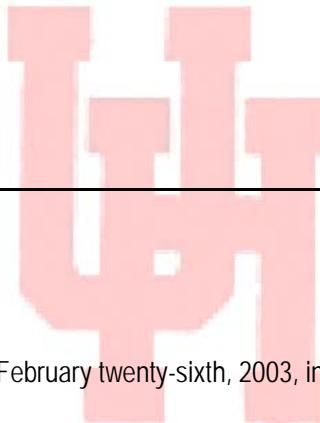


HHA # 00399
Interviewee: Ben Schrick
Interviewer: Steven Wiltz
Interview Date: February 26, 2003
Interview Module & No.: MMS: SW043
Transcriber: Lauren Penney

[Transcriber's note: The majority of "uhs" and "ums", repeated words, and the interviewer's backchanneling have not been transcribed for the purposes of readability.]

Ethnographic preface:

Ben Schrick was born in 1941 in Iowa. He earned his Airframe and Power Plant Certificate from Amarelle Aeronautic Institute in Florida. He was hired by PHI in 1964. In 1965 he received his commercial pilot license, and since then worked as a helicopter mechanic and pilot, working abroad and in Louisiana. He also discusses the importance of helicopters' in the oil industry and his perceptions of Lafayette.



Interviewer initials: [SW]

Interviewee initials: [BS]

SW: Interview with Mister Ben Schrick. It is February twenty-sixth, 2003, in his home. And I like to get started in the beginning, is it okay if I sit in this chair?

BS: Sure, absolutely.

SW: I like to kind of just get a little bit of background about you, about where you're from, and when you were born, and where you were raised, and things like that.

BS: Okay, I was born March seventeenth, 1941, in Sibley, Iowa. And I grew up on a farm in George, right outside of George, Iowa. And, let's see, I went to, at the time it was Iowa State College in Ames for two years. Took some pre-engineering work. Then I went to Embry-Riddle Aeronautical Institute in Miami and received my airframe and power plant certificate and my private pilot license.

SW: Oh, so you didn't get it from the military?

BS: No. I've never been in the military.

SW: That's good or bad depending on who you talk to.

BS: Yeah that's right. Oh it was alright. Then I went to work for Petroleum Helicopters after I graduated. And that was in February of... '64, 1964. As an A and P mechanic, airframe and power plant mechanic. And during '64, in the early part of '65 I went ahead and received my commercial pilot license, airplane and [Inaudible] pilot license, airplane. And

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at that time PHI was offering to check out mechanics who had commercial fixed wing license, which I had a airplane license. So they checked me out in helicopters and it was May of 1966 I went operational as a pilot-mechanic and worked offshore on various jobs as a pilot and I took care of my own aircraft.

SW: So not only you could fly, you could fix it.

BS: Right, that's right.

SW: Is that a little unusual?

BS: No, we had a number of pilot-mechanics. At one time we probably had about... 30 of 'em. So there are a number of 'em in the industry.

SW: Is-

BS: There are far more pilots than pilot-mechanics that's for sure. And far more mechanics than pilots.

SW: What got you into flying?

BS: Uh, I don't know, I just always liked that aspect of being able to fly. I found it rewarding. Different. That's it.

SW: Anyone in your family that-

BS: No, no one in the family did fly, so.

SW: Your father did-

BS: Father was a farmer. All his life.

SW: Well like I said, it's kind of, I know from PHI, speaking to Ed, that a lot of pilots that they hired were guys that were out of Vietnam.



BS: Oh yeah. Right-

SW: You-

BS: Right out, Ed was one of 'em.

SW: Yeah. You were pre-Vietnam, but uh-

BS: Right.

SW: But were you still in the minority concerning a private pilot license or did a lot of those guys that you worked with come from military? [Slight pause]

BS: Have a private license?

SW: Well, the guys that you worked with, a majority of 'em were they getting private licenses or did they get it from the military?

BS: The military, oh yeah, absolutely. There was probably only, I probably only know of about maybe... 10, 15 of us that Petroleum Helicopters checked out that did not get their training in the military. So there weren't that many.

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SW: So you were in that small group.

BS: Right.

SW: That had done it.

BS: Very small group.

SW: It must be expensive to get your private license.

BS: It's not expensive get a, your private airplane it wasn't that expensive. The expensive portion is the helicopter rating, commercial helicopter rating.

SW: You have to go through, what do you have to go through to get that?

BS: You, at the time we had to have 60, I think it was 60 hours in the helicopter 'fore, before you could get your rating. And 60 hours is very costly. 'Cause helicopters cost a lot to operate an hour. So that costs a lot, that costs a lot of money, but I didn't have to pay for it. PHI paid for it, so that was very worthwhile [Inaudible].

SW: Was that an investment they were putting in you because you-

BS: Right, because I, yeah, I'd worked for the company as a pilot-mechanic and, you know, there, you can take a pilot-mechanic and you're doin' both jobs, so you don't need two people to do the job and we did receive a little more salary than a straight pilot, but it wasn't all that much more. So we, in effect we probably saved 75 percent of a mechanic's salary.

SW: I know I'm belaboring that point, but is it still like that over or is it more divided between just pilots and mechanics now over there?

BS: It's gettin' more divided between pilots and mechanics. I don't think, we probably don't have over five operational pilot-mechanics out there anymore. Yeah, it's pretty much segregated.

SW: What kind of aircraft did you fly?

BS: I flew the uh... let's see, I did my training in a Hughes 269, that's an old belt driven [piston?] helicopter. And then once I went operational I flew the Bell 47G2s, G2As, G4, G4As, Bell 47J models. And then we got into the turbines. I flew the old 206 series. A, B. Bells, I flew the Hughes 369 which [civilian bursas?] the 500. And I flew the AS 350 Eurocopter [Inaudible].

SW: So many different models.

BS: Yeah, many different models. And it was over about a 10 year period.

