

# An Interview With L.A. Airways' Clarence M. Belinn

Lois C. Philmus



Clarence M. Belinn, Pres., L. A. Airways

*Q. Los Angeles Airways has evolved from a small mail carrier to a successful commuter helicopter airline. Where do you grow from here?*

A. There is no reason in the world why L. A. Airways should not be the commanding inter-urban feeder system in the state of California. We have a commanding lead now and we have plans to enhance that lead.

*Q. Won't that put you into direct competition with the local service airlines?*

A. No. Recent acts of the Civil Aeronautics Board have extended the traditional local service airlines into the big markets. This is going to force them into an equipment policy aimed at the longer hauls.

Bear in mind, the locals were originally set up to be feeder airlines. The new acts are going to leave a nice little patch for feeder service. We already belong in the local category. We will emerge as a feeder airline.

*Q. Does this premise trigger a potential for new helicopter airlines proliferating in a post-Vietnam surge?*

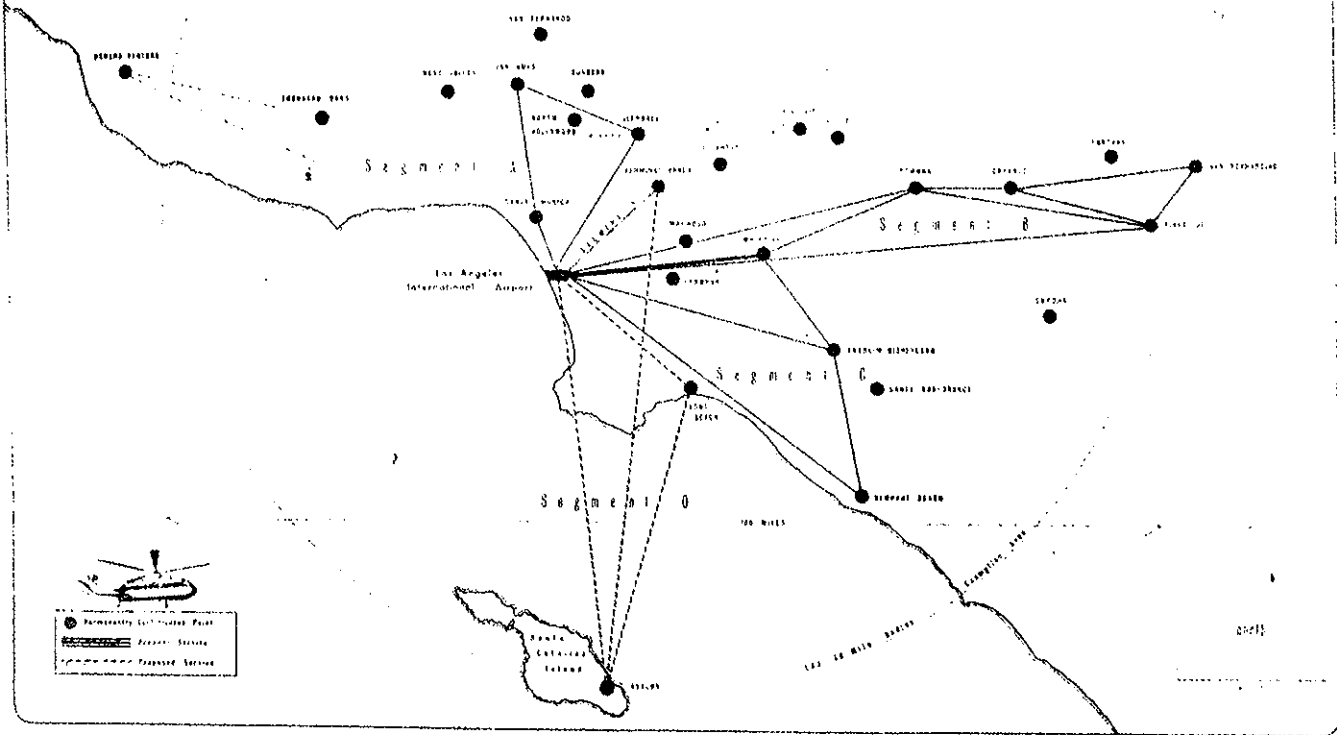
A. Not really. There aren't many places in the country that could support an operation like ours. There are, however, hundreds of places where you can do a taxi-type operation if you can get the costs down.

