

A Realistic Picture on Pursuing a Career as a Professional Helicopter Pilot



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So You Want to Become a Professional Helicopter Pilot?

Many people have dreamed their whole lives about flying helicopters for a living. There are few more exciting, challenging, or interesting jobs anywhere. Most people who do it love aviation and would not trade it for any other career. But because it *IS* a very desirable job, there are many people (perhaps like you) who aspire to fly helicopters as their life's work.

Realistically, it's not easy, quick, or inexpensive to gain the flying experience required to "get your foot in the door." If it were, there would be tens of thousands of helicopter pilots out flying for a living. And that's not the case. It's very important to understand that earning a Commercial Pilot certificate and other advanced FAA ratings is just the *first step* down the road to becoming a Professional Helicopter pilot. But don't be discouraged!

What are the opportunities? What are the requirements? How long does it take? Where do you start? What does it cost? What kind of salaries do pilots earn? These are not simple questions with simple answers, so bear with me and read on.

CAREER JOB OPPORTUNITIES

There are some truly exciting jobs open to helicopter pilots. In the civilian area, there are opportunities with law enforcement, government, TV and radio news, traffic reporting, hospital patient transport, aerial photo, agricultural spraying, offshore oil work, heavy-lift, sightseeing, firefighting, fish-spotting, pilot flight training, and corporate transportation — just to name a few.

State and Federal governmental agencies also employ helicopter pilots for conservation, forestry, survey, research, search and rescue, etc. U.S. agencies like Customs, the Border Patrol, the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), the FBI, and

others hire (and sometimes train) professional helicopter pilots.

In the military area, all branches of the Armed Forces train helicopter pilots for a wide variety of jobs. The Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard all use helicopters in their day-to-day missions not only for combat and troop transport, but for search-and-rescue, anti-submarine patrols, and moving troops and material. First of all, however, you must understand that becoming a professional in ANY field requires a substantial investment of time, effort, and money. Many careers that demand a college degree or extensive training in any skill or trade require years of effort, study, and often a substantial investment, up to

hundreds of thousands of dollars. Lawyers, scientists, engineers, and countless other professionals have to invest many years and tens of thousands of dollars in their educations just to meet the minimum entry-level requirements for their chosen life's work.

Craftsmen in the skilled-trades must do likewise and serve long apprenticeships (often at relatively low pay) to gain the experience needed to succeed. Becoming a professional helicopter pilot is no different. You must not only invest significant money, time, effort, and study in earning your ratings, you must then build flying "time" and experience (often referred to as 'paying your dues') in the helicopter in order to meet even entry-level job requirements.

TWO ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO GO: MILITARY OR CIVILIAN

In general, there are two routes to go: the military route or the civilian route. If your goal is to become a career military helicopter pilot, your first step is to visit with recruiters for the Armed Forces to explore the opportunities available at this time. The Services have restrictive educational, age, height, eyesight, and physical requirements that often do not apply to civilian helicopter pilots. Military training is excellent, but getting into one of the military's flight training programs is very difficult, simply because there are a lot of applicants competing for a small

number of flight training slots. Preference is given to active-duty personnel and veterans. Many of the Armed Forces require you to have a 4-year college degree to be admitted to flight training. A much smaller number of applicants are accepted from the civilian world. In any case, people have found that earning a civilian helicopter pilot rating FIRST is often a major advantage in being accepted into a military flight training program, as long as they can meet the other requirements. It certainly puts one way ahead of those aspirants with NO flight training. But check with the recruiters about this route. Policies and rules for admission change constantly. Of course, there is no free lunch. In exchange for your training, all of the Armed Services will require a commitment on your part to serve for some number of years after you complete their flight training programs, even if you don't intend to make the military your lifetime career.