SW: If you fly one and there's another similar one, you can kind of just get into that one and fly that one too, is-

BS: Eh, once you know the, well once you know the systems in the other machine, once you learn the systems and all, the helicopter flies, one helicopter flies like another helicopter. It's, there's basically no difference in actually flying a helicopter. There is differences in systems, avionics and all that stuff.

SW: The buttons you have to push and whatnot.

BS: Yeah. [That's right?].

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SW: In 1964 when you got here in Lafayette and you started workin' for them, what kind of work schedule did you have?

BS: We worked 10 days on and five days off.

SW: And just rotated like that?

BS: Right. I'd work 10 days, and get five days off, and go out for 10 days again, and off for five.

SW: When you were on for those 10 days how long [Audio cuts out] hours?

BS: Eleven and a half hours a day.

SW: But then you'd come home at night.

BS: No, uh uh.

SW: Oh you-

BS: Stay offshore or at a field base if we were at a field base. I was offshore, so I stayed offshore for 10 days.

SW: You'd fly out to the-

BS: Right.

SW: Where they were working out of.

BS: At that time I'd fly out, I was a mechanic at that time, so they'd fly us out and we'd work out 10 days and at the end of the 10 day work, they'd fly us back in and we'd break for five days and...

SW: And go right back out. So but back in that day, I'm starting to get that picture, you were just being a mechanic at that point.

BS: Right.

SW: And you got the helicopter license or-

BS: Later.

SW: The commercial license later.

BS: Yeah. 'Bout a year and a half later.

SW: So they had you actually on offshore platform workin' on the-

BS: As a mechanic, that's right.

SW: The helicopters?

BS: Right. You know, we had a number of helicopters back then offshore. We probably at one time we had up to 60 helicopters that stayed offshore. So we either had pilot-mechanics with 'em or pilot and mechanic.

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SW: Okay, that's interesting because I was under, well, speaking with some of the guys, the roughnecks and pushers and toolpushers and whatnot, that helicopters would fly them out there and pick up some people or equipment and fly back. I didn't-

BS: The big helicopters would. The, you'd take, in those days, we had the Bell 204s, we had the Sikorsky S-62s and those were crew change helicopters. They just fly out with people, they'd fly back in with 'em. But we would stay offshore and, with our helicopter. Or, well in my case then as a mechanic, my pilot would stay there with me and with the helicopter and he would fly people from the living quarters in the mornings to the other platforms in that area to check those all out. And if there was any problems, fix 'em. And then at the end of the day he would bring 'em back to the living quarters. And we'd spend the night in the living quarters.

SW: You guys were hoppin' around out there-

BS: Yeah.

SW: As opposed to just goin' back and forth.

BS: That's right. In fact very seldom did those helicopters based offshore go to the beach. Go the beach and back out, they normally just stayed out there all the time.

SW: And you maintained them and everything out-

BS: Maintained the 'em out there.

SW: I see.

BS: Unless it was a major, like a engine change or a major component change, then they would swap the aircraft out and bring it to the beach and did the component change [Phone ringing] and then take it back out, and swap it out.

SW: Do you need to get that?

BS: [Goes to get the phone]

[RECORDING TURNED OFF AND BACK ON]

SW: And we're back on. Uh, well that's an interesting thing. I had, well again you're only the second pilot we've actually made it to talk to, so this is a different deal. And Vernon had done maybe some different things that you did.

BS: Oh yeah he did. Vernon did different things. I don't know that Vernon ever was based offshore as a pilot. I'm not sure.

SW: So you were 10 on and five off and 12 hours, or 11 and a half hours a day as you said. You were pretty much like those offshore crews, you-

BS: [Got sa-?], we had the same schedule as the offshore crews.

SW: That was during the day or at night or did y'all-

BS: No this was... offshore as a mechanic uh... probably about noon 'til midnight we was one, 'cause we had to do our maintenance at night on the helicopter.

SW: Yeah, you didn't fly at night.

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BS: Right, right.

SW: That was, is that too dangerous out there?

BS: No, we flew the bigger ones at night, but not the small ones. The small ones really aren't, weren't equipped to fly at night, they didn't have the instrumentation and so forth. We just flew the crew change helicopter.

SW: Flyin' 'em during the day and then 'til midnight workin' on 'em [Inaudible, overlapping speech]-

BS: Yeah, they're, well they finished flying, well, yeah, they finished flying about, well whenever sunset was. Official sunset they quit flyin'. Then we can start doin' our maintenance on the helicopters. We were always finished [Inaudible] midnight, 'cause you only had one helicopter in most cases.

SW: And how long did you do that mechanic job?

BS: I did that mechanic 'til about, offshore 'til... roughly... the fall of '65. And then the fall of '65 I came into the hanger here and worked in the hanger as a mechanic. And then I was takin' my training on my days off and my time off, helicopter training. And once I that was complete, which was, I think it was May of '66, then I was back offshore as a pilot-mechanic.

SW: Oh okay and doin' sort of the same thing, but you were always flying at that time too.

BS: Right. Flying and maintaining.

SW: So uh, like I said, you're out there with the roughnecks and the-

BS: Oh yeah.

SW: How-

BS: The whole works.

SW: How was that?

BS: It was very enjoyable. They got some good people out there, for the most part they were very good people. The food was good, the quarters were good, the-

SW: I was gonna ask you about that. They fed you regularly on the-

BS: Oh man the food was excellent on all the offshore jobs, [Inaudible] it was excellent. Absolutely excellent. And the people, I never run across any people I had any problems with offshore. We had a good working rapport and, you know, you just, [something?] give and take a little bit, but that's the way it is all over.

SW: Pretty much. [Chuckles]

BS: Pretty much.

SW: What would you guys do for entertainment? I mean you're-

BS: Back then we, back then they had, some of 'em had ping pong tables, they had television, oh but not very good, 'cause we didn't have satellite television or anything like that. So it was very limited television. Play cards and, that's it.

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SW: It's all that could go on. [Chuckles]

BS: That's it, you do a little fishing off the platform.

SW: Oh, they le-, I hear now they don't let 'em do that anymore.

