

DHS said it's filling a void for products in the Bell medium aftermarket sector, as well as other non-Bell products.
Mike Reyno Photo



Hitting the Mark

IN THREE SHORT YEARS, DART HAS QUICKLY BUILT A REPUTATION FOR BEING THE GO-TO PLACE FOR HELICOPTER OPERATORS NEEDING AFTERMARKET PARTS AND ACCESSORIES.

by Mike Reyno

As 2007 came to a close, Dart Helicopter Services (DHS) had inked yet another exclusive distribution agreement to market and sell one more manufacturer's product lines. This time, the deal was with Heli-Lynx of Stoney Creek, Ont., which designs and manufactures 25 different aftermarket products for Eurocopter AS 350 and AS 355 series helicopters.

As important as this contract was, though, it was just the latest in an impressive series of agreements announced by DHS since the company was founded by well known helicopter businessmen Jeff Shapiro, Ron Gladnick and Mike O'Reilly.

FILLING A NEED

Although DHS is only three years young, the helicopter parts and accessories company is well on its way to becoming a major worldwide resource for a large part of the industry. According to Jeff Shapiro, DHS president and CEO, this growing reputation has come from addressing a void that existed in aftermarket helicopter parts and accessories. "The void wasn't so much in the Bell light category," said Shapiro, "where there is a lot of options, but it was in the Bell medium category, as well as with other non-Bell products, like Eurocopter, AgustaWestland, Sikorsky and

Robinson"

It was because of this void that Shapiro joined with co-founders and partners Mike O'Reilly and Ron Gladnick to form DHS. Shapiro had come up through the ranks at Bell Helicopter Textron, leaving in 2003 as president and general manager of Bell subsidiary Edwards and Associates, parent company of Aeronautical Accessories. O'Reilly, meanwhile, is president and CEO of Eagle Copters in Calgary, Alta., and holds the same titles at DART Aerospace in Hawkesbury, Ont. Gladnick is president and CEO of Apical Industries in Oceanside, Calif., which is now wholly owned by DHS.



TOP LEFT Dart has the capability to custom paint fleet conversion landing gear kits to any color.

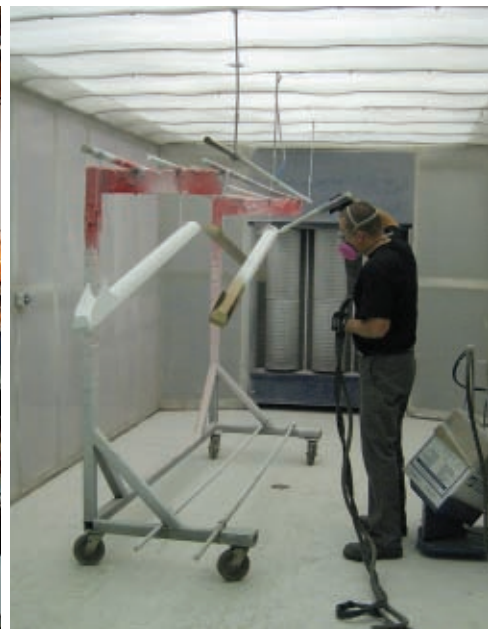
TOP RIGHT An example of a Geneva ENG system cockpit for an AS 350. Geneva works closely with the customer to develop a mission specific layout. **Gary Watson Photo**

LEFT Dart makes products that are superior to conventional replacement parts, including its patented Dart Round-I-Beam skidtube.

RIGHT Extensive state-of-the-art machining, like this six-axis CNC lathe, located at Apical's facility, is required for many DHS components. **Dan Megna Photo**

BOTTOM LEFT DHS subsidiary Apical produces a variety of patented helicopter flotation systems from its 30,000-square-foot, float and life raft production area. **Dan Megna Photo**

BOTTOM RIGHT The majority of DHS parts are powder coated for added protection. Here, we see the coating being applied to some step components in Dart's paint booth.