*Q. Since your goal is to emerge as a dominant feeder airline, you must have a particular interest in the development of the convertiplane?*

A. I'm not as optimistic about the convertiplane as I was five years ago. And I wasn't very optimistic then.

We get the backside of the problem first—the dramatic part. Then the realists come along and you get the front side. Here's a flying machine

## L. A. AIRWAYS SYSTEM MAP



that does everything an airplane can do and has almost all the advantages of a helicopter without a proportionate allocation of the distances.

The unfortunate part is it sounds good.

That is until you pick up the chips and you start finding the monumental problems. There are very, very serious problems of safety, both from the standpoint of dead man's curve (take off) and transition. As a result, you have to shovel in two shovels full of dirt where ordinarily you only need one.

Then you have to get down on the ground to serve the eyeball of your market.

Monumental problems, monumental. Not only from operation but cost. Relate that to the very few places in the U. S. where there is a demand for this kind of machine—you can count them on one hand.

Who's going to build—custom-build—a gadget that will, at least in my humble opinion, cost a billion dollars for the full envelope, including automatic devices?

Where's the pay dirt?

Do you put one of these gadgets on the downtown Los Angeles-to-airport run, shave maybe a half minute off the time and quadruple the price of the ticket?

**Q. Don't you believe the convertiplane will fill the gap between the helicopter and the jet transport market?**

A. The dividend comes in speed. You have to have the route to accommodate it. The com-

mercial helicopter will be an ideal machine for the northeast corridor—Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and all the way to Boston.

As a matter of fact, the gap between the helicopter and the long-range transport is narrowing. We have airplanes—air buses coming along now—that will carry a large volume over intermediate distances. The helicopter is advancing up to 150-mph speeds—narrowing the gap in the other direction.

I think this is squeezing out a requirement for a convertiplane.

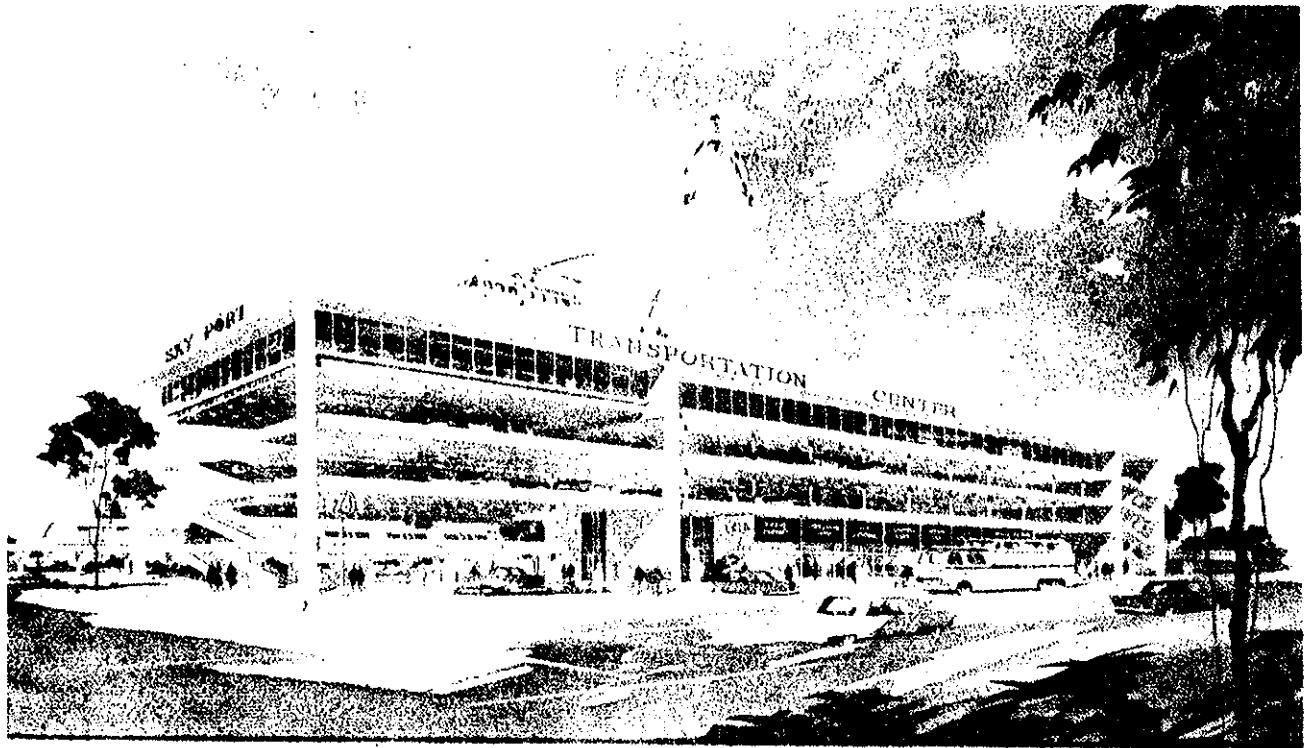
**Q. What are your re-equipment plans?**

