Carson Helicopters

For nearly twenty years, Oregon has been the home to Carson Helicopters, Inc., which operates a fleet of heavy-lift helicopters from its headquarters in Grants Pass. The brainchild of engineer Frank Carson, the company got its start in 1958, when Carson sold the first helicopter he built, and bought a farm in Perkasie, Pennsylvania—still the company's 81-acre East Coast headquarters.

Carson Helicopters entered the heavy-lifting business in 1963 and over the years developed engineering modifications that increased lift, speed, and fuel-efficiency. The company holds twenty FAA approvals for modifications of the Sikorsky S61. One was to the Composite Main Rotor Blade, which permits the Sikorsky S61 to carry an additional 2,000 pounds. In 2008, Sikorsky contracted with Carson to upgrade and modernize the existing fleet of S61 helicopters.

Carson also operates a fleet of helicopters that can be contracted for oil exploration, construction, firefighting, search and rescue, and logging. Since the 1980s, Carson has been involved in firefighting, providing helicopters for the Forest Service. The importance of logging and firefighting in Oregon led Carson to establish a West Coast office in 1991, first in Jacksonville and later in Grants Pass. The Grants Pass site employs about 180 people, operates Carson's fleet of Sikorsky S-61 helicopters, and handles all domestic and international operations. The East Coast division focuses on research and development, overhaul work, and sales of rotor blades.

Firefighting has also driven engineering applications, and in 2004 Carson introduced its Fire King helicopter, a Sikorsky S-61 with a 1,000-gallon water tank. The increased emphasis on firefighting has had a tragic side as well. In 2008, two Carson pilots and seven firefighters were killed in a crash fighting a fire in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

Written by Edwin Battistella

Further Reading:

"Firefighter Accident Is Copter Company's First." *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 8, 2008.

Carson Helicopters. http://www.carsonhelicopters.com/about_carson.htm

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