BELL HELICOPTER IN HOVER THIS YEAR, GROWTH MODE IN 2017

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Civil helicopter deliveries at Bell Helicopter Textron won't really take off until next year, after the new Bell 505 Jet Ranger X light single enters service late this year and the super-medium 525 Relentless is certified early next year. Thus, shipments this year will be mostly flat, just as they were last year, Textron chairman and CEO Scott Donnelly said yesterday during a fourth-quarter investor conference call.

Bell delivered 175 civil helicopters last year, three less than in 2014, while military rotorcraft shipments numbered 48, compared with 61 in 2014. Donnelly expects the helicopter division's 2016 revenues to be about $3.4 billion, on par with last year and down from $4.25 billion in 2014. Profits also slid by $129 million, to $400 million last year. Bell's backlog at the end of last year was $5.2 billion, up $76 million from late September.

Donnelly anticipates that the two new helicopter models will bring solid growth to Bell in the coming years. Flight-test efforts for both the 505 and 525 are on pace, he said, with the former expected to obtain FAA approval in the fourth quarter and deliveries starting immediately afterward. The Bell 525, which will make its public debut in early March at Heli-Expo 2016, is currently undergoing single-engine testing and will start certification testing in the spring.

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