A. We are basing our master plan on the pure helicopter at least through 1950. We are convinced that the future for the metropolitan type operation is in the pure helicopter.

Our plans have always been progressive. First, the single-engine Sikorsky S-51, then the S-55. Now we have the S-61. We have five and we're taking delivery of the last two more soon. We couldn't afford to let those two get away from us. They're the last two available in this form. When Congress killed the subsidy, it stopped anybody in his right mind from going out and buying helicopters so Sikorsky only cut metal for 10.

**Q. How long can the S-61 be practical in light of your route expansion plans?**

A. Our master plan assumes the 61 is the DC-3 of the helicopters for all practical pur-



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poses. It has a very considerable amount of economic fallout yet which is very important. We've put the big engines in all but two of the machines. We're getting a higher load capacity because the engines are more reliable. We've got some work to do in the rotor blades yet and some in the tail section.

We've got them modified to the point now that they are able to carry 28 full-grown passengers under all conceivable conditions with virtually no penalty for operation.

In other words, the 61 is good for another 10 more years as a practical machine.

**Q. What are your requirements after that?**

A. We'll need more capacity and frequency. But not beyond 40 passengers because then you're getting into a machine you can't live with environmentally. The 61 is a quiet little cozy buggy and we need that. And not beyond 150 mph. I think when you begin to exceed 150 mph you get into the problem of transition from VFR to IFR in places where the air is congested. No, I don't mean airlines—I mean private flying. Our experience is that when you get beyond 150 mph, you lose the speed advantage because you have to maneuver and cut back because of traffic. It's the edge of the economic plateau. You get quite a bit of utilization at that speed. Above, you lose the advantage, below you slow down—frankly, economically too far.

**Q. Are you "shopping" now beyond the 61?**

A. We're beginning to look at what Lockheed and Sikorsky and others are doing to re-engineer

the concept, based on the powerplant combinations that will be available in five or six years.

**Q. What if something better came along than the S-61 in less than 10 years?**

A. We'd buy it.

**Q. Are you talking to Lockheed seriously?**

A. Yes. Well, we're sure talking to them.

**Q. While we're talking about exotic equipment, let's hear your views on the Skylounge? You're participating in the HUD-sponsored study. What do you think about the operating aspects?**

A. I think the big money makers are going to be the lawyers. Our report is just being filed on the question of the interlocking aspects of the operation. It's bad enough to have to carry a passenger only 10 miles but compound that by two or three modes of transportation and you have your work cut out for you.

**Q. Do you think the HUD study is constructive?**

A. Oh, it could be. At least, it's the first time we've gotten any remuneration for what we've been doing on our own for the last 20 years.

Seriously, the Skycrane concept is a long way off. The year 1975 is a good brochure date. The Skycrane itself is flying now but it's years away for us. It's very inefficient and it costs twice as much to operate than the 61 per unit mile. The breakthrough on the crane will come when the data from Vietnam is in. There has to be a shakedown on those big engines. No one's pay-

ing much attention to economy now because the engine people are putting their all into the engines for the big transport.

I'm not optimistic about any kind of Sky-lor operation—feasible operation—being worked out under the present frame of reference. It can only be worked out by the carrier operating under the law and who is charged with the responsibility, under that law, to manage and operate such a vehicle as a business should be run.

