



***This article was published in the
Aerial Firefighting Magazine
November/December 2023 Issue***

Founded in 1999, Tiger Performance was started by Sonny and Tina Hawkins to fill a need they had identified while competing in the dangerous sport of Offshore powerboat racing. During an 18 year and successful powerboat racing career, Sonny had identified several critical areas of safety improvements that needed to be addressed as the World and USA governing bodies started to address safety concerns after several fatal accidents on the racing circuits.

Not finding a suitable helmet in the marine world that would address multiple needs such as head protection, communications, and the ability to attach rescue breathing in the event of a crash, Sonny looked towards the aviation industry to see if any options would suit the racing community. It was at that point Tiger Performance was founded.

Quickly, after identifying a helmet that would suit the needs of the powerboat racing industry, Sonny struck a worldwide dealer agreement with a company that was at the time called CGF, the French helmet manufacturer offering the LH050 and LH250 helicopter helmets and the LA100 Jet Pilot helmet. Sonny began to market to the Worldwide powerboat racing community for all categories of racing, bringing an aviation helmet designed for pilots into the marine environment for the first time. The CGF compact and lightweight helmets provided ready-made attachment of an oxygen mask, superior sound attenuation and communication ability in addition to dual visor functionality that was needed during variable conditions, providing not only a step up in functionality but a step up in safety with the addition of the availability of these helmets.

As word spread of the new helmet available to the powerboat racing community, the popularity of the helmet grew quickly, becoming the most sought-after and most well-used helmet within the industry in a short period.

Sonny developed a patented underwater breathing variant of the USAF MBU20P jet pilot oxygen mask that automatically activates the flow of compressed air during roll over or submersion. These masks now made racing in all forms of fully enclosed cockpits much safer and is credited with saving many lives over the past 25 years. These masks are connected to on-board and miniature man mounted compressed air bottles and buys racers valuable time for rescue to arrive for extraction while injured or trapped under water.

Tiger also expanded its marine on board communications expertise into the marine patrol boat market for onboard plug in and wireless radio intercom systems and is used around the world for various military, law enforcement and commercial applications.



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Tiger Performance Enters the Aviation Market

Shortly after the start of the company, Sonny decided to sell the CGF helmets, Tiger Performance advanced communications and bail out emergency breathing systems to the aviation industry after many inquiries from interested pilots and crew members.

During the early years of representing the CGF helmets, they were rebranded as CGF Gallet, then the inventor of the CGF Gallet helmet, Adrian Gallet, passed away. His wife then sold the company to U.S.-based safety equipment supplier MSA, rebranding to the MSA Gallet helmet. In the last several years, the company dropped the Gallet branding, with the helmet now being solely branded as an MSA product. The MSA helmets continue to be widely recognized for being the lightest weight, high quality, comfortable with many superior features and accessories. Many accessories have been developed exclusively by Tiger Performance including 2 types of Maxillo face shields (optical see through offered in 4 colors and lightweight carbon fiber), NVG quick release mount, fid lock magnetic and heavy-duty ratcheting chin strap choices.

Tiger also offers the very popular ICARO and Petzyl EMS-SAR helmets with attached headsets. These helmets are very comfortable and lightweight with easy attachment of a wide variety of custom Tiger, Bose and Lightspeed headset choices. These helmets have rapidly grown in popularity for spray plane applicators, search and rescue, air medical rescue and law enforcement.

Tiger's man mounted miniature and lightweight carbon fiber 4500 PSI Survival Breathing Apparatus is an aviation industry leading emergency bailout breathing system and the first choice for many aircrew members around the world.

Challenging the Status Quo

Tiger Performance was the first company to delve into improving the audio quality of the existing helmet by integrating the extremely popular Bose A20 headset into the MSA and other brands of helmets.

"We reconfigured a Bose A20 headset to fit inside flight helmets. Over 10 years ago, we were the first ones, the originators of the Bose A20 conversion, which was extremely notable because it took off like wildfire. Suddenly, people wearing a helmet would benefit from what that headset could do with high-quality audio fit into a helmet for the first time. The pilot and aircrew can benefit from high quality active noise reduction with onboard voice activated communications, listening to music, radio, or making a phone call while flying. There was nothing like all those high-end qualities at their disposal ten years ago. So that opened up a whole new world for pilots wearing helmets when only pilots wearing headsets had that ability previously," said Hawkins.



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Testing

The Department of the Interior oversees helmet standards for the U.S. State Department of Interior, and the U.S. Forest Service demands a high safety standard for helmet safety for use in department aircraft and by contractors operating aircraft for those agencies. Hawkins stated that they had put many years and tens of thousands of dollars into testing their helmets to certified standards and making adjustments to the helmet, including creating custom molded ear cups for high noise attenuation and side impact. These ear cups are the foundation for Tiger's in house high quality PNR and ANR helmet communications with or without Bluetooth. Tiger also created the addition of a helmet pigtail connector which quick disconnects a plug in straight or coiled cable for PNR, PNR/Bluetooth, ANR or ANR/Bluetooth with U174 helicopter plug, dual GA or LEMO plug. These plug- in cable choices enable meeting any type of helmet communication requirements. Tiger's Bose and Lightspeed helmet communications also qualify to meet the DOI/USFS standard.

