

HELICOPTER PILOT CAREER GUIDE



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Helicopter Pilot Careers

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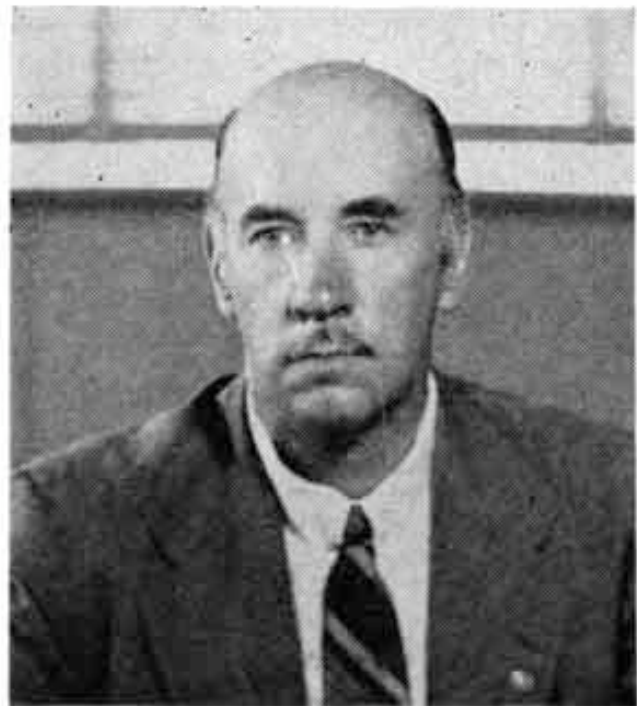
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I. Why Helicopters?

The fact that you're able to fly anything, whether that be an airplane or a helicopter makes you unique. Do you realize that in the United States that are approximately 600,000 licensed pilots. That's out of a population of about 270 million. That's .002 percent of the U.S. population that is licensed to fly an aircraft whether that be an airplane, rotorcraft, airship, or balloon.

The percentage of people who are able to fly a helicopter are even smaller and those that do it professionally smaller still. I say this

to tell you that if you are a helicopter pilot or if you're planning on becoming a helicopter pilot you'll be unique. A member of an exclusive club who gets to see the world in an entirely different perspective. There aren't many who can do what you do day in and day out. You perform services that are vital to the economic and physical well being of the nation.



Igor Sikorsky founder of Sikorsky Helicopter.

Ever since the first helicopter was test flown visionaries have envisioned it performing the very missions that it performs today. I'm reminded of what Igor Sikorsky said and I paraphrase, 'a helicopter will never be faster than an airplane. A

helicopter will never fly higher than an airplane. A helicopter will never carry more than an airplane.

But what the helicopter gives you is versatility.

It can go places where no airplane can. It can hover over a spot, fly sideways and backwards'.

Helicopters are being used more now than anytime in history and the usage of helicopters is only going to increase. Advances in helicopter technology, from power plants to avionics to safety has made them a very reliable aircraft and their versatility is second to none.

The versatility of helicopters makes them a favorite for busy executives who need quick, reliable transport. For EMS operators whose mission is to save lives. For law enforcement who use their helicopters to fight crime



The Sikorsky VS 300 circa 1946.

and help defend the homeland. For the oil industry who use helicopters to ferry personnel and equipment to and from oil rigs and for exploration. To the various governmental agencies who use the versatility of the helicopter in numerous ways. To the military whose helicopters help defend our nation. To hollywood where helicopters are playing an increasing role both in front of and behind the camera. The helicopter is here to stay.

II. Why Now?

Presently, many of the helicopter pilots who flew in Vietnam and subsequently went into the commercial helicopter industry are either retired or will be retiring soon. The increased demand for helicopter pilots as well as the shrinking number of pilots in the field creates a wonderful opportunity for anyone who wants to become a professional helicopter pilot. That's not to say that it will be easy but nothing that's worth anything rarely is.

III. Prerequisites

To fly helicopters for compensation (to get paid) you'll need a few things first. The FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) requires you to have a Commercial Pilot certificate with a rotorcraft rating and a second class medical certificate. Most professional helicopter pilots also have an instrument rating which allows flight without any outside references (such as the horizon). The types of licenses, medicals, and ratings are listed on the FAA's website.