For most, civilian helicopter pilot training is the fastest and most logical option, but not the least expensive. In the United States, there are many excellent helicopter schools. In order to become a professional pilot, you must first earn your Rotorcraft-Helicopter Private Pilot Rating (or license) and then your Commercial Pilot Rating. (Please ask us for an Excel spreadsheet for the minimum requirements and costs to obtain those ratings). If you start helicopter pilot training "from scratch", you need a minimum of 150 hours of helicopter flying time and you will invest about

\$60,000 to \$80,000 in your education and training JUST for that Commercial license. (For just about the same investment and in the same 150-180 hours of training, you can also earn your Certified Flight Instructor (CFI) Rating, which we strongly recommend that you do). If you also earn your Instrument and Instrument Instructor (CFII) ratings, you will spend in the neighborhood of \$70,000-\$100,000 (or more) for all those ratings (Private, Commercial, Instrument, CFI, and CFII) to be the most employable you can be. These estimates are just a guideline and can vary widely depending on where you fly, in what make and model of helicopter you train in, etc. College programs can cost even more but can also qualify you for Government-backed student loans, college credit, etc.

INSURANCE CONSIDERATIONS

Another employment issue is insurance requirements. Many employers are insured by companies that demand a minimum number of flight hours to work for that organization in order to be covered by their insurance. You should check with any potential employer for their pilot-time requirements.

SPECIAL MESSAGE FOR FIXED-WING PILOTS

Note: if you already have at least 65 hours of Pilot-in-Command time in airplanes, you can earn

a helicopter Commercial Pilot "Add-On" rating for approximately \$60,000-\$70,000. However, you will only end up with a total of about 80-90 hours of helicopter flying experience as opposed to the 150 hours for the "normal" Commercial Helicopter Pilot. The problem is that most employers and insurance companies don't give you any credit for your fixed-wing flying time and experience when you are seeking employment. Most helicopter employers are only concerned with your total hours of helicopter time and experience. So you might have 500 hours of airplane time and 200 hours of helicopter time, and they will only consider the 200 hours of helicopter time if you are applying for a helicopter-only position.

THE HARDEST PART: OBTAINING FUNDS

Where Can You Get the Money??!

Where can you obtain the funds for your flight training? That is the most difficult hurdle for most pilots. Unfortunately, there are very few grants, scholarships, or other forms of "free" financial assistance available for pilot training. Even "student loans" available to college and university students seldom cover pilot training UNLESS YOU ARE ENROLLED IN AN AVIATION-RELATED COLLEGE PROGRAM. (See more information below). Unless you have sizable funds available, financing pilot training is a problem that most pilots have to solve on their own, or with help

from relatives or friends. (A note to Military Veterans covered by the G.I. Bill: The G.I. bill does not normally cover any costs for your initial Private Pilot Helicopter (or Airplane) Rating. For "advanced" ratings like Commercial Pilot, CFI, etc., the G.I. Bill usually covers some but not all of your training expenses, the rest is your responsibility. The rules and requirements change frequently. So check with your local Veterans Benefits Administrator for details. Their toll-free number is 1-888- GIBILL-1 (1-888-442-4551)

Generally, you will find it very difficult to borrow money from most banks or other financial institutions for pilot training. Most lenders will treat it as an "unsecured" loan, and in most cases, it's difficult to get an unsecured loan for any significant amount. There are some private businesses that will make loans for flight training, usually at fairly high interest rates. But not many. The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) has some financing programs. Check with them for current requirements. Website: www.AOPA.org or (800) 872-2672.

Grants, Scholarships or Other Sources of "Free" Funds for Helicopter Pilot Training

It is not easy to find money for flight training. But that is a good thing in some ways. The bad news is that there are few (if any) grants or scholarships for beginning helicopter pilots that we at Midwest Helicopter are aware of, and we have been in this

business a long time. The good news is that there are few (if any) grants or scholarships for beginning helicopter pilots that we are of. What do we mean by that? We mean that the people who make the effort to earn or find a way to finance their own helicopter pilot training have an edge over those who don't. If there WERE a lot of grants, scholarships, or easy loans, then there would be a HUGE NUMBER of people training to be helicopter pilots so the competition for jobs would be fierce. Since it takes a lot of personal sacrifice to do it, there are consequently fewer people with the drive, desire, and commitment to become helicopter pilots. Work at it, find a way, and you'll be successful. Unfortunately there aren't many people or institutions out there to help you. In this industry, you have to do it on your own and "pay your dues."