Company Profile DART HELICOPTER SERVICES



From its headquarters in Piney Flats, Tenn., DHS has grown from a design, manufacturing and distribution center that offered about 750 products, like bearpaws, floats and Dart Aerospace's trademarked I-Beam skid tubes, to become a powerhouse company that has close to 1,500 products listed in its 374-page 2008 catalog. Products offered by DHS include a collection of emergency flotation systems, landing gear products, electronic and avionics components, high definition cameras, passenger access steps and storage racks, brackets and hard points, cargo hooks and rappelling kits, fuel cells and fuel transfer systems, cabin interior panels and protective trim, emergency stretcher kits and ground handling wheels, and hundreds of other items from door rollers to bubble doors.

"Given our breadth of products, we like to think of ourselves as a one-stop shop that offers mission-specific solutions," said the company's director of worldwide sales, Peggy McDonald. McDonald, who has worked with DART Aerospace for the past 10 years, said DHS can offer operators certain synergies that others can't. "We can take care of most of their needs in one phone call. For example, for a Bell medium, we can sell them everything from replacement skid tubes, to vertical reference windows, to utility baskets. We take the headache out of having to call a variety of aftermarket suppliers."

For Abitibi Helicopter's director of maintenance, Hossein Golanbari, that's exactly why his company turns to DHS for many of its aftermarket

parts and accessories. All of the Calgary, Alta., based company's ships (AStars, 350FXes and a single Bell 205) are equipped, nose to tail, with Dart accessories. Said Golanbari: "The OEMs usually don't think of the bush operators when they are designing and certifying a helicopter, which is why operators like us have to turn to aftermarket suppliers to configure their aircraft for their specific mission. The variety of products that are offered by DHS cater to our specific needs and requirements, which makes them our one-stop aftermarket shop."

BALANCING ACT

DHS, together with its affiliates, employs approximately 150 people, and has quickly grown into a company with a wide global reach. Currently, the company has sales support centers in Hawkesbury; Vancouver; Oceanside, Calif.; Lafayette, La.; Barbados; England; Singapore; and Chile. How have they done it? Balance.

DHS's first step toward achieving this balance has been to form partnerships with various aftermarket suppliers. "We are an independent company, so private companies are much more comfortable forming partnerships with us," said Shapiro. In the past, he said helicopter operators turned to many "mom and pop" businesses for specific aftermarket helicopter parts and accessories, to enable them to do their job more efficiently, safely and at the lowest possible cost. Now, those same mom and pop businesses can market and distribute their products through one company.

TOP LEFT At the end of 2007, DHS inked a deal with Heli-Lynx to market 25 different products which that company designs and manufactures for AS 350 and AS 355 series helicopters. **Dan Megna Photo**

TOP RIGHT Dart's cargo expansion accessories, available on 15 different helicopter models, are recognized worldwide.

ABOVE LEFT One of the original products designed by Dart is its popular Bearpaw kit, which is available on everything from an R22 to a B412. **Barett Soroka Photo**

ABOVE RIGHT An interior trim component being produced on Dart's vacuum forming machine.

"That's exactly what brought us to DHS," said Heli-Lynx president Mike Whitter. "Our agreement with DHS allows us to focus on what we are good at. This agreement not only opens new doors, but it gives us a good level of credibility by being associated with a company like DHS."

DHS likes to form partnerships with companies that have outstanding or unique products, and that are trying to get further worldwide reach. By the end of 2007, DHS was already representing 15 companies offering nearly 1,500 products, 95 per cent of which are exclusive to DHS. "This is a win-win situation for both parties," said Shapiro, "we are giving them further reach into the worldwide helicopter market, and we get to add their products to our catalog If there is a high quality helicopter part or accessory available that will help operators achieve that goal, we want it in our catalog."

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This is certainly true for a company like Canam Aerospace, which specializes in external load products. In November 2006, Canam selected DHS to distribute their product lines, including cargo hooks, electric swivels, long lines, carousels, grapples and cargo nets.