I think the place where we get into some muddy water is whether we are a rehabilitation civic committee or whether we are an efficient carrier of goods.

**Q. Let's discuss the route expansion plans of L.A. Airways? What does the master plan call for in evolving into the feeder airline concept?**

A. Progressive stages again. Our ultimate goal is to provide feeder-line commutation type service for a 150-mile radius around Los Angeles. This means going as far north as Santa Barbara, as far south as San Diego and as far east as San Bernardino.

In the next few years, we'll extend our present segments in those directions. Next extensions will come north into the Oxnard-Ventura area and south over to Catalina Island. We can already produce a 28-to-30 minute schedule from downtown Los Angeles to downtown San Diego. Ultimately, Santa Barbara to San Diego with feeder stops will be ideal for the pure helicopter.

**Q. In light of the high cost of vertical living and the loss of your Federal subsidy, how do you propose to attract the passenger market that can support the route expansions?**

A. Beginning right now, we are going after the low-cost, high-volume business for starters.

Let me state emphatically that helicopter fares are too high. They have to come down. That's why Congress shot us down. We operate a machine that is so expensive that it caters only to a narrow market. This is a great injustice to the helicopter.

There's no need for the costs to stay high. Sixty-five per cent of the operating costs are indirect—notably attributable to the fact that the operation is too small. We fly only a million miles a year. If we fly five million miles a year, we don't have to hire the same percentage of presidents and brass hats.

Therefore, we have become the proponents of volume. We are pushing a new type of rapid transit, with the business and professional community as our customers.

**Q. It sounds as if you have something up your sleeve.**

A. We do. We are talking to industry and professional people right now. We can move large numbers of these people on a block basis for group rates. We're working out the schedule now.

**Q. Do you mean for commutation to the airport?**

A. No. There's no airport involved. We are reaching into a 25-mile circuit. It would entail the eastern extremities of the bedroom communities lying out in San Fernando Valley, maybe Pasadena and Pomona, as far south as Anaheim. Our prime target is Beverly Hills.

It won't be simple but it will be workable. We're talking commutation, working on the backside of our regular schedules. It's a selective, narrow band of the rapid transit market and we foresee at least 5000 passengers a day ultimately.

We can bring a trip into the main business centers down as low as \$3.50 one way. It will take time but we figure we can break even in about a year and a half on the volume.

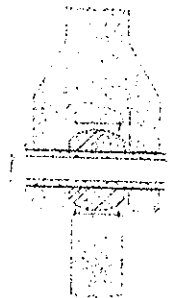
**Q. What do you think is the lowest fare you could possibly achieve on your regularly scheduled routes?**

A. You have to get back to fare per passenger mile. Right now the highest airline fare in the world is 16¢ per passenger mile charged by a European outfit. Ours is averaging 18¢ per mile, systemwide.

I think we ought to be able to get our direct operating costs down to 5¢ a mile for a helicopter. We're running about 6½. Double that for indirect costs, throw in some profit, and

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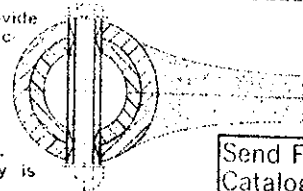
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we're at 14 or 15 cents. We'll get in the ball park.

*Q. This seems like the chicken and egg routine. You can't get the volume until the fares come down and the fares can't come down until the volume goes up. What's the answer?*

A. We think the high volume is the beginning. All you hear from the bureaucrats are jack up your fares and then you'll go broke—I mean get into the black. You hear this at a time when for the first time the airlines are in the black because of lower fares. So the bureaucrats know when to jack up the short haul fares.

*Q. This seems to be a good place to turn you loose on the subsidy problem. Do you see subsidy coming back?*

A. I can't speculate on it. I haven't got a clue on the direct Government subsidy. We'll be coming to grips with it this year.

It's going to have to be decided at the higher legal echelons. On one hand, the withdrawal of subsidy from the helicopter industry has now been declared illegal. However, we all accepted certificates stating we are ineligible for legitimate subsidy. We had to. We had to continue operating. We had to have a certificate of some

kind or we couldn't go to the airlines or the banks for help.

It was a gross miscarriage at a time not only crucial for the operators but for the country's transportation picture.