BS: Yeah, I think they probably clampin' down a little bit now, but back then, oh yeah, there was-

SW: Whatever you wanted, huh?

BS: Oh yeah, you fished. 'Cause back then I know I got bumped a number of times on crew change, I'd be out there 10 days as a mechanic and some of the company men caught so dang many fish, they takin' 'em in with 'em, so it was too much weight, so I got bumped for a later, 'til a later flight 'cause- [Chuckles]

SW: They bumped you off for a bunch of fish. [Chuckles]

BS: [Chuckling] Oh yeah, the guy, well the guy was goin' in, so he was takin' his fish with 'em, you know, so.

SW: Did they have to hide the fish or-

BS: No, uh uh, oh no.

SW: [Inaudible, overlapping speech]

BS: No, no they didn't have hide 'em.

SW: Wow okay. Now I'm sure they would have, they have issues about that, about the weight and everything.

BS: [Hesitatingly] Yeah, yeah, and like you say, they don't, I don't think they allow much fishin' out there anymore.

SW: Yeah, I just-

BS: Off the platform.

SW: The environmental changes and whatnot.

BS: Right.

SW: Well that's interesting that so much fish would change, if we could, if I could ask you a technical question for a second about the helicopter. One of those, I guess one of those small Bell ones, how many people would this little one hold when you're hopping from-

BS: Oh there was, there would a pilot and two passengers.

SW: That's it.

BS: That's it. And the J model was a pilot and three passengers, but if they were big guys, like most of the offshore guys were, you could carry two too, so.

SW: Yeah, what was the weight capacity of that?

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BS: Oh man, the payload I guess was probably in the neighborhood of, and when I'm talkin' about payload I'm talkin' everything but the pilot and the helicopter, it probably was in the neighborhood of 400 pounds and that's about it.

SW: About all you could-

BS: Right.

SW: Wow. I think, and I'm guilty of that myself, you see these helicopters flying around you just assume that they can fly with whatever, but you've got to really take into account-

BS: Oh yeah.

SW: It sounds like your exact-, who's on board with you.

BS: You fill 'em up with fuel, there's very few helicopters that you fill 'em up with fuel and you can fill all the seats up with passengers, 'cause you'd be over gross weight.

SW: Wow. So you never filled up?

BS: No, you never filled all the way up with fuel.

SW: You went three-quarters capacity?

BS: Yes, it depends upon where you were goin' and where the next fuel stop was. If it was close, you could go with quarter fuel capacity. Depended on where the fuel installations were.

SW: That, to me, that's an interesting aspect of that because you remember those things are spinning and trying to lift up, it's not like an airplane that has the forward momentum where-

BS: Right.

SW: You know all about that as well. [Chuckles]

BS: Right. And in our day, well when I first started those helicopters were very slow, you know, we were lucky to get 60, 65 miles an hour out of one, [one of those crews?]. So they were extremely slow.

SW: How fast can they get up nowadays?

BS: Oh now the, some of those, some of the lighter ones will go... 160 miles an hour, 170. So there's been a big improvement.

SW: Yeah, that technological advances and everything.

BS: Right. Absolutely.

SW: Ed, when he took us on his tour, he showed us this old Chinese helicopter. Actually, they got it out of Taiwan. It was one of those that had two rotors. [Inaudible, overlapping speech]

BS: Oh that's a brand new one, though. That helicopter's only, that helicopter is, uh, let's see, we send it over there the year I retired, which was 2001. That was a K-Max.

SW: Yeah, that's it.

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BS: Yeah, it's, no, that helicopter's only a couple years old. We bought it specifically new, we bought it new for that job. Yeah, it's a very, it's a heavy lift helicopter. It can lift a lot on the sling.

SW: Oh that's what it's designed for?

BS: Yeah, 'cause it only has one pers-, just one pilot is all it's capable of carrying as far as personnel are concerned. Yeah, but it has a tremendous carrying capability on the hook. Oh, it's got like 5,000 pounds on the hook, so.

SW: Is that because of its design? The-

BS: That's got, that's some of it. It doesn't have a tail rotor, so you don't have that power lost through the tail rotor and all, you're using all your horsepower to lift it. And it's fairly light helicopter. It has a fairly large engine. [Phone ringing]

SW: I don't know about getting in it, though. It looks- [Chuckles]

BS: Huh?

SW: I don't know if I would get in it. [Chuckles]

BS: The thing [Phone ringing] that things a heck of a sling machine. Really a good sling machine.

SW: Yeah, it was interesting the way it looked. [Chuckles] [Phone ringing]

BS: Yeah, I didn't think it was back already, I thought it was still over there.

SW: Oh, well, as of a couple of weeks ago we saw it in there. And he brought us into the room that had all the PHI stuff, had models of each helicopter.

BS: Oh yeah, yeah.

SW: Models there, too. Of every model that had flown, that was pretty, it was-

BS: Bet there was a number of 'em weren't there?

SW: Yeah.

BS: There were some in there that we haven't flown- [Hear someone in the background leaving BS a message on his answering machine; pause in interview] There was a... there were some in there that we never did fly. There's an EH101, which is a three engine helicopter made in England. We never flew that. In fact, I don't think any commercial operator's ever flown that, so.

SW: I recognized a couple of, they called 'em Hueys I guess in Vietnam.

BS: Yeah, Vietnam helicopter.

SW: I've read some books and seen some pictures of 'em. And I'm always interested to talk about what they refer to as the Jesus Nut.

BS: Yeah.

SW: Everybody's got a story about that. And Ed took us in the back and showed me exactly what it was.

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BS: On the older helicopters, that's right, there was one nut held the rotary system on. Forty-seven models uh, Hueys, uh the new ones, they have probably about six or eight maybe more than that, you know, circle [hold the head on?], but the old ones, they had one nut. [Slight pause] That was it.

SW: After you... I'm sure, I know you love to talk about the technical aspect of it, too, huh? [Chuckles]

BS: No, it doesn't make any difference.

SW: Uh, I'll shift back to the other stuff after you, you went back to workin' out there as a pilot-mechanic, how long did you do that for?