WELCOME ABOARD

An aggressive acquisition strategy is the second part of DHS's balanced plan: acquiring supplemental type certificates (STCs) and companies that focus on particular products or helicopter types. In November 2006, DHS acquired 42 STCs from Era Helicopters, including auxiliary tanks, interior products, float systems, flight steps and avionics.

Soon after, DHS acquired Geneva Aviation Inc. of Kent, Wash. Geneva is one of a handful of companies in North America capable of designing, engineering and installing complex, STC'd, modular, high-definition broadcast systems for electronic news gathering, and multiple, integrated audio systems for law enforcement.

Currently, Geneva holds over 30 STCs, including consoles, audio systems, seatbelt kits and an assortment of AS 350 airframe kits. To further leverage Geneva's core competencies in audio, video, microwave and satellite telephone applications, allowing them to create more advanced systems, DHS has created an advanced develop-

ment center for this new acquisition.

The purchase of Geneva also meant DHS gained the rights to be a North American distributor of high-definition, gyro-stabilized camera systems made by Axsys Technologies (formerly Cineflex). Interestingly, though, while Geneva was acquired for its ENG and law enforcement STCs and completion work know-how, DHS is not getting into the ENG or law enforcement completion business. "We have made the decision to team with other completion centers, like Eagle Copters, Texas Aviation Services and several others that can carry out the work for us," said Shapiro, "we are just providing the STC'd parts and expertise to them."

In September 2007, DHS also acquired affiliate partner Apical Industries, which specializes in the design and manufacture of emergency flotation equipment. Apical owns over 40 patents including their innovative design of packing life rafts together with external floats. Despite the fact that DHS had already been working with Apical for three years at the time, Shapiro said the move strengthens its drive to significantly broaden its internal engineering and manufacturing capabilities. "Adding Apical as a permanent member of the growing DHS group of companies gives us additional engineering and manufacturing capability."

MORE THAN SKID TUBES

The third step that keeps DHS balanced is its ability to design, engineer and manufacture new products at any one of its three facilities with manufacturing capabilities. "We spend a lot of our revenues on R&D, which is where we feel there is more opportunity to grow DHS," said Shapiro.

Between its affiliated companies, DHS has over 30 engineers on staff that can take a product from conception to certification, through the Parts Manufacturer Approval process. Engineers work directly with customers in the development of innovative products, like new vertical reference windows, utility baskets and helicopter flotation devices. These are then produced using either Apical's or DART Aerospace's latest manufacturing technology available, including its new water cutting machine and five-axis milling machines.

In all, DHS and its affiliates own more than 400 product STCs and international equivalents, receiving certification on close to 80 of them in 2007 alone. "We like to think of ourselves as inventors," said Shapiro. "But, we are inventors born of others' needs."

By working closely with customers, DHS leverages their concerns and future needs. McDonald said that over the past year DHS has traveled worldwide, meeting with 392 small and large

