

# AMERICA'S WHIRLYBIRD AIRLINES

In the concluding half of his two-part series on the rise and fall of the USA's rotary-wing airlines, **DAVID H. STRINGER** picks up the story at the turn of the 1960s, when, after more than a decade of pioneering commercial helicopter operations, the outlook for the "choppers" who had thrived in such a challenging market looked rosy. But was it?

**I**N 1960, AS the new decade dawned, the future looked bright for America's helicopter airlines. All three of the country's Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB)-certificated rotary-wing carriers — in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles — were posting profits. The most profitable by far was Chicago Helicopter Airways (CHA), which reported a \$230,000 net income in 1959, some ten times the amount posted by New York Airways (NYA), and more than quadruple the profit reported by Los Angeles Airways (LAA).

## THE WINDY CITY

CHA was so popular because it was shuttling passengers between the city's Midway Airport (then the world's busiest) — which could not handle the new jetliners being introduced in the long-haul and heavily travelled markets — and the newer O'Hare Field on the city's north-western outskirts, which had plenty of runway space to accommodate the turbojets. As a result, hundreds of connecting passengers found themselves flying into Midway in piston-engined propliners before being forced to transfer to O'Hare for their outbound jet flight to the West Coast or to a foreign destination. Wisely, CHA had set the fare between the two airports at a cheaper rate than a taxi ride; the journey was also much faster (and more exciting!).

In addition to these flights connecting the two airports, CHA also transported passengers from both O'Hare and Midway to Meigs Field, a small single-runway commuter airport on the lakefront, adjacent to downtown Chicago. These flights were very popular too. Finally, CHA's route structure reached out to two suburban communities: Winnetka, on the wealthy north side, and Gary, Indiana, an industrial city 25 miles (40km) south-east of Midway Airport.

The 30,000 passengers per month that CHA was carrying prompted its management to order five of the latest-model helicopters — Sikorsky S-61s, with two turbine engines and outfitted with 25 seats — for delivery in 1961. Things were looking good for CHA, but that outlook was about to change.

**ABOVE RIGHT A 1962 American Airlines promotional item extolling the virtues of helicopter operations in the USA's big cities. BELOW The prototype Vertol (Boeing-Vertol from 1960) Model 107, N74060, was demonstrated to New York Airways in a spurious colour scheme in December 1959, the airline placing an order for five in January 1960.**

TAH ARCHIVE



AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



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