BS: Let's see, I did that 'til... see, 1967, the fall of '67 I went to Saudi Arabia with, as a pilot-mechanic on a 207A model, a turbine powered helicopter. There was three of us, a pilot, pilot-mechanic, and a mechanic, and we went to, we were based in [Baharan?]. Flyin' for REMCO offshore. To the rigs and that was an experience 'cause we had a brand new helicopter, that helicopter just came out in 1967 and we went over there in 1967. So that was a large learning experience. But it was... it was enjoyable. I keep tellin' people that I see I was flyin' over the desert Christmas day of 1967 in the aircraft, flyin' over desert, headed offshore. And it was the largest true living uh, nativity scene you ever see in your life. [Both chuckling] I mean it was the camels, the tents, the goats, the shepherds, I mean it was all, and it's out there movin', it's actually alive. And in that day and age to see something like that was... was a shocker for somebody that wasn't used to it, like myself comin' off of a farm. [Chuckles]

SW: Absolutely, huh. [Chuckles]

BS: Really was.

SW: It's Christmas day, were you married at the time?

BS: Yeah.

SW: Oh, so you were away from home.

BS: Yeah, I was over there for six months and I went over to help 'em start up the job, and I came back in May I think of '68. Then when I came back, I went back offshore as a pilot-mechanic in the Gulf of Mexico. And then... see, 'bout January of 1970 I went to Angola. Africa. To fly, actually flyin' out of Kivinda, Angola, for Chev-, for Gulf Oil at the time. Chevron now. Stayed there for two years and then came back and I flew offshore again. And then in 1976 I went into management on the maintenance side. And in Mor-, I was the Morgan City base manager. Then sometime later, a couple years later, I came up to Lafayette and was a maintenance manager up here and vice-president of maintenance I guess and all the way up to... [Thinking out loud to himself] see, vice-president of maintenance... it'd be ninety... '91, '90, 1990. And then at that time I became... general manager. And they had, they had some other terms, I was CO also, I ended bein' CO, but it was basically general manager that they just changed to the job title.

SW: So that, you did, look like you did that for about 21 years, 22 years or somethin' like that.

BS: At PHI?

SW: In management.

BS: Oh in management, yeah. From '76 to uh... 2001. I was in management.

SW: That puts you in the office into regular hours? [Chuckles]

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BS: Yeah, for, well for the most part regular hours. We still spent a lot of time out in the field with the guys, so had a couple nights a week we would go out in the field and be with the guys 'til late in the evening. So, but otherwise it was pretty much normal hours, yeah.

SW: So when you uh, goin' back a little bit when you were pilot-mechanic and goin' overseas, you were still doing that 10 and five schedule or-

BS: Oh no, no. The 10 and five only lasted about, when I hired on it only lasted about a year and then it went to five and five. Five days on, five days off. And then sometime, and that only last like... a year, less than a year, then it went to seven and seven. Seven days on and seven days off, so, on the Gulf Coast and we always worked seven and seven. We were in Africa, I mean in Saudi Arabia we worked... 10 and five. Two for one, we were home every night. In Africa we worked 14 and seven and we did, were home every night, we lived in Luanda and worked in Kavinda, so. But on the Gulf Coast it was seven and seven and we must have got the seven and seven schedule in... '67 or '68, I would think we go on seven and seven.

SW: Did, was there a reasoning behind that? Did people not like the 10 and five, or the five and five, or?

BS: Oh no, the reas-, well yeah, one of the reasons was the oil company personnel they were already one for one. You know, some of 'em were on five and five, some were one seven and seven [Phone ringing] and we were on 10 and five, so uh [Pause; phone ringing] after awhile they got, there was enough complainin' that they went same schedule as the oil companies. [Phone ringing]

SW: Oh okay, so y'all try to kind of match what they were doing anyway.

BS: Right. Right. [Phone ringing]

SW: To your preference, which one was, was there one that was better than the others?

BS: Oh seven and seven schedule [Phone ringing] by far the best. As far as I was concerned. You all, you're out sev-, on seven days, you're off seven days. Five and five is one for one schedule, too, but the problem is if you work in Venice and your break, you're spendin' half a day come home, so you're here four and a half, you gotta day, a half a day goin' back, so actually only got four days off. So a seven and seven was by far the best as far as I was concerned.

SW: I've heard of 14 and 14 too [Inaudible, overlapping speech]-

BS: Four-, there, a lot of it's gone to 14 and 14 now because of the, for the oil company personnel, 'cause of cost.

SW: Yeah, they-

BS: Of crew changin' personnel. So they can actually cut their transportation cost in half by goin' 14 and 14.

SW: To me, though, after 14 days do you get a little bit of cabin fever there, out there if you're out in the rig.

BS: I think it's all psychological-

SW: Really?

BS: Oh yeah. So I mean after you get, after you know you're gonna be out there for 14 days and you accept it.

SW: It's the way it is.

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BS: It's just the way it is, I mean it's, you know you're gonna be in for 14 days, so that's a long time too, bein' off for 14 days. That's the way it works.

SW: Could also look at it that you're gone for half the year, too. [Chuckles]

BS: Yeah, absolute-, oh yeah, absolutely.

SW: That's the way it goes.

BS: Yeah, you're away from home half the year.

SW: You literally were overseas, you were gone for six months.

BS: Yeah, then, yeah, that was, that's right. Then when I come back I was on seven and seven, so that was longer than that.

SW: When PHI sent you over there, did they just transfer you or were you asked if you wanted to go or how did that kind of work out?

BS: Um... in those early days it was like, "Hey y-," bein' as we were pilot-mechanics, there weren't many of us, they said, "Okay, one of you guys is goin' on this job, one of you goin' to South America," and so you just decide amongst yourselves where you want to go, you know, so that's what we did. In the, later on, like the one in Africa, that was, you just put in for it. And then they, if they, if you met all their qualifications, then you'd go.

