts for what will work and what won't. Let's face it; there aren't a lot of helicopter pilots out there who would think hauling a trapeze act or Santa Claus was a good way to promote their business. But Wes did it—because he knew that helicopters had to earn their place in the public consciousness before they'd ever earn any real money. How do I reconcile this Wes Lematta with the quiet man I met over clam chowder who was more than willing to let a more outgoing Jack Erickson do the talking? I can't.

Most everyone we visited wanted to talk about Wes' vision. No surprise here. Wes does have great vision. How else if not by great vision does one create an entire industry where one did not exist before he came on the scene? Wes will tell you that he did it by hiring well. And he surely did, time and time again. What separated his hiring genius from that of others was his willingness to let great talent become greater by giving it all the room it needed to succeed on its own merit. Very few CEO's in closely held companies have mastered this art. Most are meddlesome micro-managers. Wes is not.

Everyone it seems also has a story to tell that just beams with pride: a mission accomplished, a hardship overcome, midnight oil burned, blades turning at first light in some far off forest or jungle. And then there is Sudan, where tragedy met indomitable spirit on a desert battlefield—and spirit won. Who would not tingle with pride or feel the sudden rush of humility that comes with knowing that out there, half way around the world, Columbia Helicopters caught the updrafts of divine winds.

But there is one aspect of this wonderful story that I reserved for these introductory pages—and that is the short but spectacular story of two hearts that became one when Wes and Nancy married in 1962—he one of four sons of a North Dakota farmer who was driven west to Brush Prairie, Washington by the combined forces of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl; and she, born in Greybull, Wyoming, the daughter of a printer in search of greener pastures who moved his family of five first to LaGrande, Oregon, then Hood River and finally Eugene, where she grew up, became a secretary and flight attendant on Pacific Power & Light's company plane, all while living in an 18-foot travel trailer on Division Street in Portland, where she was when she met and married her prince.

My wife and I met them as a couple in 1990 on a cruise to Alaska sponsored by the Pacific Logging Congress. We were both quite taken by their expressions of friendship and by the fact that there was simply no pretence to them. Despite great wealth, they were as ordinary as any couple we'd ever met. The delightful day we spent helicopter touring Mendenhall Glacier is one we'll both long remember.

A great many organizations, Evergreen included, have been blessed by their quiet and extraordinary generosity: Portland's Doernbecher Children's Hospital, the Casey Eye Clinic, the Humane Society, the Wes Lematta Cancer Fund at Meridian Park Hospital in Tualatin, where my own mother died of cancer in 1985, and the Providence Cancer Center in Portland, where Wes' daughter Jill died from the same dreadful disease two years ago, following a courageous 15-year struggle.

It's been my pleasure to witness the genuineness that accompanies their giving. How well I remember the November evening in Hawaii in 2003 when Nancy endowed a logging engineering chair at Oregon State University in Wes' honor. "I can do this," she humorously declared from the podium, "because *I have the*

*checkbook!*” And with that, she wrote out a check for \$1 million and handed it to a very pleased Hal Salwasser, the school’s forestry dean. The occasion and her whimsy remain frozen moments in my life.

Time was when the Lematta’s could not afford to replace a back door that fit so poorly it couldn’t keep out wind-driven snow; could not afford to buy carpeting to cover up the plywood floors that Marci, Betsy and Bart crawled on when they were babies. For a time, Nancy cleaned Columbia’s Swan Island offices because there was no budget for a janitor. I suspect she could—and would—still clean the company offices if she had to. But through all of the lean years, she never went to bed wondering what she had gotten herself into, never once thought she could have married better. “I believed in him and I believed in his ambition.” Some compasses never veer from their original heading. Hers is one. His is another.

She says tenacity is what has made it all work. He, grinning, says “Patience on my part.” And in reversed afterthought, “She is very patient with me.” To which she adds, in cadence, “We respect each other—and he has been very good about letting me follow my dreams.” The piano, the painting lessons and the harp in the living room: things a girl growing up in Hood River wants that are almost never found in houses that also don’t have indoor plumbing or suitable drinking water.

And then there is what Wes calls “the honesty thing.” Despite hardship, and jobs that were losing money, he’s never walked off a job, never quit a customer no matter how thorny the problems became or how bleak the future looked. It is why the last helicopters on earth that will be parked on tarmacs are Columbia’s red and white 107s and 234s, the largest private fleet of its kind in the world.

There were certainly times when a lesser man would have abandoned his dreams, looked for something more stable to do, but not Wes Lematta. Before he married Nancy, when Columbia was not much more than a flight of fancy, he did a little long-shoring or drove truck whenever he needed extra money to make ends meet.

