



## Alan Bristow 1923 – 2009

Alan Bristow, one of the world's helicopter pioneers, died at the end of April at the age of 85. Having learned to fly helicopters in 1944 and created one of the world's largest helicopter service companies, he knew all the great men, including Igor Sikorsky and Jimmy Viner, Arthur Young, Charlie Kaman, Stanley Hiller and Frank Piasecki. An aviator through and through, Bristow flew his King Air until he was 84 and died leaving a half-finished tenth-scale Tiger Moth beside his wheelchair.

Bristow joined the Merchant Navy when war broke out on his 16th birthday and survived two sinkings before jumping ship to join the Fleet Air Arm in 1943. Sent to Canada, he learned to fly on Cornells and Harvards before being ordered to New York's Floyd Bennett Field to learn to fly the Sikorsky R4. He was the first pilot to land a helicopter on a battleship under way, and test-flew the Luftwaffe's Focke-Achgelis Fa223 helicopter along with Jean Boulet, later chief test pilot for

Aerospatiale, in 1946. He became Westland Aircraft's first helicopter test pilot when it contracted to produce a version of the Sikorsky S51, the Dragonfly, working under Harald Penrose at a time when 25 percent of the test pilot population was being killed each year. Bristow survived a tail rotor failure and many engine failures. On one occasion Alvis delivered a batch of engines with cross-threaded cylinder head bolts, and six of them failed under Bristow in a single day when he tried to deliver them – the MoD paid cash on delivery and Westlands needed the money. He set speed records between London and Paris and won the Royal Aero Club's silver medal for valour after flying to the relief of the Wolf Rock lighthouse, whose keepers had been cut off by weather for weeks and were running out of food. The episode almost killed Bristow when a keeper hooked his hoist cable to the lighthouse gallery rail, rendering the helicopter uncontrollable, but crewman Les Swain chopped the cable with bolt-cutters.

Bristow, a squat, powerful man who was an accomplished exponent of a brutal type of shipboard boxing in which men fought while tied together at the ankle, was always on a short fuse and was sacked after knocking out

Westlands' sales director, then picking him up by the ears and banging his head against the wall. He found work in France as operations director for Helicop-Air, training pilots, crop-dusting, and flying dangerous stunts for publicity purposes. Once, the trapeze of a circus act he'd been carrying became wrapped around his tail rotor drive shaft and tore off the tailboom, and on another occasion he crashed while dusting oranges in Algeria when overcome by DDT fumes. When one of the engine-mounting bolts of his Hiller 12A sheared while spraying the tsetse fly in Senegal he repaired the helicopter with baling wire and flew it 30km to Dakar.

Bristow went to Indochina to try to sell Hillers to the French Armée de l'Air, who were fighting a vicious colonial war there. He rescued four French soldiers under Viet Minh fire and was awarded the Croix de Guerre before managing to sell eight Hillers, then threw in his lot with a group of ex-SS mercenaries who were leaving the Foreign Legion to join a pirate whaling fleet run by Aristotle Onassis. Bristow convinced Onassis he needed a helicopter to improve his whale-spotting and went to the Antarctic on the *Olympic Challenger*. Hiller had promised him

a time-served mechanic but could only find one man who'd agree to go, an ex-Marine called Joe Soloy who needed money to pay for an operation on his son's toes. Soloy knew next to nothing about helicopters but was a quick study. He and Bristow got on famously, and Soloy went on to build the Soloy Corporation, a billion-dollar company which created turbine conversions for aircraft and helicopters.

Flying in the Antarctic was fraught and dangerous, and on one occasion Bristow survived only by landing on an iceberg with iced-up blades and waiting for the ship to come and get him. Other whaling companies saw the advantage of having helicopters, and Bristow was able to sell Dragonflies and later Whirlwinds to British and Norwegian customers. His first big financial coup came in 1955 when he sold the patents for a helicopter-borne humane killer for whales to the Netherlands Whaling Company, together with several helicopters and an operating contract. By then Bristow had met the legless fighter ace Douglas Bader who was in charge

exploits came in 1979 when he extracted all his personnel and most of his helicopters from Iran in a dawn operation under the guns of the Ayatollah Khomeini's Revolutionary Guard. Author James Clavell, a lifelong friend of Bristow and a director of some of his companies, wrote a book, *Whirlwind*, which was a fictionalized account of the operation. Bristow resigned in 1985 in an argument with Lord Cayzer over Bristow's offer of a seat on the board to Bobby Suharto, son of the Indonesian president. Cayzer arranged to buy Bristow out, leaving him with no financial interest in the company he had founded.

The following year Bristow, a staunch Tory Party supporter who had provided helicopters gratis to Mrs Thatcher during election campaigns, mounted a takeover bid for Westland Helicopters, but the bid foundered after he had built a majority stake when he discovered a £41 million government loan that had not been declared in the company's books. In a bewildering series of political machinations, Westland was instead delivered into the hands of Sikorsky, leading to the



of Shell Oil's aviation interests worldwide, and had started oil support operations in the Persian Gulf.

Bristow was a tax exile in Bermuda in 1959 when he was tracked down by Freddie Laker, who wanted to buy Bristow Helicopters on behalf of Air Holdings Ltd, a joint venture between blue chip companies including P&O, Lord Cayzer's British & Commonwealth, Eagle Star and Lazards who had got together to form the private airline British United Airways. Bristow was happy to sell a stake in order to get access to friendly capital, but his and Laker's valuations of the company were £67,000 apart – enough to buy a row of houses in Kensington at that time. They settled the issue by tossing a coin at a lunch after which Bristow's accountant George Fry needed treatment for heart palpitations. Bristow won.

Bristow Helicopters Ltd expanded at breakneck pace, with Bristow gambling everything on the success of North Sea gas and oil exploration and seeing his risk amply rewarded. In 1968 he took over as chief executive of loss-making British United Airways and stabilized it before selling it to Caledonian Airways and returning to Bristow Helicopters. One of his headline-making

resignation of two Cabinet ministers, Michael Heseltine and Leon Brittan. At one of several Parliamentary inquiries into the deal Bristow revealed he had twice been offered a knighthood by Tory grandees to switch sides, once by Lord King, once by Lord Forte. The furore destroyed his long-standing friendships with both men. Later Alexander Haig, president of Sikorsky's parent company United Technologies, told Bristow he'd taken Westland in payment for American spy plane data provided to the British during the Falklands War when he was Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State. Bristow always maintained Westlands should have become part of the Eurocopter consortium, as he had intended.

Alan Bristow could be terrifying in a rage and had a reputation for sacking people on a whim, but many of his pilots and executives stayed with him for ten, twenty, even thirty years. When he chose, he could charm the birds out of the air. He was loyal and generous to those who had worked for him and retained the friendship of his workforce to the end of his life.

Bristow leaves a wife, Heather, and a son, Laurence. His first wife Jean and daughter Lynda predeceased him. ■



**Left: Bristow in Saigon in 1949, trying to sell a Hiller to Emperor Bao Dai**  
**Above: the Wolf Rock relief in February 1948 made headlines around the world**  
**Below: Bristow with Neville Duke at a test pilots' reunion at Popham in 2006**