SW: Did you guys ever draw straws because y'all didn't, none of y'all wanted to go to a certain spot? [Chuckles]

BS: No, we never did that, no. We didn't get that far down the road, we just talked amongst ourselves and decided who was gonna do what and when because there was always some conflict with some people bein' able to go now and some bein' able to go later, so.

SW: Oh so-

BS: It always worked out.

SW: You policed yourselves is what it sounds like.

BS: Right. Absolutely. Absolutely.

SW: What kind of pay did you guys have? Was it better than average?

BS: Pay? Hm... it probably was about, it wasn't that good. Goin' overseas it was about 20, probably 20 percent above base here.

SW: Okay, so they-

BS: And in Saudi Arabia it wasn't bad 'cause your housing was furnished. You paid for your own food and everything, but in Africa we paid for our own lodging and everything else over there, so. It amounted to about I guess 25 percent above base pay here.

SW: There was some financial benefit if you went at least.

BS: Yeah, uh hm. Oh yeah.

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SW: And then back here pilot pay, I, really I have no conception of what pilot pay-

BS: In those days?

SW: Yeah.

BS: In the early '60s the pilot pay was... right around six, six-fifty a month. Six hundred, 650 a month.

SW: How does that compare to-

BS: Oh today? Oh man today it must be up around uh... pretty close to 3,000 a month.

SW: For basically workin' the same work.

BS: Well, workin' the same job.

SW: Well 3,000 a month is pretty good around here. I'm guessin' that six-fifty a month back then was pretty good for [around here?].

BS: Yeah, six-fifty wasn't that bad. Although we, I was livin' in an apartment we were paying two-seventy-five for a two-bedroom, two-bath apartment. But we had three other, I had three other guys livin' there. It was two, there was always two on the opposite seven days of us, so there was always, there was only two there at any one time. So it worked out pretty good, but, yeah, but the rent was still pretty high back then.

SW: Yeah, I think it's pretty much still high some places around here now. [Chuckles]

BS: Yeah, absolutely, it's runnin', yeah. We, I, we just sold a four-plex today and we're gettin' about 400 for a one unit in a four-plex. [Phone ringing; BS goes to get phone]

[RECORDING TURNED OFF AND BACK ON]

SW: Make sure. I just wanna make sure I always see that little red when I hit the button.

BS: [Chuckling] That it is on.

SW: Yeah, I hate to go and talk for a little while and then it's. [Chuckles]

BS: Right.

SW: Realize it's not there. [Slight pause] What other, compared to, that 650 a month compared to maybe other jobs, could you get that in any other sector of any other industry at that time or-

BS: I think a lot of the... oilfield workers made more than I offshore, the ones that worked offshore made more than that, yeah. Uh... onshore... I'm not too sure, because I never even looked into it. But I think the guys offshore, except maybe for the catering services, the food catering services, those guys never made that much money. The cooks probably did, but not the guys that worked for 'em. But otherwise those, the offshore oil workers I think they beat us out.

SW: Really?

BS: Yeah.

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SW: You'd say the same now maybe too?

BS: Uh... oh I would say that for a starting pilot today, yeah, I think an offshore worker probably makes more than he does. Yeah. 'Specially those that work for a major oil company. Now those that work for some of these production companies, maybe not. But in those days we didn't have no, in the '60s, early '60s there were no production companies. They all worked for major oil company. [Coughs]

SW: What about job security? Have you ever had problems with that or ever worried about that-

BS: With PHI?

SW: Yeah.

BS: No. I never, I was never worried about job security at all. Never. And the o-, I think there was, the first time PHI laid anybody off was probably... the mid '80s when that, when the economy really went to pot in the mid '80s is about the, I think that was the first time that PHI laid anybody off in, since they were founded in, what, '49. So everybody had a, whoever was employed with PHI had a real sense of bein' very secure. But no, I always had enough seniority and thought I did a good enough job that I wasn't worried about it.

SW: I've heard that it's, well, I don't know about now, but it used to be, when you were, a close-knit type of company, you guys all knew each other pretty well and pilots stick together and that kind of thing.

BS: This, but the helicopter aviation business is very small anyway when you look on a worldwide, you look at just the helicopter industry, it's very small. I mean, you know all the guys in the other companies. You can go just about anywhere in the world where there's a helicopter and you're gonna know somebody that's workin' there. It's just a very small world.

SW: Yes. It seems that way 'cause [not?/now?] everybody can fly. [Chuckles]

BS: Yeah.

SW: [Inaudible] goes through that to do that. What about unions out in the industry at all? Do they have a lot of unions?

BS: No, uh... well they do now. P-, Air Log was first to become unionized and then we were right, I think we were unionized in... probably 2000 or 2001.

SW: Oh so that's-

BS: There had been numerous attempts prior to that. I mean there were attempts in the '70s. There must've been three, four attempts prior to that time and they were unsuccessful. But last time they made it. But, no, the offshore oil workers are not unionized.

SW: [It's the?] same there, it's a trend I've noticed. I'm looking at those guys always, they always fought unionization too.

BS: Yeah.

SW: Why? Were the pilots just not in favor of that kind of thing or?

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BS: Unioniz-, unionization? Oh yeah the pilots wanted it. The management I think fought it more than anything else. Oh it's, I think it's [Slight pause] I've never dealt with a union, so I really don't know. It's probably, makes your job a little bit harder being a manager I would think, although I'm not that sure.

SW: That would make sense, though, because it seems to be, that seems to be the conflict always between unions and managers.

BS: Yeah, there's always some knit-pickin' goin' on, you know. But I read into that, I think it was today's paper, where union workers in the U.S. are way, way off people belong to unions, way off.

SW: Oh yeah, I saw the same poll.

BS: Did ya read that?

SW: Where it's down. Very low-

BS: Oh yeah, because of the steel mills and everything else were union, those guys are cuttin' way back.

SW: Seems like all the stuff their, the proponents always, the opponents always say it doesn't work.

BS: Right.

SW: Maybe it's coming true, I'm not sure. [Chuckles] Um... how do, in your opinion, how do helicopters fit into the grand, the whole grand scheme of the oil patch? Why did PHI rise up to where it's at?

