

Becoming a Helicopter Pilot

In 2007

By Blake Moore

When I was asked to write this article about the helicopter training industry I had a very hard time determining what to write about. I knew I could write about Settling with Power (Vortex Ring State), Autorotation, Emergency Procedures, Dissymmetry of Lift, or Piston vs. Turbine. Each of these topics already has quite a few well written articles published about them. As I sat at my computer, I kept asking myself the same question; “How can I become a helicopter pilot in 2007?”

As I was growing up, I always assumed that every helicopter pilot came from the military. I had no idea that you could train as a civilian to fly helicopters professionally. I remember telling everyone that I wanted to fly and of course, I received all sorts of answers and wonderful advice.

How many times have you heard, “Do you have to fly airplanes before you fly helicopters?”

The simple answer – NO, you can start training in helicopters without ever flying an airplane. Also NO, you do not have to go into the military to become a professional helicopter pilot.

But the question still remains, “How can I become a helicopter pilot and fly professionally in 2007?”

There are so many misnomers in the helicopter industry today that I thought I would try and break it down and make the related questions a little easier.

First of all, it’s very important to realize that becoming a professional pilot is very expensive. Most student’s will spend anywhere from \$35,000 to \$70,000 on their journey to becoming a professional pilot. You may ask why the broad range in cost? I will get to that further in the article.

Everyone knows that you can go into the military and learn to fly helicopters. You must remember though that not everyone who enlists will make it into the flight training program. For some of us, our only option is to find a civilian helicopter flight school. If you Google “Helicopter Flight School,” you will find hundreds of flight schools all across the country and all over the world. This leads us to another question; “which school should I go to?”

There are excellent flight schools that offer training year round in most every state. Choosing the flight school that works best for you is very important. As I mentioned, where and how you train will influence the cost of your overall flight training experience.

One of the very first decisions that you will be required to make is what flight school to attend. This decision is very important and depends on your needs, time and other factors such as financing and veteran's eligibility. There are two different sets of federal guidelines that flight schools can choose from to build their curriculum which may also play a factor in your decision. There is Part 61 (of the Federal Aviation Regulations) flight school curriculum and also Part 141.

A Part 61 flight school gives the student the flexibility to arrange lesson plans and content to meet their needs. A Part 61 flight school is not required to follow a line item curriculum and the student can choose to fly when their schedule permits. A lot of students enjoy the Part 61 environment because of its laid back style and flexibility.

A Part 141 flight school is frequently audited by the FAA, is also required to utilize a course outline, and must meet a high student pass ratio. A 141 flight school also has their classroom and aircraft inspected on a routine basis. In addition, they are required to document and keep a file of each student's progress. Due to the higher standards of a Part 141 flight school, the FAA will allow the student to achieve ratings with less than the normally required hours. For example, the FAA requires a student to have 40 hours before he can take his Private check ride. While training in a 141 program the 40 hour mark can be decreased to 35 hours.

Both types of flight schools offer the same ratings. There are many pros and cons to both types of schools. It is very important to look at all aspects of the school before you make your decision on which school to attend.

Once you understand what type of school you are interested in attending, make a list of schools meeting your criteria and give them a call or a personal visit. If you decide to attend a Part 61 flight school, request a copy of their curriculum. Don't be hesitant to ask for anything, especially their rules, regulations and/or procedures. You may be surprised to find how many schools don't have these in place.

Thanks to technology, a lot of this can be solved by the internet. Take the time to research as many schools as you can online, but definitely follow up with a phone call and a personal visit.

Here are some questions that I highly recommend asking:

Ask the school representative for advice and guidance on your new endeavor.

Ask for a copy of their curriculum and any marketing materials. A lot of schools will be very hesitant to mail you a copy of their curriculum, so it may take a personal visit to obtain this. I have also found that many schools don't print marketing literature, but make it available on the internet.

How long has the school been teaching helicopter flight training; Are they Part 61 or 141? Ask them to explain the difference.

How important is helicopter training to their business? Find out if their flight school is a main part of their business or if they are more interested in aircraft sales.

How many helicopters do they have and what types are used for training? What is the student to helicopter ratio?

How many instructors' do they have?

Do they have a classroom? Ask to see it if you visit their office.

How busy is the airport? Is it a towered airport or non-towered?

Do they offer student housing?

How close is it to the airport?

How often can you fly?

How do you schedule flights?

One very important questions to ask: What happens if you have an accident while enrolled in your training program? You NEED to know the answer to this question. You are already spending a lot of money and you don't need to be caught off guard by any additional expenses.

Can you get a list of students who have attended their program? They should be proud to provide testimonials.

Schedule a time to meet with one of their instructors and give them an interview. Remember, the instructor will be working for you.

Can they send you a printed pricing information sheet?

What types of payment do they accept?

If you pay up front, PLEASE READ their refund policy. This is a must!

Do they help with any type of job placement after you complete training?

These are some very basic questions and I definitely recommend that you ask as many questions as you can. You are about to invest a lot of time and money and it's important to know that you are getting your money's worth.

As I mentioned previously, you may spend anywhere from \$35,000 to \$70,000. Compared with most activities, flying helicopters is very expensive, but you are investing in your education and skill. In this business, you don't want to cut any corners.

Most schools when quoting pricing will quote you the FAA minimum times so you will at least have a rough estimate of what you are guaranteed to spend. There are a number of ways to get a discount on your training such as purchasing a block rental rate. The more money you give them up front, the less you pay in the long haul. As I mentioned before, if you put a large amount of money down, please get the refund policy in writing.

Loan programs are also available through organizations such as AOPA and Pilot Finance. Many Part 141 flight schools also have relationships with finance companies that may be beneficial to you as well.

Once you have narrowed your search, I highly recommend that you spend some time getting to know the instructors. Ask them their goals and find out their teaching styles. Please be careful that you do not get caught up with an instructor who is trying to build his time on your dollar. This happens time after time in the training community. I have seen situations over and over where an instructor is trying to build his magical 1,000 hours so he can move on to "bigger and better things".

One area that many articles fail to mention is the difference in ratings between a fixed wing pilot and a rotorcraft pilot. This difference may also affect the total amount you spend working towards a helicopter career as opposed to a fixed wing career.

To become a fixed wing instructor, you must achieve your Private Pilot Rating, Instrument Rating, and Commercial and then Instructor (CFI). You can also add your Instrument Instructor (CFII)

In the helicopter industry, you have the option of not receiving your Instrument Rating before you complete your Commercial or Instructor certificate. The reason behind this is most helicopters do not fly in the clouds. They fly most of their flights by visual flight rules (VFR).

In closing, the helicopter industry provides an abundant amount of opportunity. If you are willing to relocate, you may end up flying tours in Hawaii, tours in Alaska, flying in the Gulf of Mexico, flying for a news station - Electronic News Gathering (ENG), Emergency Medical Service (EMS), flying for the police, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Fire Fighting, and much more. It's a thrill of a lifetime and has provided me with opportunities that I would have never received or experienced elsewhere.

Be safe and enjoy the world of flight!