



‘We will get there’

HAI Chair Nicole Battjes wears a number of hats. Not only is she serving the association both as its figurehead and member of the HAI strategic planning committee, she is also the founder and President of Honolulu’s Rainbow Helicopters. Gideon Ewers found a window in her hectic schedule.

For Nicole Battjes the relationship with aviation began early. At 16 she began flying in fixed wing aircraft, gaining her PPL (A) far from Hawaii’s balmy climate and shores.

Battjes’ helicopter epiphany had to wait until she had completed her studies at Eastern Michigan University, when she “fell in love with helicopters” and moved to the west coast and California to begin helicopter flight training.

Following completion of her PPL (H), Battjes secured a position as the

manager of Sonoma Helicopters, a small flight school in the Napa Sonoma area of Northern California’s wine country.

She recalls: “They had three Robinsons, an R44 and two R22s, and I did everything there – answered the phones, did the scheduling, helped out with maintenance in the hangar.”

Every aspect of the business in fact, with the exception of flying, as Battjes was yet to acquire a commercial licence.

That came thanks to the awarding of a scholarship from the International

Organisation of Women Pilots – the 99s – which enabled her to add the vital CPL to her resume.

Starting from scratch

The time at Sonoma also revealed another latent trait to Battjes – an affinity for and enjoyment of the sales side of business.

She says: “I’d been that kid in school selling my classmates candy from my locker, that kind of thing, but what I found when I was at Sonoma and especially when we began to develop air tours of the wine country was that I really enjoyed the sales side of the business.

“Obviously, I enjoyed the flying as well as the negotiations and business running aspects, but I found that with sales and the hospitality side the fireworks really went off.

“It’s funny, I talk to people running

“When you are in my situation, a business owner with no partners or shareholders to keep happy, you have the luxury of coming in each day and saying ‘What is it that I really want to do?’”

Nicole Battjes, founder and President,
Rainbow Helicopters



As well as the air tours side of its operation, Rainbow Helicopters is the Robinson dealer and an authorised service centre for the Hawaiian Islands. Image: Rainbow Helicopters

businesses and they say the whole sales side is not much fun. But not me, I really love it!”

After a year of running the company and at the ripe old age of 27, Battjes had another epiphany.

“I thought, wow, I can do this and there is absolutely no reason why I can’t do this for myself. Of course, I had no idea what I was getting into!”

In any case on the 13th of July 2011, with US\$5,000 in the bank, Battjes founded Rainbow Helicopters.

“That’s what I started with,” she says. “I had no outside investors or family fortune or funding from friends or anything like that – it was from the ground up with a single leased R44 and I’m proud of that.”

Of course, the realities of running a start-up air tours operation meant that once again Battjes’ multitasking skills were called to the fore.

“In the beginning I was flying the tours around Oahu,” she says. “But I was doing everything else too. I drove the shuttle van, answered the reservations phone,

worked in maintenance – not doing it, you understand, but managing it, the whole works.”

Support network

From those humble beginnings the vision grew and today, 13 years on, Rainbow Helicopters is a Part 135 operation that boasts a growing fleet of two Airbus H125s and six Robinson R44s.

The company employs a staff of 55, and in addition to the air tours side of the operation it is also the Robinson dealer for the Hawaiian Islands, as well as an authorised service centre.

Even with the additional strings to the Rainbow, the bulk of the company’s work remains directly related to the tour business and support of it.

“Hawaii is a relatively small market

compared with, say, California,” Battjes tells me. “So we don’t sell many helicopters and the bulk of the support work we do is for our own fleet.

“But the partnership works well for us and for Robinson too, since we have a dealer relationship with them and they have a support network node in Hawaii.

“So overall, more than 90 per cent of the business remains in the tours operation.”

While the opportunity to move into other types of aerial work is certainly there, the remoteness of some of Hawaii’s terrain makes helicopters an indispensable tool for tasks like utility maintenance and construction – though it’s not something that appeals to Battjes.