BS: Oh I think just, uh, it was a hell of a cost savings for the oil companies bein' able to get their personnel out there faster, not having to pay overtime, and gettin' 'em back faster, it was a big, it's a moral issue for the workers also, you know. So I, but basically it was a cheaper way of transportin' the personnel. That's how it all got started offshore. Absolutely, and the part, same way with the parts and all. Rather than puttin' 'em on a boat, if a rig is down and they need a part instead of puttin' it on a boat, the boat's got to go six, eight hours, they fly in a helicopter and it's there in an hour and the rig's back on line. And the same with, way with oilfield workers. It cuts seven hours overtime off just one way for each person, that amounts to a lot of money, so that's how it came about originally.

SW: Somebody, Bog Suggs saw an avenue or a need and-

BS: Well he really, first started not offshore, he was in the seismic business in the marshes and it was a lot faster doin' it with a helicopter than it was with the marsh buggies and everything. So it was saving them a tremendous amount of money out there too. In fact they're still doin' it today with the helicopters. And then it just evolved into the offshore business when the oil companies started buildin' structures offshore and it just kept growin' and growin'. And for a long time PHI was the only one. Oh, there always some little mom and pops that sprung up, but they were, they didn't last, they run out of business. Air Log was the first big competitor that ever came here in the early '70s.

SW: You, it seems to me you need to have some serious capital and backing to run a company of helicopters, you have to have a fleet. It would be hard for a mom and pop unit to be able to keep that up.

BS: Mom and pop unit can do it probably with, as long as it doesn't get too big, they gotta cu-, a good customer that's very dedicated customer that will assure them that they'll stay with 'em with a few helicopters. And they can hang in there. But otherwise, yeah, it's extremely difficult. It's very ex-, helicopters are expensive, you can't believe. I had a outer combustor case in the, in my truck the other day and it's probably about, oh... 18 inches in diameter. And it's probably about eight inch-, 18 inches long and it's all machined up and new it cost 80,000 dollars and that's one part of one piece of a engine. Just one piece of. So it's very expensive all the way around.

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SW: How much does your average flying unit cost?

BS: Helicopter? Today uh, the, typically Bell 407, which is a seven place helicopter that includes a pilots, it's, it cost a million and a quarter. And it carries seven people, probably about a hundred and... 40, 145 mile an hour.

SW: [It's top out speed?].

BS: Yeah.

SW: That's pretty expensive. And how big is, how big was PHI fleet when you left?

BS: Oh, when I left we must've had... I wanna say probably three... 340, 350. I don't know what they're down to now. They got rid of a lot of helicopters.

SW: Oh did they?

BS: Uh hm. Since Carroll [Note: Carroll Suggs] sold out and [Hel?] bought it. You know, they, they've, they sold some helicopters.

SW: [Inaudible, company or person's name], right?

BS: Yeah, [Inaudible, repeats company or person's name – sounds like Heliconsul].

SW: That's, to me it's just amazing to see even if they have, only have what would you say only 250 machines out there, that's still a heck of an inventory in terms of dollars. [Chuckles]

BS: You bet. And then the inventory you have to have in parts to support that. At one time we were runnin' 420 helicopters. [Slight pause] And we were fle-, we were flyin' just a little over 400,000 hours a year. That was the highest we ever got and that was... that was around the early '80s, just before things went downhill. [Chuckles] Big time, fast. [Chuckles]

SW: Yeah, I know about this, I was in grade school and high school. I watched it happen myself.

BS: Absolutely.

SW: I was cognizant enough that even I was younger I could still see people were, couldn't get out of town fast enough. [Chuckles]

BS: That's right. Absolutely.

SW: People sellin' their homes and everything. How did that downturn, let me back up a little bit. The oil patch goes up and down anyway, how did a company like PHI, a helicopter company, weather those downturns?

BS: It was very difficult. We, like I said, that was the first layoff I had, first layoff Petroleum Helicopter had, as far as I knew, and as far as I was told. And with the layoffs we had to sell equipment. I mean, you sold equipment. The other thing Bob Suggs did, he had the foresight to get into the aero-medical business, EMS. And we put a lot of helicopters in EMS at that time, so we grew, we grew a little bit in one field, and then we did sell off some helicopters, and we reduced our workforce, and it's the only way you can make it.

SW: Yeah, you have to diversify at some point.

BS: Oh absolutely.

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SW: Well I see in the old building y'all have over there, I pass by over there sometimes I see the Acadian ambulance drivers out there.

BS: Right. Right.

SW: So they kind of took over the old building or-

BS: Right. Yeah, they took over that little hanger right alongside the road there. And the [obs?], what we call the "obs" building, the office building that's on the corner.

SW: That's, so that big '80s crunch hit PHI too?

BS: Oh! Big time. BIG time.

SW: Did y'all lose a lot of personnel or?

BS: Oh I don't recall how many we lost, but yeah, there were a lot of personnel. [Pause] Over a couple years we probably lost 600, 600 or so.

SW: I mean that was par for the course for the industry too.

BS: Oh yeah, everybody was doin' it. The oil companies, everybody. Everybody had to do it 'cause otherwise you wouldn't stay in business very long.

SW: Was it, being that the oil patch was the life blood of the company, were you guys, I know you turn on the news every day and they have a rig count. [Chuckles]

BS: Yeah.

SW: Were you guys keeping your eye on the rig count everyday?

BS: [Chuckling] Oh yeah. Every Thursday is when the new rig count come out and we, yeah, we would always be lookin' at that. And then you get all these technical journals and everything, you get all the information you can out of those too. Get your sales people out there and see what's on the horizon.

SW: Always, I guess that's the nature of the beast, though, you're sort of, being it's an auxiliary industry it's more or less dependent on that.

BS: Oh yeah.

SW: That commodity, that oil.

BS: Exactly right and that's why we were ver- [Chuckling] we were very dependent on that oil. Oil and natural gas, man, that was the name of the game. Very dependent.