IV. Certified Flight Instructor

Most civilian helicopter pilots began their career by becoming a certified flight instructor. Certified flight instructors are the foundation upon which the rest of the helicopter industry is built. CFI's teach students the required maneuvers and knowledge necessary to pass the various FAA flight and ground tests. A CFI position is usually one of the first positions that

a new pilot will obtain and for most is considered a way to build experience and hours. CFI pay is typically low so when instructors have the



A Robinson R-22

required hours, usually 1000, to move on they usually do but there are those instructors who choose to remain a CFI and may eventually buy their own helicopter and open their own flight school. Because most new helicopter pilots become CFIs there are a few things that you should know.

The first is that the overwhelming majority of flight schools use the Robinson R-22 as a training helicopter as opposed to its competitors the Schweizer 300 and the Bell 47. This in itself is not important but here's the catch. Because of the Robinson's handling characteristics the FAA has mandated experience requirements for anyone who wants to act as a PIC (pilot in command) of the helicopter. As an instructor you will be PIC. All of the specifications are outlined under [SFAR 73](#) but in general if you don't have any experience in



The Schweizer 300

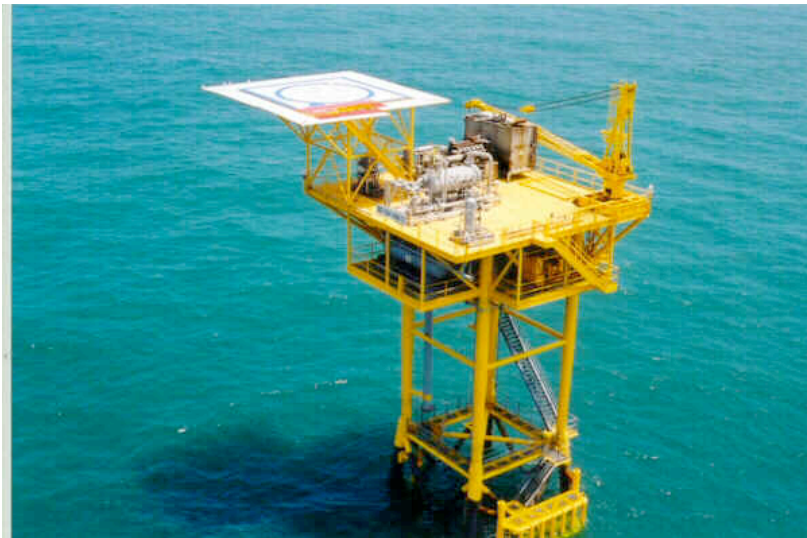


The Bell 47

Robinson helicopters you'll need more than a 2 hr. checkout to be able to act as PIC of one. This rule in combination with the percentage of flight schools that use the Robinson for instruction should persuade you to learn in a Robinson if you plan on instructing afterwards. The Schweizer 300, Robinson R22, and Bell 47 are very capable helicopters and they can all take you to bigger and better birds but if you learn in the Bell or Schweizer, and want to instruct at a school that flies the R22 you can expect to spend additional cash to satisfy the requirements of [SFAR 73](#).

V. Off Shore Oil Support

The off shore oil support industry is the largest employer of helicopter pilots worldwide and the demand for oil is only going to increase in the future. There are numerous companies that supply oil support services to



oil companies both domestically and internationally. The oil rigs work day and night pumping oil. They need a constant flow of workers and supplies.

Most off shore oil support

companies want you to have at least 1000 hrs. of helicopter time and an instrument rating. Oil support companies fly a range of aircraft from the Sikorsky S-92 to Bell 206's. The pay as an off shore oil support helicopter pilot is very good especially for a new helicopter pilot. A new pilot



A Petroleum Helicopters Inc. Sikorsky S-92

flying off shore oil support can expect to earn approximately \$45,000 in their first year.

Pilots who fly off shore oil support in the United States typically fly in Alaska or along the U.S. Gulf Coast. Oil companies have rigs in the Gulf Of Mexico (GOM) and have embarkation points along the shoreline. Oil support pilots typically fly a set number of days on followed by a set number of days off. For example 5 days on followed by five days off, 7 days on followed by 7 days off or 14 days on followed by 14 days off.