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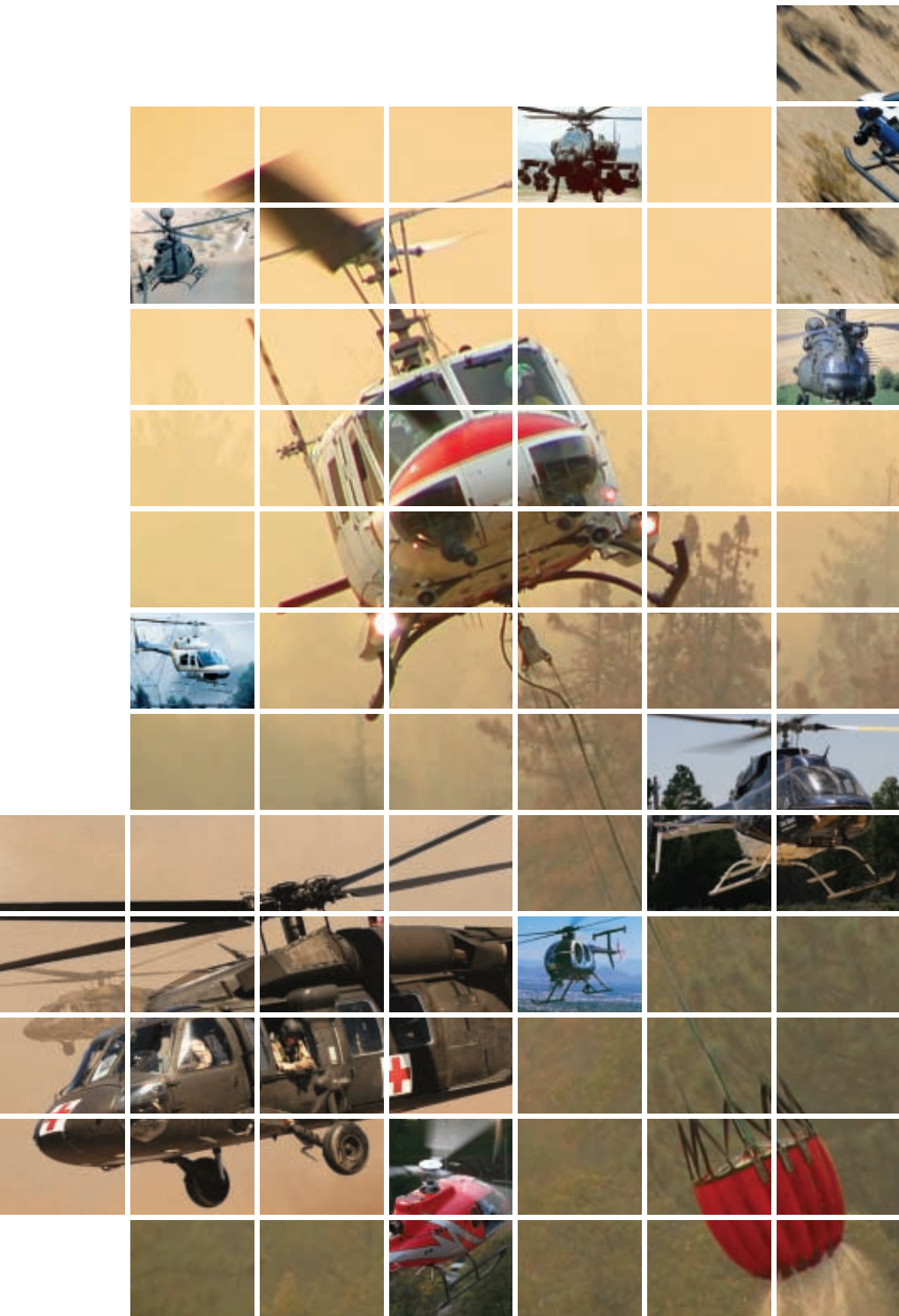


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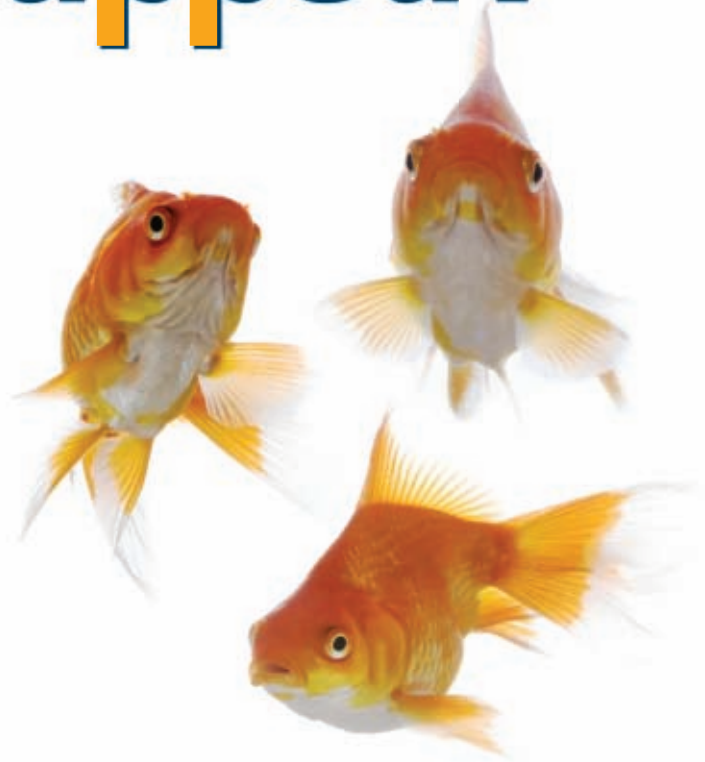
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DHS founders (l-r): Mike O'Reilly, Ron Gladnick and Jeff Shapiro. **Mel O'Reilly Photo**