SW: Now they s-, I still notice though they do, they still have boats, they still do use boats.

BS: Oh yeah.

SW: You can't do everything out of a helicopter, you gotta-

BS: No, some equipment's way too big for a helicopter even think about takin' out there.

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SW: But-

BS: And they transport fuel offshore and everything else, so, yeah, we couldn't do that with a helicopter.

SW: But as you say, it just, it made up for itself, though, in terms of being able to transport and save overtime on people and some equipment and everything.

BS: Right.

SW: Even though the, which one's more expensive? Shipping stuff in a boat to the platform or flying 'em out in a helicopter? Was the boat expensive as well?

BS: Oh the boats are very expensive, too. Oh, boats are probably more expensive than the helicopter. I don't really know what b-, what the boat rates are runnin', but uh, they're probably expensive, too. [Slight pause] [Inaudible] And their rates went up just like everybody else's every year.

SW: Okay. [Pause] Who did you work with? Starting back from the beginning, was it all guys that were out there [Inaudible], were there any, ever, did you ever see, have any women pilots or-

BS: No, we all guy pilots. I mean, all guys. Our first women pilot that I became aware of I think was uh, probably in... early '70s. You know, [Inaudible, seems to be saying he has to do something]

[RECORDING TURNED OFF AND BACK ON]

SW: I like to set it back to where the person can move around as much as possible. Alright. Uh... let's see, I think had asked you about the first woman you ever saw as a pilot. I guess it's just, is it just not in a, not a sector of the industry where you see a lot of women?

BS: [Inaudible], yeah, there aren't that many, I don't think there, well, I know back then there weren't that many women helicopter pilots. Probably still aren't that many women helicopter pilots. And if there are they don't, I don't think there are a lot of 'em that like the offshore duty. It's different, you know. 'Course there was a lot of women workin' offshore with the oil companies now, too, and service companies. Lot of 'em. So everything's changed. I don't know if we, if PHI has any women pilots anymore or not.

SW: Yeah-

BS: They come and go and, in fact they're probably more transient than the guys are.

SW: Okay. 'C-, I didn't think to ask that to Ed. Of course we didn't interview him. He was just showing us around. And that kind of thing. Well that's interesting. Ah, there's one thing I've been meaning to ask you all along and we keep side tr-, g-, which is good because the stories are good, the danger, I mean, which was more dangerous in your opinion, the helicopter or the airplane?

BS: Helicopter or an airplane? [Pause] To me there's no difference, although if you look at it realistically, there's a lot more movin' parts on a helicopter. So you would have to say mechanically-wise probably a helicopter's a little more dangerous than an airplane because of the number of movin' parts. But otherwise, I never felt uncomfortable in one, I always felt very comfortable in it just like gettin' in, strappin' in, it's like gettin' in a car and puttin' a seatbelt on, you know. Never felt uncomfortable. Either in an airplane or a helicopter. But I think because of the number of rotating parts and moving parts the helicopter is probably maybe prone to more problems than an airplane.

SW: The chance that something can go wrong. [Chuckles]

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BS: Right, yeah, it's greater, absolutely.

SW: You ever had any accidents or anything?

BS: No, na uh.

SW: A 100 percent safety record.

BS: I've never, I've had one c-, uh, one, I had to make an emergency landing one time, but it was a successful one. I lost partial engine power and I couldn't keep, I could not keep s-, level flight, so I had to descend and land it back at the heliport in Leeville. But, no, other than that I had no incidents or accidents in the 10 years that I flew for hire. And even after that when I'd go to the field bases when I was in management, didn't have any either, so I was fortunate.

SW: So even as a manager you had to fly still.

BS: Oh yeah I took-

SW: [Inaudible, overlapping speech]-

BS: I take the helicopter and go fly it, 'cause the base is like goin' to Rockport, Texas, or Sabine, Texas, or Galveston, or even Venice. Just jumpin', it was a lot faster gettin' in a helicopter and flyin' down there than drivin'.

SW: Did you guys look forward to that when y'all were in management?

BS: Oh absolutely.

SW: A chance to go fly.

BS: Oh yeah. Yeah, it's probably more fun because flyin' offshore it's, in the case of where you're based offshore and you just hop around these platforms it's like a taxi driver. And if you're actually makin' the crew changes, big crew change, it's like a bus driver, you know. They're all scheduled, you know what you're gonna do, before you go out you know what you're gonna be doing the next day, the next day, and the next day. So flyin' to field bases was a little bit different, it's... it was different just about all the time.

SW: Not as monotonous.

BS: Right. Oh definitely, no.

SW: What about PHI safety record overall? I think Ed said that they had a pretty exemplary record.

BS: We, overall for the length of time we've been in business I'd say it is extremely exemplary [sic]. We had our, we had rough time. We've had, we had years where we had more accidents than we should've. But overall I'd say we have an excellent safety record. And some of those accidents were uh... maintenance and not necessarily mechanics, but mechanical parts breakin' and so forth, so, in fact some of 'em were parts breakin' that could not be detected until they actually failed. So gotta take all that into account, too. But overall we had a very, very good safety record. And they still do.

SW: D-, is it like they say things come in three, you'll have an accident and you'll notice two more or two more incidents really close by, and it seems like everything happened all at the same time?

BS: You know, when they first told me that I didn't believe it, but if you take note of it that's the way, it normally does seem like it does run in threes for some reason and I have no idea why, but it sure does. It, 'fact if we had one

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and hadn't had any in a long time, man it's, one thing that was at the back of your mind, you know, "Man, what's gonna be next? Where, when?" All serious. And sometimes it's no more than an incident, but still. It normally does run in threes.

SW: My mother's been tellin' me that for years and she keeps smilin' when I tell her, "Na, that's just, you just notice it when it's in threes." [Chuckles]

BS: I thought it was just helicopters that they're talked about, but I didn't believe it at first, but [Chuckles] put a little more credence to it now. [Laughs]

SW: To it now, yeah. Definitely. Um... in your opinion how did, what did oil do for the City of Lafayette? The oil patch?