Oil support pilots refer to their time on as being on hitch and their time off as being on break. Pilots will typically work an eight hour shift and will fly for approximately four hours when on duty.



An ERA Aviation AB 139.

After the shift ends, and if the pilot hasn't moved to the area, you'll go back to your company provided living spaces which is usually a trailer or dorm room type set up. You'll be provided with the basic amenities but don't expect the Ritz Carlton. Most of the areas where embarkation bases

are located are not near major population areas. In fact, most of the places are pretty remote so don't expect to spend too many nights out on the town.

In general, GOM operators will operate under VMC conditions. For the most part Gulf Coast weather is good flying weather absent hurricane season and the strong thunderstorms that pop up in the summer time.

In fact, many of the smaller ships aren't even equipped for IFR flight but some of the larger ships such as the S-76 and S-92 are. One more thing, in an effort to carry as many people and supplies as possible, helicopters operating in the GOM don't carry what they consider to be non essential equipment. This includes the air conditioner so you can expect to be somewhat warm before you get to altitude.

Alaska is another matter entirely. Though the weather in Alaska can be quite pleasant it can turn on a dime. Clear skies can turn to very low ceilings and light winds can turn to gale force. For this reason Alaskan operators operate under IFR.

If you're willing to travel and want to see the you might want to investigate the opportunities available with international oil support companies.

VI. Law Enforcement

We've all seen news shots showing a police helicopter pursuing a fleeing vehicle or shining a spotlight on a suspect trying to hide. The police helicopter has become an invaluable asset in



A Miami P.D. helicopter departing on a mission.

the war against crime. Police helicopters are considered a force multiplier because of their ability too "see" the tactical situation and direct officers. Most suspects know that once the police helicopter has a bead on them that they're caught...it's just a matter of time.

The large surplus of ex military birds that occurred at the end of the Vietnam war ushered in the widespread use of helicopters in police aviation. Police departments have seen the benefits of utilizing helicopters and have steady increased their roles.

Today police helicopters perform a number of missions from law enforcement search and rescue, EMS, port and sensitive area security and tasking as received from the Department of Homeland Security.

There are two roads that you can take to becoming a police helicopter pilot. The first, and the one most travelled is to join the police force, attend the academy, ride a patrol car



Your first stop in becoming a police helicopter pilot.

or walk a beat then apply to become a pilot with the force. Most police agencies operate this way. They believe that going through the academy and walking a beat gives the pilot more camaraderie with their fellow officers on the ground. They also believe that being a ground officer gives you experience in the types of situations that police officers encounter so you're better able to use the helicopter to assist.

The second, less traveled road is to apply to and be accepted by a department that does not require its pilots to first be police officers. Though fewer in number these departments do exist in fact the Maryland State Police does not require its pilots to be ground officers first.



A Maryland State Police Eurocopter AS365N Dauphin.

As a police pilot you'll be paid what other officers are paid who are the same rank as you. You might also receive special assignment pay. You'll also receive the same benefits as

other police officers.

VII. Air Attack

Air attack pilots fight forest fires. The flying is exciting, challenging, and can be dangerous if pilots are not prepared and if they act in an anything less than a professional manner. The helicopter side of air attack is handled by a variety of different aircraft. There are Bell 212s, BELL 206s, Erickson S-64 Skycranes, Kaman Firemax even a version of the Army's UH-60 called the Firehawk.



An Erickson S-64 Skycrane dropping retardant on a fire.

Air attack pilots work six months out of the year during the fire season. When a fire is active and their services are needed air attack pilots leave their home and are based at an airfield close to the fire. When their services are no longer needed they return home. This cycle is repeated throughout the fire season.

If it's a particularly active fire season pilots will not make it home very often. During the season a pilot can make up of \$80,000.

VIII. EMS Pilots

One of the greatest beneficiaries of helicopters and their ability to land in spaces the size of tennis courts are hospitals. Because of the speed and versatility of helicopters, people who need life saving emergency medical care are able to receive it quickly.



Pilots who fly EMS (emergency medical services) missions help others in times of great need.

