

# TRAIN WITH THE STARS - GETTING AN FAA HELICOPTER LICENCE IN SA

As fantastic as holding a commercial helicopter licence might make you feel, the job prospects in the local helicopter industry make looking for employment feel like a hard landing to most. Does holding an FAA licence make a difference?

**B**ECAUSE the number of jobs in South Africa is limited, and reaching the 200-hour commercial requirement without a sponsor requires immense funds, the prospect of a CPL helicopter licence holder ever making back the investment of the initial training in this part of the world seems slim.

Driven by this, and amplified by the current slow-down in offshore oil and commodity driven demand for helicopter work, more and more candidates start preparing for seemingly greener pastures abroad – the usual ‘Africa uncertainty factors’ playing a contributing role as well.

Luckily getting the required foreign qualifications is a bit easier than getting a foreign passport, depending on where you want to go.

Los Angeles (LA) Helicopters of Long Beach California, in cooperation with local company FAA Services, offers customised training programmes, to prepare candidates in South Africa for their FAA commercial helicopter licence in the USA.

The single biggest general aviation market is still the US. After all, flying was invented there, and most of the equipment we fly is still made there. Also, the US register of aircraft is still the biggest on the planet, and many foreign operators keep their aircraft on the N-register (US register).

Hence getting a US CPL has several benefits – the least of which getting to hang

Training in LA and getting an FAA CPL could open up job opportunities worldwide.



out in Los Angeles and Hollywood, mingling with the rich and famous:

- The FAA requires only 150 hours, and one exam for the helicopter CPL, instead of 200 hours, and eight exams in South Africa.
- Conversion to a South African CPL (VFR) is relatively easy with only three more local exams.
- (Many pilots choose this route because of the time saved and the ‘CV value’ of holding both FAA and SACAA CPLs).
- Experience flying in an environment with different challenges and a different flying/testing standard, resulting in superior skills.
- Building a network and reputation with connections in another part of the world.
- Possibly getting tested by the Robinson factory test pilot and global helicopter legend, Tim Tucker, and attending the factory course (optional).
- Access to the biggest general aviation job market on the planet.
- (Pending one more EU/US trade agreement, the – ‘TTIP’ Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership – FAA licences are bound to be recognised in Europe by EASA in future).
- Ability to fly N-registered aircraft no matter where they are operated.
- (There is an increasing number found in South Africa).

- Ferry flying opportunities (most machines start out with an N-registration).
- Maintaining the FAA licence every two years does not require flying back to the US. (FAA Services South Africa can conduct any rotor- or fixed-wing Flight Review and administer IPCs: Instrument Proficiency Checks and FAA medicals can be done South Africa).
- Plus, don't forget there are the bragging rights of holding a prestigious FAA CPL ... and shopping for pilot gadgets in the US.

US validations of foreign licences for private purposes are very easy, but how do you get to hold a standalone FAA commercial license?

The process is reasonably simple.

Before going, plan on:

- Verifying the foreign licence by the FAA (by electronic submission).
- Getting a FAA medical (a few medical examiners in South Africa can issue those).
- Getting cleared by the TSA, the Transport Security Agency.
- Applying for an M1 student VISA. (the last two items will be facilitated by LA Helicopters/FAA Services)

Depending on the talent and skill level, and mix of hours (meeting the night, PIC, instrument and cross-country hour requirements), count on a few flying sessions in South Africa to comply with the



Special Federal Air Regulations and getting no less than six logbook endorsements to prepare for the test.

At the current exchange rate, flying and instruction in the US is more expensive than in South Africa. FAA Services will try to minimise your cost by preparing you as much as possible before leaving. On arrival in the US you pick up your PPL at the FAA, write your test (the prep software guarantees your pass rate) and finish off a few local area- and sea-level familiarisation flights before taking your CPL skills test and oral exam.

### THE COSTS

Over the past two years, the candidates that went this route had different backgrounds and prior experience levels, so the process above generally gets tailored for each person. In particular, the number of preparation flights in South Africa is difficult to predict.

FAA Services charges about US\$250 for the preparation and endorsements. A ticket to LA is around US\$950, depending

on the time of year. R22 flight time at LA Helicopters is currently US\$269 dual p/h – bank on three to four hours. The skills test examiner fee is US\$600 and the exam centre for the written test charges US\$270. Add a bit for books, test prep software, VISA application and admin, accommodation and rental car – unless you stay in LA Helicopter's student accommodation, in cycling distance from Long Beach Airport. That's about US\$2,800 in total, or around R38,500.

For an initial CPL, budget on a 10-day trip, accounting for recovery from jet lag and leaving time for shopping and star gazing in Hollywood. So far, all candidates passed without re-testing.

### WHERE TO START?


LA Helicopters is one of the most prestigious helicopter schools in the Los Angeles basin. Students from all over the globe have trained there and the process is seamless and hassle free. Most of their examiners are also test pilots at the Robinson factory, a five minute flight away

**BELOW** - Christoph from FAA Services with FAA examiner and Robinson factory test pilot, Tim Tucker of LA Helicopters.



across the Long Beach harbour.

FAA Services in South Africa is proud to be LA Helicopters' official sub-Saharan Africa representative, and can be reached on christoph@yebo.co.za or 082 372 3641.

Christoph is a full-time instructor, working mainly out of Grand Central Airport. He holds FAA and SACAA Airline Transport Pilot Licences and Instructor Ratings for both rotor- and fixed-wing (FAA CFII and MEI). 

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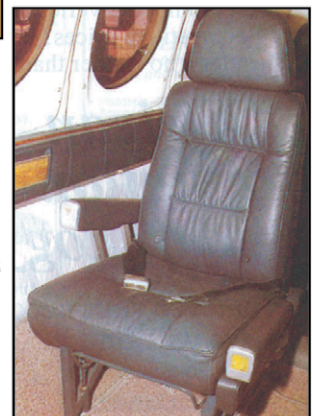
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