There is one BIG EXCEPTION to what I stated above: COLLEGE LOAN MONEY FOR FLIGHT TRAINING. READ ON.

There ARE grants and low-interest student loans (that will also cover your flight training costs) available to students enrolled in certain approved College and University flight training programs. Search the Internet for those programs. None of them are cheap, but it's possible to get Government student loans for many of those programs. A couple of University-based helicopter pilot training programs that come to mind are the University of Southern Utah and the University of

North Dakota. There may be others I'm not aware of as of this writing. Time to do your Google Search for more information.

FLIGHT EXPERIENCE AND "BUILDING FLIGHT TIME"

It is extremely important to understand that obtaining the Commercial and CFI ratings does not automatically make you employable or guarantee you a job. Most employers (driven by their insurance companies or other constraints) demand at least 200 hours of flight experience to be considered for employment at an entry-level position.

Most entry-level jobs consist of flight training, aerial photo work, sightseeing rides, etc. Note that many Federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies and other Government agencies require less experience than employers in the Private Sector, and often those agencies will pay for beginning, advanced, or continuing training. It is not easy to get into one of those programs. Many require that you work for that agency before you apply to fly for them.



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Most helicopter pilots enter the profession as flight instructors (CFIs), which helps them earn money while "building time" and flying experience. Unfortunately, becoming a professional pilot of any kind demands flying experience or "hours." The more flying experience you have, the more employable you are. The highest paying jobs go to those, in general, with the most flight time.

And getting that experience (or "paying your dues") requires a serious investment of time and money. The good news is that 5 or 10 years ago, helicopter pilots needed about 500 hours of flight experience as a practical matter in the "real world" to be employable. Now that number is down to about 200 hours, as I mentioned above. The "better" paying jobs may require 500-1000 hours of flight time, and the "best" paying (and most prestigious) civilian jobs, like EMS (Emergency Medical Service) piloting jobs often require 1500-2000 hours or more, with minimum amounts of "turbine-time" or experience in flying helicopters with jet or "turbine" engines.

The name of the game is accumulating flight hours and experience. Pilots call this "building time." How do you "build time" to qualify for the better and higher-paying jobs in the industry? Typically, a pilot will try to get an entry-level job at a flight school as a Helicopter Flight Instructor (CFI). These are lower-paying jobs but allow a pilot to gain valuable flight time and experience that

someone else is paying for. A CFI might only be paid \$30-\$50 per hour of flight instruction, but can "log" an hour of flight experience as a flight instructor (at the student's expense) that might otherwise cost you \$300-\$600 an hour.

Many flight schools also perform aerial photography and offer tours or rides, allowing low-time Commercial pilots to gain even more flight time and experience. Other pilots have even purchased their own helicopters and offered flight instruction, aerial photo, sightseeing, etc. to "build time." It's expensive, but not as expensive as renting a helicopter from a business that has to cover overhead, salaries, etc.

And, if you look around on the internet and in helicopter magazines, there are often opportunities to build time by paying a company to fly with another pilot on a pipeline or power line inspection contract. These companies often charge you much less to build flight time in that way than you would pay to rent an aircraft. Most reputable flight schools can guide and advise you on a number of ways to build your flight time for the better jobs out in the "real-world."