In hindsight, Columbia skated on thin ice until helicopter logging came into its own in the early 1970s. In the sixties, the company grew in fits and starts, as do all start-ups born of nearly impossible dreams. One day you’re rich, the next day you’re broke. There was no stability, no steady cash flow to plan for the future. And no banker in his right mind would talk to you. Wes hints at the possibility he was probably broke more than once. But dreams live in the depths of our souls and march to a different drummer, far from the rush of the day or the news that the job you so desperately needed did not come through.

“The only times he knew he was broke was when I told him he was,” Nancy chuckles.

“I just kept working,” Wes says softly, almost apologetically. And then, as if addressing an imaginary audience, “Whatever you are doing, don’t give up. There will be ups and downs. Just keep working.”

Of all the decisions Wes has made in his life, he says marrying Nancy was the most important. And although he means it, she says his tenderness is not something he would normally verbalize, even to her. He, allowing for the grace she has just extended, adds, “Probably going with the bigger helicopters was the most important decision; that and the DVOC system of flight.”

Over the years, Wes taught a good many people how to fly helicopters, including his own brothers. But the student he remembers most fondly is his old friend Stu White, who with his late father owned Aero-White, an aviation finance company that bankrolled many a Columbia helicopter over the years. Stu was there when Wes and Nancy married in 1962, and they still share e-mail notes most days.



*Bart, Betsy and Marci*

“He learned quickly,” Wes says of his former student. “But almost every time we went up his nose would start itching. I can still see him trying to scratch it on the cyclic, which controls forward and backward movement, while hanging on to the collective, which controls up and down movement. It was pretty amusing.”

As life’s shadows lengthen, long forgotten memories of good times had with old friends flash by unexpectedly, like meteors dashing across the night sky. Where do they come from and where do they go, these tiny bursts of light that suddenly illuminate the unremembered past?

Perhaps because Wes grew up in the shadow of the greatest Douglas-fir forests on earth, he maintains a keen interest in forestry. In his youth he cut firewood and hauled slab wood from tiny sawmills no more than five miles from the suburban setting he shares with Nancy today. By the time he turned 17 he’d saved enough money to make a down payment on an old Hercules-powered diesel, which he used to haul logs in southern Oregon until he was drafted in October of 1944. Small wonder then that despite Columbia’s global presence in oil drilling, mining, heavy construc-

tion and power line transmission work, it was helicopter logging that put his company on the map.

But in recent years the art of lifting timber from untrammelled forests has given way to the less rewarding task of dropping 3,000-gallon bucket loads of water into thousand-degree flames broiling 300 feet above the tree tops. It makes great theater, especially for reporters who don’t understand what’s needed to keep forests healthy. But as lucrative as firefighting has become, it is in most cases the avoidable consequence of our nation’s failure to do the thinning and stand tending work necessary to contain insect and disease infestations that inevitably lead to wildfire. Helicopters can do some of this preventive work, but most of it could be done quickly and efficiently using more conventional logging systems. Wes would want you to know the many sciences of forestry that provide proven tools needed to rescue the country’s beloved forests. What’s missing is the political will to move forward.

The day I interviewed Wes and Nancy at their home in Vancouver, Washington, Nancy took numerous calls from friends and their grown children. She did not bother to leave the room for privacy’s sake, so I was privy to the way every phone call to their children ended. “I love you,” she would say, and they in turn would say, “I love you too, Mom.” Perhaps because my own mother and father have been gone so long, and hardly a day passes without my missing them, I found myself closing my eyes, listening for the sweet sound of my own mother’s voice. “I love you too, Son.”

There is a great deal more I could say about Wes and Nancy, but they’d much rather we tell you about their employees, for it is they to whom Wes and Nancy have dedicated this book. And it is they who the Lematta’s say built Columbia Helicopters from the ground up. I can assure you that Wes and Nancy admire all of you—and your work—as much as you admire them.

We also want to tip our hats to the late Ted Veal, the company’s first public relations director and the architect of its newsletter until his untimely death in March 1994. Ted launched Columbia’s *Intercompany News* in June 1979, two months after he was hired. His love of history and his penchant for painstaking detail reveal themselves in words and pictures in the newsletter and in hundreds of press releases that made our job much easier. Writing in his obituary, Jon Lazzaretti said something about Ted that could just as easily have been said of anyone in the company. “Not only has this work helped Columbia gain recognition worldwide, it has enhanced the acceptance of the helicopter in general as a vital asset to mankind.”

So here you have it, the story of Columbia Helicopter’s first fifty years, told in the two-count rhythm of fine writers who also love history and photography and detail. And here’s hoping this company’s next generation of wunderkinds creates new and beautiful things out of thin air.

*Jim Petersen  
The Evergreen Foundation*