EMS operations are located around the country in all types of communities. From bustling metropolitan areas to rural farming communities, to mountain towns. Today many communities have use of a helicopter to provide EMS services.

As a pilot you'll work either an 8 hour shift or a twelve hour shift with 12 hours being the norm. You'll normally work a set number of days on followed by the same number of days off. It might be 5 on, 5 off, or 7 on, 7 off. You'll usually switch between night and day shift biweekly or monthly.



The interior of an EMS helicopter.

One of the benefits of EMS operations is the ability to provide a quick response. Its important for the pilots to remain "close" to the aircraft so that when a call comes in the ramp up time is minimal. Think of the way firefighters spend time in the firehouse.

Some EMS operations keep the helicopter at the hospital and provide the crew a 'ready room' that has a bunk, tv, refrigerator, microwave, and maybe a stove.

Other operators keep the helicopter at a nearby airport and provide the crew with a furnished trailer for accommodations.

For many pilots, a job as an EMS pilot is the pinnacle of success within helicopter aviation.

Generally EMS companies like to see around 1500-2000 hrs. of helicopter time as well as a few hours in the type of helicopter you'll be flying.

As an EMS pilot you can expect to make about \$45,000 when starting out and max out at about \$100,000. One thing to note is that as a group, EMS pilots probably fly the least out of every other group of professional pilot. Some EMS pilots only fly 200 hrs a year.

IX. Corporate Pilots

Look at any large city, especially along the coasts and you'll see a large number of helicopters. Companies that have subsidiaries spread through out a region use helicopters to quickly and efficiently transport executives and other company personnel between locations and in business time is money.

As a corporate pilot you might fly for a large public corporation or directly for the owner of a privately held business. I



A helicopter in flight over Central Park in Manhattan.

know a pilot in Florida who fly's a helicopter for the owner of a citrus growing company which has groves in different areas of the state. The helicopter allows him to not only see his groves but can land for a closer visual inspection and be back before lunch.

As a corporate pilot you can expect to live in or near a large city because this is typically where a company's headquarters are located but not always. While large financial companies might have their helicopters based

in New York City a large agribusiness might have its headquarters in Sioux City.

Life as a corporate pilot varies with the size of the company. Generally larger companies (Fortune 1000) will have set schedules with set days off. Smaller companies might require you to always be available within a couple of hours.

Hiring minimums for corporate pilots are consistently some of the highest in the industry. Most operators want to see at least 2000 hrs of helicopter time with 1500 pic and an instrument rating.

Corporate pilots fly a wide range of aircraft such as Sikorsky S-76, Bell 430, Eurocopter EC-145's and Robinson R-44's. The pay for



The Bell 430 is a favorite among corporate operators.

corporate pilots is also some of the best in the industry. Pilot's typically start at around \$50,000 and max out at around \$120,000.

X. Government Flying

What do the NOAA, DEA, FBI, NPS, Border Patrol, Customs, NASA and the FAA all have in common. If you said they're all government agencies you'd be right. If you said they all have helicopter pilots employed by them you'd also be right.



The opportunities for helicopter pilots in government is not one that's widely publicized but these can be some of the best jobs in aviation.

These opportunities don't only exist at the Federal level but at the state level also. State departments of wildlife/fisheries, park departments, Marine patrols, transportation authorities and others all utilize helicopters to perform certain jobs.



The lifestyle of a pilot employed by the government will differ as much as the agencies they work for.. Pilots in the FBI and DEA can expect to

perform a lot of surveillance missions.

Pilots employed by a fisheries department can expect to do flying related to supporting research and enforcing maritime fishing laws and treaties. Pilots at NOAA might fly scientists to glaciers to take scientific



An NOAA MD 500 departing a research ship.



A US Customs Blackhawk escorting two Customs speedboats.

reading while pilots at customs will fly in pursuit of aircraft and boats suspected of drug smuggling. The amount of time you spend away from home depends on what agency you fly for. It can range from a few days to a month or more.

The requirements to fly for a government agency

differ but for the most part you can expect to need about 1500 hrs of helicopter time and an instrument rating. Certain departments, most notably the FBI and DEA, require their pilots to be special agents for a period of time first, and then request a transfer to aviation. Other agencies don't have those requirements. Pay for government pilots starts at approximately \$55,000 and goes up to about \$112,000. In addition you'll receive the other benefits that government employees receive.