THE DREAM OF BECOMING AN EMS (EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES) PILOT



Probably one of the most sought-after helicopter piloting jobs is flying for a hospital helicopter transport service. To many, an EMS piloting job is the pinnacle of success. These jobs are exciting. EMS flights often involve saving lives or transporting critical patients for emergency treatment. There is a tremendous amount of prestige, pride, and satisfaction in these jobs. The pay is some of the highest in the industry. The hours are often desirable, too. EMS pilots usually work like firemen, a few days "on-duty," then a few days "off-duty." When a pilot is on-duty or on-call, he or she normally lives with the medical crew and the helicopter. The crews are often called to emergencies on a moment's notice, often to accident sites where critically injured patients are picked up, stabilized by the medical crew, and transported immediately by air to a trauma center. As mentioned above, however, you must have quite a bit of experience to qualify for an EMS

helicopter piloting position. EMS (Emergency Medical Service) piloting jobs often require 1500-2000 hours of flight experience or more, with minimum amounts of "turbine- time" (or experience in flying helicopters with jet or "turbine" engines). EMS jobs normally require a pilot to have at least a Helicopter Commercial Certificate and an Instrument Rating in addition to the required flight hours (see below).

THE HELICOPTER INSTRUMENT RATING: NOW EFFECTIVELY A NECESSITY

To be employed as a professional airplane pilot, an instrument rating is mandatory, because airplanes (large and small) often fly in clouds or in limited-visibility weather conditions and land at airports specially equipped to make landings in "bad" weather. That's not necessarily so in flying helicopters, however. Many career jobs don't require a helicopter instrument rating. Unlike small airplanes, very few small helicopters are equipped for actual flight in the clouds, or in what's called "IMC," Instrument Meteorological Conditions. Most helicopter missions are not into airports with "instrument approaches," but rather into off-airport landing sites. You might be very surprised to learn that a high percentage of older helicopter pilots don't have an instrument rating.

Today, however, most EMS jobs, jobs like flying off-shore to oil rigs, and Corporate helicopter jobs

DO REQUIRE an instrument rating. Should you obtain an instrument rating somewhere in your training? Nowadays, it is probably a very good idea (if not mandatory), since more and more professional positions are making an instrument rating a condition of initial employment. The best time to get your instrument training is when you are working on your Commercial Pilot Certificate. Since you need 150 hours of flight time for the Commercial, why not dedicate 40 hours of that required training time to obtaining your helicopter instrument "ticket?" It will never hurt you in your career. Sometimes it depends on what your career goals are. Are you shooting for a job that might require an instrument rating or not? All U.S. military pilots currently undergo mandatory helicopter instrument training.

CAREER CHANGE AND AGE ISSUES

I receive a very large number of e-Mails from people asking "how old is too old" to get started on a career path to becoming a professional helicopter pilot. I myself did not start training until I was 40 years old, and did not start flying full-time (when I started Midwest Helicopter) until I was 47. Is that too late? I don't know. That's a personal decision that each person has to make. Are you in good health? Will you most likely be in good health for some time in the future? Do you have the financial resources and time available to obtain the minimum number of helicopter hours (about 200) in a reasonable period of time, or will

it take you many years, like it took me? It's my opinion that somewhere around 45-50 is where a person starting from scratch might begin to question whether or not it's a good idea to pursue flying helicopters for a living or as a professional career. Many of the e-Mails I get are from people who hate their present jobs and believe flying helicopters would be an interesting and exciting career, which it is. There's nothing wrong with a career change, but approach it with your eyes wide open, knowing that it won't be inexpensive, quick or easy, as I explain here. But if you're over 50 and want to go for it, don't let me stop you. You only go around once in this life. Don't let me or anyone else tell you what to do or when to do it!

PHYSICAL SIZE / HEIGHT / WEIGHT ISSUES

The most common primary flight training helicopters are Robinson helicopters, which is the aircraft most people learn in. There is a 240-pound seat weight limit in the 2-place R-22 for safety reasons. The Robinson R-44, Enstrom, Schweizer, and Bell-47 Helicopters can accommodate larger pilots but it normally costs more to train in those aircraft. If you are a larger person than about 200-210 pounds and 6 feet-2 inches or taller, you might find it harder to become employed as a Certified Flight Instructor in an R-22, because you would be limited by weight-and-balance issues as to how large your

own flight training students could be. And, a few companies (like EMS operators) might have a maximum weight limit (like 200-220 lbs) as a condition for hiring because of weight and balance issues in the aircraft they fly. In the "real world" Robinson flight experience is almost mandatory, because flying Robinsons is where most of the entry-level jobs are. Nowadays, R-44 flight experience is the most valued. Experience in other brands without significant Robinson flight time may greatly limit your employability.