operators alike, getting a better understanding of their concerns and adding value to each relationship. "People in the maintenance departments are our best designers," stated McDonald. "We listen to them, they tell us what they need and we try to come up with a cost-effective solution for them."

Shapiro cited one recent example where Era Helicopters approached DHS with concerns over the lack of nose wheel doors on the AW139. The utility version of the 139 operating in the offshore market does not have nose wheel doors like the corporate version does. Said Shapiro, "Era was complaining of noise and wind turbulence, as well as salt and grime that was getting into the actuators." To acquire the nose wheel doors from the OEM was cost prohibitive, so Apical worked with Era to develop bolt-on versions. "They are not only cheaper than the OEM [version], but also better designed and constructed, with lightweight carbon fiber material and closed-cell foam cores that cut down on wind turbulence and noise, improving the service life, as well as resistance to water absorption."

IN THE WORKS

Even with a doubling of its product offering over the last three years, Shapiro said there are still many new products in the works for 2008. "We examine some of the concerns that have been voiced by operators over the years and then come up with a cost-effective fix or new design that uses new technology." Some of those fixes or new designs include new air conditioners for various models of helicopters, carbon-fiber replacement panels instead of aluminium panels, a line of new cargo hooks, a high-definition microwave pod and antennae, a new digital audio system for the 412 and new rescue hoist mounts, to mention only a few.

"We just don't copy or reverse engineer other products. Many of these products were designed in the '60s and '70s. We look at what is available today in the way of materials and technology and apply it to our products, like the current air conditioner on a Bell 412 or AS 350. Weighing the components individually, the A/C for the AS 350, for example, weighs 108 pounds. We are design-

ing an A/C that will weigh closer to 50 pounds. Ours will also have a quick-detach compressor that can be removed in the off-season, further reducing the weight."

Over the past few years, DHS has also been working more closely with helicopter OEMs, providing them with mission-specific equipment that can be added to the helicopter on the assembly line. Shapiro said airframe manufacturers are focused on delivering safe, reliable helicopters capable of fulfilling most roles and missions operators have for the aircraft, but look to third-party companies for mission-specific equipment — whether Dart steps, bubble doors, a complete float system with externally mounted life rafts for an offshore-configured 412 or an avionics console

for a ENG-configured AS 350. "At the end of the day," said Shapiro, "the customer is much happier since their helicopter is configured exactly the way they want to suit their mission, versus having to configure the aircraft after the fact."

Where does DHS go from here? Shapiro said the final step in its balancing act will be increasing its product offering to other models of helicopters, including Eurocopter, AgustaWestland and Robinson. The company also wants to increase its core competencies in that respect. "When you get into a core competency, like skid landing gear, we now make them for all models of helicopters. We will do the same with other products that we currently only have certified for certain model types. We have only scratched the surface."

Mike Reyno is editor-in-chief, co-founder and co-publisher of Vertical Magazine. Mike has been involved in both fixed- and rotary-wing aviation publishing for over 16 years. He lives in Kitchener, Ont.



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