

What is the fuss about flying helicopters?

An attempt at understanding the mystique and romance of flying rotor-craft.



It is a well known fact between aviators that there is something special to be said about piloting a rotor-wing machine. But ask any pilot who has experienced controlling a helicopter to put into precise words how it made him feel, the answers will invariably be the usual enumeration of superlatives: “awesome, fantastic, incredible, out-of-this-world” underlined by a grin on his/her face that probably only fades a few

days later.

Sadly, probing for more precise articulations of the adrenaline rush and endorphins release accompanied by this activity rarely yields to more insights, other than the suggestion “you have to try it yourself”...

So what is the seemingly best kept secret about helicopter flying that creates such an addiction?

This ‘investigation’ uncovered three possible factors:

Firstly, one needs to realise that the fascination for helicopters goes beyond just the men and women that choose to fly them. Helicopters have become an interesting object in society beyond their role as efficient means of aerial transport. The freedom to hover above everyone and everything and see things from a different point of view has been associated with ambitions and achievements, leaving the

helicopter as an icon of wealth, power and authority. Furthermore helicopters have infiltrated our subconscious. One of the first references coming up on the web is the interpretation of helicopter dreams:

“Appearance of helicopter in one’s dreams is suggestive of success in life maybe at work or at home. It generally signifies that the dreamer is going to get immense success in his life which is a result of his hard work. Similar to the helicopter, which is not limited by any airport or runway to reach the skies, there are possibilities that the dreamer will reach a soaring high in his business or personal life. To envisage oneself in a helicopter is also reminiscent of the sense of independence and freedom in life. It means that you want to deviate yourself from the nagging problems of your life to become trouble free.”

Beyond dreams, helicopters also have a glamour and prestige status, and like real French champagne, helicopters are brought on for special occasions: – celebrations, anniversaries, marriage proposals, weddings, photo/fashion/movie-shoots.

They also have priority status on less celebratory, unplanned but nevertheless important events: air-rescue, mountain rescue, emergency services, law enforcement and vehicle tracking.

In summary there is something powerful and liberating going on with helicopters in society at large, that influences the experience for both pilots and passengers.

Secondly, the actual piloting of helicopters as a learnable skill seems to play a role in the addictive qualities of this activity. Some say one needs to be ambidextrous to do it. Others compare it to balancing a golf-ball on your right index-finger, using only the corner of your eye to do it, playing a yoyo with your left hand and using the rest of your limbs to tie your shoe laces, all while maintaining a casual conversation.

The latter makes it sound like one has to be a talented über-human to overcome these challenges, but all it takes is about 50 hours of training, only ten hours more than the minimum for a fixed wing license.

Nevertheless amongst aviators the helicopter guys/girls seem to rank higher on the achievement scale. The difference can't only be about hovering, vertical take-off and flying backwards and side-wards – can it?

Helicopter flying has been described as a zen-like experience (minus the noise and vibrations of course). To be a good pilot one needs to be completely relaxed and must be totally focused all at the same time. The interface between man and machine must be un-noticeable, one needs to be fully in tune with the machine to fly it well, and on top of one's game. The precision, concentration, coordination and fine motor skills needed to fly smoothly and safely take some getting used to – once one has reached that stage there appears to be an undeniable sense of achievement and self worth, an ultimate form of self actualisation that little else compares to.

Thirdly, there appears to be some elitist scarcity coming into play. The circle of helicopter pilots is smaller. In South Africa a little more than 2.000 people i.e. only 17% of all pilots fly helicopters. Similarly there are less rotor-wing than fixed wing machines on the planet. The cost of those machines surely plays some role but this can be explained: Many more parts move and need monitoring and maintenance, many more things can go wrong so the insurance is pricier. But at the end of the day the license to fly costs much less than some spend on their 4x4s, and the minimum cost to maintain the license is probably less than the installments on that same 4x4. – Just compare: how much is one likely to remember about the last car owned versus the psychic income and experience of a life-time that piloting helicopters can provide? Never mind the 'dinner-party' benefits...after all, how big an achievement is it really to buy a big car?

The circle of helicopter pilots is not homogeneous though. As exclusive as it sounds to count oneself in the company of Clint Eastwood, Harrison Ford and Gisele Bündchen, you are not likely to run into them in the air even though you are sharing the same sky. Also, the fixed wing guys will have a longer list from Angelina Jolie to Morgan Freeman, Tom Cruise and John Travolta – so this can't be the reason neither... and it

wouldn't explain the less famous fellow pilots that do enter the industry



Supermodel Gisele Bündchen, a few months pregnant, doing the pre-flight checks on a Robinson R44 before a training flight in Boston

to try and make a living off it.

The celebrities, wealthy executives and hobbyists aside, for most professional pilots, the attraction to aviation is an emotional one rather than something that is based on salaries or job opportunities or any of the reasons described further above. Helicopter pilots in particular have the above highlighted difficulty to explain their passion for flying, but will almost always tell stories about how their fascination with helicopters began at an early age.

Emotions and passions are easier to describe in words and pictures when they relate to experiences that are common or shared amongst most humans, so everybody can recount their own and compare. For

example, a vast majority of people have experienced love, so reading a love story generally evokes similar sensations and makes it easy put oneself into the experience one is reading about. The same is not true for the descriptions of the passion for aviation and the helicopter flying addiction, in particular as only a very small percentage of the population can relate to piloting aircraft from own experience. In South Africa only one in about 5.000 people is a fixed wing pilot and only one in 24.000 flies helicopters.



As an aside, the author has been flying fixed-wing aircraft for more than 20 years, ignoring the advice to 'try helicopters' for fear of becoming a 'rotor-wing addict' - he finally came clean, left his day-job, and has not stopped flying helicopters since. That is when his parents dug out this painting he drew at the age six.

In conclusion, the mystique and romance of helicopter flying is simply not describable in words that the un-initiated could relate to or that would do justice to the experience of controlling a machine oneself.

This is the very reason why, to date, nothing beats the actual experience itself, and the standard answer to the question 'what helicopter flying is all about' will still remain for quite some time:
"you won't know until you try it yourself!".

Don't make the mistake of just listening to, and relying on others that are failing to describe adequately what controlling rotor-wing flight really feels like.

Regardless if you are already flying fixed-wing or not, or if your child takes a model airplane/helicopter to bed instead of a teddy-bear – get behind the controls of a helicopter at least once! (and possibly take your child with...)

This article was published by African Pilot in March 2013 and the Newsletter of the Society of Aviation and Flight Educators (SAFE) in the USA in 2015 (see <http://www.safepilots.org/>)

The author previously worked for a global strategy advisory firm founded in Boston, mainly for private equity clients and holds no less than four current Airline Transport Pilot Licenses for both fixed-wing and rotor-wing (both with the US FAA and the SA CAA); Both with Instructor Ratings for helicopters and airplanes in both countries, in addition to Agricultural-, Game/Cull- and Test Pilot Ratings. He has more than 3600 hours total time flown in the US and Africa of which about 1400 hours are instruction and rotor-wing – Christoph can be reached at instructor@yebo.co.za or on +27 82 372 3641, in particular for all questions relating to FAA licenses in Africa.