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shareholders to keep happy, you have the luxury of coming in each day and saying ‘What is it that I really want to do?’

“We’ve had approaches to get into that kind of work, but it just doesn’t attract me. You can make good money on some of those contracts, but I prefer to stay in our lane, to focus on what we are really good at, and for us that’s flying tours, doing aerial photography and videography.”

Pilot management

An area of concern for many operators is the challenge of sourcing enough pilots and maintenance staff.

But perhaps not only because of the desirability of living and working in Hawaii, the problem isn’t as pronounced for Rainbow Helicopters as it is elsewhere.

Battjes agrees it might be a factor but thinks that the composition of the fleet also counts for something.

She says: “As well as all the other jobs in the company I was our Chief Pilot until last year we hired one, so I’ve been 100 per cent involved in pilot recruitment from the beginning and done a lot of pilot management in my career.

“In fact, I’m still involved in our hiring process even now. Generally speaking, we have a pretty good pool of applicants.

“Part of that might be the location, but as much is that we are one of the few operators with a fleet of R44s and H125s – so that we can bring people in with lower time than they’d typically need to go into a turbine job and bring them along as they build time and experience and they can make that turbine transition and stay with the company. I think candidates find that an attractive idea.”

Vision thing

Clearly Battjes has a vision for the future of her creation, Rainbow Helicopters, but what of the industry as a whole?

What does the world look like with her Chairman of HAI hat on and how does she see the work of the Association evolving after 75 years of representation?

“We are in a super-exciting time for the industry,” she says. “By which I mean the whole of the vertical lift sector, helicopters, eVTOLs UAVs right

across the board. If you look at the industry today, we are kind of dating but we haven’t made that commitment to move in together or get married yet.

“I guess a better idea would be to call it an integration, but the potential is incredible. You have the named side of things, of course, with greater efficiencies in existing technologies.

“The whole world of potential from battery-powered vehicles bringing another whole new category to the way we do things. And then when you bring in the unmanned portion, well, that too is a very exciting prospect.”

Which isn’t to suggest that Battjes is overly starry-eyed about the timelines for the arrival of the new future.

“There are a lot of different perspectives out there right now about how the eVTOLs are going to play out,” she says.

“On the one hand you have the people that believe that it will be a reality very soon, and on the other there are others who are the naysayers.

“I don’t know what kind of timeline it will have because I’m not a developer or whatever, but I’m convinced that it will happen. We’ll get there, we will definitely get there.”

The right stuff

While it’s easy to focus on headline factors like improved sustainability and performance, Battjes says that safety also has to be close to the front of the industry’s mind.

“Sometimes we talk a lot about the speed that we can do things – get excited about how quickly we can move packages from A to B. But more important there are projects out there which could change the way we fly and make it safer.

“As an operator, that’s what I think about all the time. In aviation we are always striving to be as safe as possible, right? It’s what we think about all the time, it’s what makes us different from most other industries.

“If I go into a coffee shop and order a latte and they give me a cappuccino it’s not the end of the world. We don’t have that option. We have to be 100 per cent right 100 per cent of the time.”

Battjes points to initiatives like the FAA’s voluntary Safety Management System (SMS) programme as a prime example of the kind of initiative HAI is fostering and which has yielded immediate benefits.

“By being part of the programme, I know that we are compliant with Part 5,

Founded in July 2011, Rainbow Helicopters is a Part 135 operation that today boasts a growing fleet of two Airbus H125s and six Robinson R44s. Image: Rainbow Helicopters



evaluating and managing risk in a really efficient and effective way. So I can go to bed every night knowing that I've put every effort into the safety goal."

Staying relevant

But what of the future, how will the HAI be as relevant in the next 75 years as it has been in the last?

According to Battjes, it's a question that has been at the forefront of not only the association's but her mind in recent years, and will result in a new identity for HAI that will reflect its goals.

At the heart of the new identity, which will be announced at this year's Heli-Expo welcome reception, is a good deal of background work. After all, what's in a name?