BS: Damn near ruined it in the '80s. [Chuckling] There was just about no more Lafayette in the '80s. I, it did a lot of good, I guess, for a long time. In fact it probably did a lot of good until the mi-, mid '80s and then it got hit real hard and then the diversification came about then too, and [didn't/never?] seemed like none of the city or the businesses didn't rely on the oil business that much anymore, which was good. So now you get a blip you don't feel it much 'cause there aren't many oil companies here anymore either, you know. I think Ocean Energys, I saw they were bought out by [Dublin?] the other day. They'll probably be movin' out then. Union Oil, they probably still have a little place on Ambassador Caffery, but there is, there aren't, isn't much in the way of oil companies here anymore. There's some service companies, but those are relatively small compared to what we had in the mid '80s. But it just, well, it probably taught Lafayette a good lesson, the oil business. [Laughing] A very good lesson.

SW: A necessary lesson.

BS: You bet, I think it probably did.

SW: I just find it interesting that you have all these uh, these auxiliary industries that, support industries, and the helicopters is definitely one of those.

BS: Oh yeah.

SW: But you guys are, it seems to me you're so integral to the whole process that even when the oil patch goes into a dive, you guys stay here. PHI stayed here, didn't move out. Y'all lost some employees, but-

BS: Right. But you, even you take a look at, well look at all your other service companies, the larger ones who are just as integral. Franks Casing Crew, for instance, those guys they stayed right there, oh, there's a lot of 'em. You got Halliburton and all this. There's just, ooh, even some of the smaller wireline companies. I mean they weathered it out, just hung in there and stayed right there.

SW: Was it, you think it was the size of PHI, the size of it and the resources that they had that really helped that?

BS: Oh I think it does help, yeah. You get, I think the size has a lot. Of course, sometimes you fall harder, too, the bigger you are.

SW: Sure.

BS: It comes a lot faster, but they managed to stay ahead of it. Management managed to stay ahead of it, so.

SW: Perhaps that's why those mom and pops went down because when there was less business to go around you guys still had the fleet and it kind of hurt them.

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BS: Yep.

SW: It's interesting we callin' a little helicopter outfit a "mom and pop" thing. [Chuckles]

BS: [Chuckling] Yeah, right.

SW: But I mean I guess it's a good descriptor for it.

BS: That's what we always called 'em, so, the smaller ones.

SW: Um... hm, you have any regrets about your career?

BS: None at all. Absolutely none. It's... it's been rewarding as far as fulfilling and it's, and economically it's been very good to me. I don't have regret one, not a regret. I'd do it all over just the way I did it.

SW: Yeah, that was my next question. Twenty years old and lookin' for somethin' to do-

BS: I'd do it all over again. I wouldn't even hesitate. And the same with growin' up, I'd wanna go that same route too. On the farm for 18 years. Even though it was hard work, rough, I'd go that same route, 'cause I think we all learned... more about work ethic, life and everything else being raised on a farm. It's a little different today than it was then, we didn't have no, we didn't have no, we didn't have tractors with cabs on 'em and heaters and air conditioners and radios on them. [Chuckles]

SW: When I was 10 years old I didn't have a cell phone either.

BS: Yeah, that's right. Absolutely right.

SW: I mean I can even see it now with just the kids. I mean, my parents always told me that I had more than them and I'm lookin' at kids [Inaudible, overlapping speech]

BS: Oh yeah.

SW: I can already see it and I don't have kids yet, but they have more than me.

BS: Oh yeah.

SW: I guess that's just the way it goes, huh?

BS: Yeah, that's why I keep tellin', I'm on my second marriage and I have a step-son and he's 20 and I keep tellin' him that, you know, and my wife says I shouldn't, but how good they got it today compared to what we had. And he just tells me, "Man, this is the year 2000, man, this is the year 2000." [Chuckles] So that's the way it works.

SW: Yeah, yeah. And I guess we were the same when we were [younger?].

BS: Oh yeah. After 20 years from now it'll be same way for them when their kids are growin' up.

SW: That's, pretty much covered what I wanted to cover. Did you wanna add anything? Do you have any interesting stories that might-

BS: No, I just wish I would've kept a diary when I was, from the first time I started. It'd be a best seller. [Slight pause] [Chuckling] 'Cause there's a lot of things that, well, you know, the old days we weren't regulated like we're regulated today. I mean, today we're regulated up the whazoo by insurance companies, the government, attorneys and

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everything. Back in the old days, you did what you had to get the job done. And that was it. I mean, nobody, if you stayed out of trouble, you didn't get into any accidents or anything, nobody bothered, you know. But today, whew! [Slight pause] It's like you got the big eye on you all the time, you know. [Chuckles] And the regulations are a lot more stringent. So.

SW: That's-

BS: That's it.

SW: That's what I've heard a lot about, just everybody, everybody I've interviewed so far was back in those days, as long as you didn't break anything.

BS: Oh yeah.

SW: Or hurt anybody, everything was alright.

BS: Abso-

SW: But now-

BS: Oh now, no, you gotta follow the, everything to a tee. I mean, to a tee. And damn, the insurance companies and the attorneys just about run your business for you, I mean, well and, well, and the government, too.

SW: Yeah, there you go.

BS: You can't do a whole lot without, on your own anymore. You wanna be in business, you're gonna do it like this, so you follow all those guidelines, you know.

SW: Yeah. And you gotta jump through the hoops.

BS: You gotta know 'em. So, no, that's all I have.

SW: Do you still have the opportunity to fly?

BS: Pardon?

SW: You still have the opportunity to fly?

BS: No, I haven't flown in... three, four years now. No, I keep sayin' I win the PowerBall I'm either gonna buy, I gotta camp at [Inaudible], I'm either gonna a helicopter or an airplane and I'll fly back and forth. [Chuckles]

SW: I have dreams about the PowerBall.

BS: But those chances are very slim I think. [Laughs]

SW: Well Mister Schrick I appreciate it.

BS: Your welcome. Thank you.

SW: Turn-

[END OF RECORDING]