THE FUTURE JOB MARKET

What does the job market for helicopter pilots look like in the future? According to most of the trade magazines, future prospects for employment are very good. Many of the best civilian helicopter jobs were held by pilots trained by the Armed Services for the Vietnam war. The Services trained tens of thousands of pilots for that conflict. Returning pilots were very experienced and often had thousands of hours of flying time.

However, most of these "baby boomer" pilots are now in their late sixties and seventies or retired or retiring. The services have not trained nearly as many pilots since then, and many of the pilots they have trained are getting out of the service with only a few hundred hours of experience, making civilian-trained pilots more attractive and competitive in the helicopter job market. The

military services are also requiring pilots to stay in longer and giving them more incentives to stay in the Military Services and make it a career, so fewer are opting to leave the Armed Services. So civilian-trained pilots with fewer hours of experience will become more employable as the pool of "high time" pilots shrinks.

**WHERE CAN YOU OBTAIN MORE INFO
AND DATA ON SALARIES FOR
HELICOPTER PILOTS?**

www.helicoptersalaries.com

CFI (FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR) JOBS AND OTHER JOB PLACEMENT ISSUES

Many flight training schools will imply that they will not only help you find a job when you finish their "program," but also give you the impression they have an "in" with large helicopter employers and imply that you are virtually insured a good-paying starting position when you "graduate" from their training programs.

Others will lead you to believe that if you go through their entire program, they will hire you as an on-staff Certified Flight Instructor (CFI) and Commercial pilot as soon as you graduate. You will be told that they hire only from their graduates, and they might very well. HOWEVER, be VERY, VERY CAREFUL in what you are told and "sold" and what you believe. Think about it! I don't know of ANY school that can hire all of their Flight Instructor graduates. And if they have an experienced staff and low turn-over, why would they hire a low-time CFI / Pilot if they don't need additional staff? No one grows that quickly. As with looking for a job in any industry, YOU have a better vested interest in finding YOURSELF a job than the training facility does.

Most reputable flight-training facilities can give you a lot of good advice on how to go about looking for a job, where to look, current aviation job websites, and where the demand is at the point in time you are employable. You find they won't put many of their promises in writing. Let the buyer beware!! Remember the old saying that "if it sounds too good to be true... it probably is."

Summary of My Opinions

The purpose of this article is to give you realistic and honest advice about how to begin a career as a Professional Helicopter Pilot. The information here is based on our experience at Midwest Helicopter and are

my opinions based on over 35 years of doing this. Don't make any decisions based just on our opinions and recommendations alone. Seek out other opinions and talk with experienced helicopter pilots for their input. But BE CAREFUL! As in any profession, some unethical operators might paint an unreasonably optimistic picture to get you to sign up just to take your money.

But don't be discouraged. Like anything else worth doing, it take time, effort, investment, and commitment. If you're fairly young and have always dreamed of becoming a professional helicopter pilot, YOU CAN DO IT!

It's not inexpensive, quick or easy, and it's not for everyone. You have to love to fly helicopters, as I and most helicopter pilots do.

If it were cheap and easy, there would be a glut of helicopter pilots, just because it's one of the most challenging, exciting, and enjoyable careers you could pursue. You'll probably never become rich, but you won't spend the rest of your life in a job you don't like, just because that job was easy to get and keep. But the first requirement is the lifelong love for flying and a desire to be come a pilot. Good luck and safe flying !!!

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Charlie has been instructing in helicopters for over 30 years. He has over 7,400 hours of helicopter flight time with over 6,000 hours as a flight instructor in Bell 47, Schweizer and Robinson helicopters. Over 5,000 hours of instruction in Robinson helicopters alone.

Other Questions?
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