"For the last three years I've been the Chairman of HAI's Strategic Planning Committee and we, as well as the HAI

board and staff, have put in a huge amount of work to define who we are and what our purpose is," says Battjes.

"And that ties to the new identity. It's not just a case of hiring a marketing agency to come up with the concept. We really looked hard at who we are and what we do.

"We've done the work, carried out the research, run the workshops, analysed the data. We found out that we are everyone in vertical lift – we are

helicopters, we are VTOL UAVs, we are eVTOLs.

"We are the OEMs, suppliers and innovators and come up with an entire new strategy for the association. Part of that is the rebranding of not only the association but Heli-Expo too.

"So you see, it's a lot more than a name change. It's about who we are as the vertical lift industry – all of it – and we are really excited about it." ■

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Rainbow Helicopters recognised by HAI for humanitarian service



Helicopter Association International (HAI) has announced Rainbow Helicopters is the recipient of the 2024 Salute to Excellence Humanitarian Service Award.

The award, sponsored by Sikorsky, honours the person or persons who best demonstrate the value of rotorcraft to the communities in which they operate by providing aid to those in need. It will be presented on 26 February at HAI HELI-EXPO 2024 in Anaheim, California.

Last year, on 9 August, employees of Oahu, Hawaii-based Rainbow Helicopters woke to the devastating news that a fire had destroyed the town of Lahaina, Maui.

They had an immediate and overwhelming desire to do something, anything, to help their greater Maui ohana – their Hawaiian family.

Throughout the day, the Rainbow Helicopters team used its wide-ranging network to learn what was needed. They soon received a clear message: people had left their homes with nothing, and

mothers and babies, in particular, needed immediate assistance.

Having just given birth six weeks earlier, Rainbow Helicopters founder and President Nicole Battjes sped into action. She sent her father-in-law and a Rainbow team member on a Costco run to buy as much milk formula, diapers, baby wipes, and other supplies that could fit in an Airbus AS350.

As the two purchased over \$4,000 worth of supplies, news spread among the rest of the Rainbow team. People stayed on past their shifts, and others returned to volunteer their time to aid in the humanitarian effort.

Mechanics ensured the helicopter was ready to fly, ground crew weighed loads, operations managers planned and oversaw loading, and pilots created the flight plan. On the morning of 11 August, the helicopter flew its first relief flight to Maui, landing at Kapalua Airport (PHJH), as close to Lahaina as it could safely land.

Ground-tour company volunteers met

the helicopter with vans to unload and transport the supplies to families in need. The helicopter then flew to Maui's international airport in Kahului, where the team loaded more supplies that couldn't get to Lahaina by ground and brought them to Kapalua. During the flights, the team saw firsthand Lahaina's complete destruction and the desperate need of its residents. They shared what they witnessed when they returned to Oahu, inspiring further action.

The Rainbow team established a GoFundMe account in hopes of raising \$1,000 to purchase supplies for the Lahaina-area residents. All told, the account raised over \$76,000, 100 per cent of which was used to purchase items for families affected by the fire. Rainbow also established a base of operations for physical donations from around Oahu, and over the next several weeks, the entire team donated hundreds of hours of their time to purchase, receive, and catalogue supplies, package and weigh loads, load helicopters, and fly relief missions.

"It took on a life of its own, and I was overwhelmed with pride in our team, our community, and those making donations," Battjes said of the response. "At one point, through our partnerships, we were receiving photographs of specific supplies individual families needed, and our team members were volunteering their time to run to stores to get them and put them on the next flight. It took extra effort to drive around Oahu to find everything. It was really incredible to see people making this effort, and it was a feeling of hope during such a tragic time."

To help with distribution, Rainbow partnered with several organisations, including Northwest Mothers Milk Bank in Tigard, Oregon, and local nonprofits Keiki O Ka 'Aina and Na 'Aikane o Maui, which helped distribute the supplies and provided Rainbow with specific requests from families.



Helping hand: clockwise from left, the Rainbow Helicopters team with supplies purchased to aid the residents of Lahaina, Maui.