While the company plans to continue to offer the Bose A20 modification for helmets, with the recent introduction of the Bose A30 headset, the A20 has been discontinued. Once again Tiger Performance was the industry leader and first to create the Bose A30 helmet conversion. The Bose A30 has even more advanced features and performance compared to the A20.

Another key function for helmets, communication ability, and safety is comfort. Tiger Performance also allows selecting between leatherette/memory foam, gel, or vinyl foam for ear cup seals and choices of comfort foam or memory foam helmet liners.

Wireless Innovation

As a key innovator in new technology, Tiger Performance is dedicated to pushing the envelope regarding technology, safety enhancements, and improvements to helmet-based products. One of those innovations currently in development is the ability to operate wirelessly in the cockpit or on the ground during search and rescue, medical transport, military, law enforcement and other ground operations by way of a wireless hands-free communications. This fully integrated wireless flight helmet communications is once again an industry first for flight helmets. Hawkins detailed that the soon-to-be-released product is currently undergoing field testing with the ability for the wearer to adjust microphone squelch directly from a dial knob on the helmet, which allows the user to adjust the amount of squelch in a windy environment when the wearer is in the open door of a helicopter or moves outside the cockpit in a search and rescue mission. The wireless communications is available in either passive or active noise reduction configurations with helmet installed Bluetooth and radio PTT controls and can communicate with 20 or more wireless helmets or headset. An aircraft plug in transceiver enables aircraft intercom and radio connectivity with the wireless helmets or headsets. Tiger offers a complete line of wireless helmets, EMS-SAR helmet mounted headsets and headband and neckband headsets.



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When questioned about the ability of the new technology to work outside the cockpit, Hawkins explains that the wireless modification will allow the user to communicate within 1000 feet of the aircraft wirelessly as long as there is a line of sight between the user and the aircraft, potentially eliminating the need for expensive external wireless communication solutions in some circumstances.

The wireless helmet is rechargeable battery-operated and can go from wireless to wired communication in case of a battery failure or if the battery is left uncharged with an included plug-in communication cord accessory. At the same time, Hawkins estimates that with a full charge, the wireless solution will easily last an entire day of heavy usage.

Improving on Quality

In addition to the wireless solution, Tiger Performance has teamed up with a world leading Communication component manufacturer to develop the “World’s Best” microphone. The VIPER microphone series is designed for use in all forms of aviation and marine Military and commercial helmet and headset communications. Offered in either plug in or flex boom integrated, the new microphone has superior wind performance and speech intelligibility and is reasonably priced, according to Hawkins, who states, in testing with the US military and during company testing, has outperformed all competition and exceeded expectations on many levels with documented performance. The Viper microphones are available in civilian high impedance amplified electret or military low impedance dynamic configurations, for plug in full pivot, Gentex style flex with flag mount, flex/wire or full wire booms for any type of helmet or headset. Orders are now being accepted with deliveries beginning in November. TSO and Mil Spec certifications are pending.

Further Viper Microphone Progress

Also in development by Tiger Performance is a fully submersible Wet SAR version of the MSA helmet for search and rescue operations for rescue crew members that need to be dispatched outside of the aircraft into a water environment. The new waterproof/corrosion-proof helmet currently in development will be IP68 waterproof to four meters (13 feet) and is designed to be not only waterproof but have fully enclosed circuitry to beat the corrosive nature of salt water and what it can do to exposed electronic and metal components of a helmet.

Also next will follow oxygen mask versions of the Viper microphone for USAF and US Navy configurations.



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Helmet Cooling

The latest product on display at the NAAA convention held in December in Palm Springs will address the extreme effects of Global Warming and particularly interest pilots that spend extended time in aircraft wearing a helmet. Hawkins noted over several years that, pilots complained that despite having air conditioning in aircraft, they still sweat inside their helmets. Hawkins stated that his team has been hard at work developing a helmet integrated powered ventilation/cooling system that will be reasonably priced, easy to install and introduce airflow into the previously sealed helmet environment, to address one of the most complex problems of heat not dissipating out of a helmet.

The Tiger helmet integrated ventilation/cooling modification may be added to most aviation flight helmets and is easily removeable when not in use during cooler seasons

A Family Affair

Although started by Sonny and his wife Tina, Sonny is aware that he won't be around forever and has looked to family to continue the legacy he created. Son Oleksandr "Sasha" Hawkins, the Hawkins son, is the company marketing and advertising manager, is involved in production and has worked for the company for the past 8 years, the company General manager and nephew Bobby Dubill who first worked for Sonny as a crew chief on his boat racing team, has been with the company since its founding. Sonny's sales manager and second nephew Joey Dubill. has also been with the company since two years after the company founding.

The Future

As an innovator in the industry, Tiger Performance has several new products soon to hit the market that may make flying a little more comfortable and give pilots more freedom of movement and a much-improved audio experience, depending on their helmet selection and modifications. One thing is sure: Tiger Performance listens to their customers feedback and requests and is not waiting on the next big thing, but looking to what pilots want and inventing new products to continue pushing the industry forward, making flying safer and more comfortable, and providing more effective communications.