

AN OLD DOG TEACHES NEW TRICKS

Story and Images by Simon Bartlett / HeliOps Magazine Jan / Feb 2003

Palm Beach Helicopters is back and its new owner, Randy Rowles is looking to make his company a significant player in the US training market. Heli Ops spent time in Florida talking with Randy to find out all about the new standard of flight training they are offering.

Located at the Palm Beach County Park airport in Florida and equipped with a fleet of three Robinson R22s, Palm Beach Helicopters has been resurrected by Randy Rowles where he first began his aviation career. In a somewhat interesting arrangement, one that could serve as a model to an industry known for cutthroat business dealings, Palm Beach Helicopters has formed a strong alliance with a sister-company, Aircoastal Helicopters. Although the two companies are separate and have no shared ownership, they work together and support each other's businesses. Palm Beach Helicopters is a Federal Aviation Regulation (FAR) Part 61 and Part 141 flight school using piston-engine helicopters; and Aircoastal Helicopters is a Part 133 and Part 135 air carrier operation using such helicopters as the Bell 206 and 407. "We cooperate and benefit from each others' marketing", commented Rowles. "Any Aircoastal training is done for them, by us and all charter work goes to Aircoastal.

STARTING OUT

The mutually supportive arrangement had its genesis 25 years ago when Rowles started his aviation career, being a `hangar rat` (washing aircraft, cleaning hangars) for Aircoastal Helicopters, and in return they provided him training in helicopters. Armed with a commercial license and fifty hours` experience, Rowles then started a crop-dusting operation in Georgia for then Palm Beach Helicopters and after a year of doing this, he returned to Florida where he joined Aircoastal Helicopters as an instructor and worked himself up through the seniority chain, eventually becoming the company's chief pilot in 1995. He also became a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) designated pilot examiner, and worked part-time at FlightSafety International as a Sikorsky S-76 flight instructor and at the local health care district flying S-76s. He said that he came to realize that there were two levels of training in the industry, the ab initio and the professional levels. "I had the opportunity to experience the training as the provider and as the customer, and saw the significantly different level of training provided in the professional market". He stayed at Aircoastal until 2001. "I loved flight training and wanted to introduce the quality of the training provided at the professional 'heavy' end of the industry to the ab initio sector. There are some good flight schools out there, but I was seeing the steady decline in training standards of the new pilots, so I figured it was time for me to start a school based on quality rather than quantity."

He amicably resigned from Aircoastal and approached the original owner of Palm Beach Helicopters, Brian Parker, to resurrect the company name. The company had closed its

door some time ago. He also leased the western side of Aircoastals facility, maintaining the close links with that company.

BABY PILOTS

Palm Beach Helicopters exists purely to train helicopter pilots, offering ab initio flying and post-graduate courses of various lengths, including the instrument rating, flight instructor, flight instructor instrument, airline transport pilot, and crew resource management training.

“I looked at the big and small flight schools,” explained Rowles, “not necessarily looking at how they do business, but rather I looked at what the student sees when they first walk through the door, the quality of the student at the end of training and the curriculum.” Rowles said that what is taught at the flight school is the base on which pilots build their careers, so it has to be a strong foundation. He set up the company to be a welcoming and open environment to the student. He also examined the best uses of technology in order to impart information to the student as well as designing a curriculum tailored to what the student is hoping to achieve on course completion

Being an approved Part 141 flight school, Palm Beach Helicopters has attained the higher standard in the eyes of the FAA. “Basically, anyone with an instructor certificate can train ‘off the shelf’,” explained Rowles. “A 141 school though has to develop a specific syllabus and is put under the FAA magnifying glass to ensure it meets a higher level of expertise.”

Palm Beach Helicopters has embraced learning technologies to help students absorb information. For example, instead of relying solely on books or just face-to-face instructor time, Rowles uses a combination of many things. He uses PowerPoint presentations on multi-media projectors, backed up by printed notes and classroom time with an instructor. In developing the courses, he says that he was mindful that the school was a business and had to have full control of costs. Using technology, Rowles has replaced much of the one-on-one instructor time for the ground school with a classroom format, which he says, saves the students up to 60% of the per hour ground cost. There is a maximum of eight students in a class, a number he regards as the maximum student-to-instructor ratio to maintain effective learning.

He also highlighted that many schools bill for a half hour mission brief or debrief with each sortie, regardless of how long was actually spent. His method is to bill for the actual time taken. “It is a fairer way of conducting business and the students are happier because they can see they are getting fair treatment.”