*Q. Do you see the need for any subsidy?*

A. There must be one. No short-haul transportation system, whether it's land, sea or air, has ever been able to overcome the barrier that the airlines surmount by mass movements. That's why it has to be subsidized to make it really work.

There are several kinds of subsidy. We are subsidized by cities in our systems. We're helped out with land and facilities.

I think we can make money if we can allocate a justifiable portion of the promotional cost of the interline agreements to the airlines.

We'll come to grips with it this year.

*Q. There seems to be a duplication, proliferation of various groups now into transportation development affecting your domain. In the study of future vehicles, heliport planning, operational roles, there are six or seven powers working in the same arena. It looks like planned chaos.*

A. You're right. There's either duplication or a

## STATISTICAL SUMMARY 1947 THROUGH FEBRUARY 1967

The motto "Siempre Primero," aptly reflects to Los Angeles Airways' record of pioneering achievements in the world of direct lift transportation. With the inauguration of air mail service on October 17, 1947, LAA became the world's first helicopter air express service, and soon after on November 22, 1954, scheduled passenger service was begun. Los Angeles Airways' record in passenger, mail and express service is illustrated in the statistical recap shown below.

YEAR	PASSENGERS CARRIED	MAIL POUNDS CARRIED	EXPRESS POUNDS CARRIED
1947		209,325	
1948		2,573,608	
1949		4,310,775	
1950		4,424,052	
1951		4,759,839	
1952		4,633,977	
1953		5,624,223	
1954			5,568
1955	210	6,148,552	686,516
1956	4,951	6,015,842	1,549,948
1957	20,586	5,761,367	1,820,698
1958	31,269	4,581,456	1,893,350
1959	31,948	4,359,409	2,020,362
1960	42,729	4,843,110	2,629,576
1961	40,438	5,362,861	2,898,000
1962	42,608	5,168,967	3,013,948
1963	82,293	4,621,675	3,441,020
1964	171,427	4,449,709	3,265,943
1965	205,099	4,674,427	2,641,732
1966	250,358	2,953,092	3,148,737
1966 thru February	315,741	1,364,570	3,821,359
	54,860	231,652	673,733
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,321,485</b>	<b>87,187,359</b>	<b>33,863,228</b>

vacuum. We have no repository for expertise or opinion to be sifted and evaluated.

I rely very heavily on the new Transportation Department. It's very encouraging—presupposing it will not turn out to be just another obstacle course.

Nothing is as flexible or susceptible to as many variables, purposes or methods as the rotary wing machine. It is almost impossible to fully comprehend the problems that are in the box. We've brought about a device that can do virtually all the things all other means of locomotion combined can do.

I don't think there's any doubt that the Department of Transportation will have planning input at least into every aspect, be it routes, subsidies, heliports or equipment. If that capability doesn't exist now, I'm sure it will.

It has to. Otherwise we'll have economic chaos and the whole business is going to collapse. We need someone to tell off those who are going around waving the banners for state authorities and airport authorities and separate municipal authorities.

We can't have public bodies or public authorities getting into the helicopter business, diverting their authorities by getting into the carriage business as carriers. They'd divert enough business so that no one would be able to sustain the economics.

I look to the Transportation Department to get it untangled.

**Q. How do you separate Federal, municipal and private interests?**

A. I think there is no question but that we have to lead. We have led but unfortunately we have not been followed as much as we should have been.

I think that if there is anything that is amenable to local interpretation, it is the kind of service provided by the helicopter. I've felt right along that when a central office in Washington gets into the helicopter business, it retards the one that is ahead so it doesn't get too far ahead of the outfit that is not too competent.

The real problem is at the lower levels of government. I suspect this is the primary problem Transportation Secretary Alan Boyd has to straighten out.

We prefer to do education at the local level ourselves. And we prefer to find some way to finance our basic stuff at our level.

I haven't got all the answers to the financing. Bear in mind, we have a pretty well developed system here where industry and some of the municipalities cooperate on land, tax exemptions and nominal costs.

The cooperation on procedural steps that have been taken by L.A. Airways and the municipalities in Southern California have been outstanding. We have had monumental problems—but we've been able to solve them when we were able to do it directly, without Federal, state or local authority intrusions.

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