The students can burn CDs and take the presentations home for further study if they wish. As far as Rowles is concerned, the information is not proprietary because it is not new and is available elsewhere, but what counts is the way the information is presented. “I’m not concerned about people copying my material. If it is used by others, all well and good because it means a better prepared pilot, hopefully there will be fewer accidents and the

insurance rates might reduce, and we might get the standards back up to where they should be.”

His instructors come from Aircoastal or are Palm Beach Helicopters “alumni”, but in any case, all are trained by him as instructors. “ It makes sense for me to take on people trained by me. I know their strengths and their weaknesses; I know what they are thinking and their flying skills.”

SIMULATION

Rowles has invested in a FLYIT full-vision simulator. It is certified for IFR/VFR models of the R22, R44, Bell 206, Hughes 300, and MD 500. The FLYIT simulator recently received FAA certification for VFR training, replacing some of the hours flown in the helicopter with hours flown on the simulator.

“It is approved for simulated instrument time for up to 20 hours or 50 percent of the instrument time required for an instrument rating,” Rowles said. He believes the simulator has been a phenomenal addition to the schools capacity to train well. It is used for ab initio as well as post graduate training. For example, ab initio students complete two full navigation sorties in the simulator before actually flying the exercise. The first simulator flight covers the basic practice of navigation and working in and around airspace, and the second flight examines emergencies, something that can’t really be done in the helicopter. Rowles believes that judgment can’t be taught. “That comes from experience. The simulator allows us to put pilots in situations, then give them options and see which they go with it, and watch the thought process.”

He has also found the simulator extremely useful for instructor ratings, because without the expense of actual aircraft, pilots can learn to talk and teach within a circuit pattern.” Pilots who want to become instructors can save up to 50% by doing the first half of their training in the simulator.”

Rowles looked at several options before settling on the FLYIT. “I have worked at FlightSafety International for several years and also looked at the Frasca simulators used at Bell. In the end, I settled on the FLYIT because you can simulate specific helicopter types.”

“There are limitations with simulators though,” explained Rowles, “for example, some specifics of each helicopter are not replicated, but that’s not what we are trying to do. The simulators are used for the procedural training, developing scans, learning power settings, and are very good for learning to hover before even getting near an aircraft.” He said that after seven hours practicing hovering in the simulator, most students can go out and hover the real helicopter quite well, saving them more than half the cost of doing it the traditional way. Using the classroom and 4.5 hours flight time in the simulator, pilots can complete IFR refresher courses that include the FAA review.

POST GRADUATE

Palm Beach Helicopters only started in 2002 and has already trained over 60 ab initio and qualified pilot students. As well as offering ab initio training and certification courses, Palm Beach Helicopters also conducts post graduate IFR/VFR refresher training, inadvertent IMC, and turbine transition courses. Rowles also has a large client base of EMS and law-enforcement operators who use the simulator. The company offers a two-day course focused on recovery from entry into Inadvertent IMC, designed for both VFR and instrument rated pilots. “A lot of law-enforcement people fly at night in dark areas, sometimes using NVGs. They come into the simulator with their equipment and we go through the procedures for getting out of any Inadvertent IMC.”

EMPLOYMENT

Unlike some other schools that guarantee employment after course completion, Rowles makes no such promises. “Instructors are paid by the hour for the work they do with students. Some companies give the graduate the company t-shirt and hat and say ‘welcome’ but then give them no students. They have fulfilled their obligation but it is not very honest.” What Palm Beach Helicopters does offer though is a chance to build turbine time with Aircoastal, who are always doing sling work, ENG, and traffic reporting. “As long as it’s not charter and the seat and the weight is available, then the guys from the school can ride along.” Frost flying, for example, is 8 – 10 hours of hovering over crops at night. “Putting another guy in the seat helps out the pilot doing the job and gives the school pilot exposure and experience,” Rowles said.

Rowles also believes there is no point offering a student a 150 course on a helicopter other than the Robinson if the student is looking to enter the industry as an instructor, because the FAA requires anyone who is going to instruct on the R-22 to have at least 200 hours in helicopters and 50 in that type. He believes that schools should be looking closely at what the student wants to achieve at the end of the course.

FUTURE MOVES

Palm Beach County Park Airport is a good helicopter-training airport, according to Rowles. Although the local airport is non-controlled, a large variety of instrument approaches is available at the airport as well as the nearby Palm Beach International Airport. However, as with all helicopter aviation it seems, Palm Beach Helicopters has to deal with community noise issues and the local county is working on the concept of a new facility 15 miles west of the international airport. Palm Beach Helicopters is also negotiating with local colleges to provide them with helicopter training. “We have lots of irons in the fire,” concluded Rowles, “but we will not sacrifice quality for quantity. I believe that if we have the quality, then the quantity will follow.”