XI. Hollywood Pilots

Are you looking for an interesting career? How about the chance to play a part in the next blockbuster movie? And as a bonus the opportunity to rub elbows with the stars. This is all a day in the life of a hollywood movie pilot.



The famous Hollywood sign.

Movie pilots in hollywood generally play two roles. They fly a helicopter that is part of the scene being filmed or they fly a helicopter as a



A helicopter equipped with a camera on its nose.

camera ship and film the action in a scene.

If you want a career as a hollywood pilot the best thing you could do is

to get a job with one of the companies that provides motion picture support. Don't expect to be

directly hired into a position as a movie pilot. Most operators who do hollywood support also do other types of flying such as charter. If this is the case you can expect to this type of flying while you learn what's required of a hollywood pilot.

Pilots who fly aircraft that are in a scene are required to be a member of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). SAG is the union that all hollywood actors belong to and if you're going to be on screen you'll have to join it also.

Pilots who fly the camera ship are not required to join SAG.

At any rate, whether you're on screen or off you'll eventually need to join the Motion Picture Pilots Association (MPPA). The MPAA consists of a group of hollywood movie pilots.

As a group MPPA members fly the majority of aircraft used in the production of hollywood movies.

The life of a movie pilot can be exciting but it an also consist of very long days and lots of travel.



A helicopter landing in a remote jungle area.

Overseas Long movie shoots in remote locations both in the United States and overseas keep many pilots from pursuing this line of work. For the right person willing to make the required sacrifices flying for the movies can be a great career.

XII. Electronic News Gathering

We all seen footage from a news helicopter. Whether it's covering a police pursuit, the traffic, or giving an aerial shot of some grand event, the "eye in the sky" is here to stay.

Helicopters give news organizations a rapid response to quick developing news stories. The news is intensely competitive and being the first to get a story means the world to editors.

ENG operators typically require at least 1500 hrs of helicopter time and sometimes experience in the type of helicopter aircraft you'll be flying.

Houston's Fox 26 News Chopper in route to a breaking news scene

Some ENG pilots are also reporters while others only fly the aircraft and carry a reporter. About the only thing typical in an ENG pilot's day is the coverage of the morning and evening rush traffic. The rest of the day is filled with racing to developing news events, getting aerial shots and shuttling reporters from one place to another.



Pay for an ENG pilot typically starts at around \$35,000 and maxes out at around \$55,000. If you're also the reporter you can earn as much as \$100,000 a year.

An ENG pilots bread and butter-
Rush hour traffic

XIII. Long Line Flying

As a group long line helicopter pilots are some of the best paid and most highly skilled pilots in all of civilian helicopter aviation.

Also as a group long line pilots perform some of the most dangerous missions within civilian helicopter aviation.

Log line pilots use a "long line" attached to the helicopters body to transport supplies, equipment and material from one point to another.

Long line pilots typically work close to the ground, near other obstacles and need to constantly be aware of the helicopter and the operating environment. Long line pilots also operate in confined areas so its imperative they have a plan to how their going to approach a certain lift.

The majority of long line pilots work in construction or logging. Pilots who work construction use the helicopter to place equipment such as



Kaman's KMAX aerial truck on a construction job.



Two heavy lift logging helicopters-
the Boeing Vertol 107.

antennas, water towers, or antennas on top of structures.

Pilots who fly logging use the helicopter to remove cut timber from remote areas. Often the only way to access these areas is by helicopter.

Long line pilots can earn as much as \$150,000 per year. Travel is usually required and for pilots involved in logging stays away from home in remote areas is the norm.

XIV. The Military

Charter/Tours

Charter and tour flying is similar so I'll cover each one here. Charter pilots function as an air demand air taxi service. Some trips may be arranged months in advance while others give only a few hours notice.



The Bell 206 is a favorite among helicopter charter companies.

Tour pilots fly in some of the most



A tour helicopter over the Grand Canyon.

beautiful places in the United States. Think of the major vacation destinations such as Las Vegas, Orlando, New York, Hawaii etc. and more likely than not there will be at least one of not many tour operators in business. Helicopter tours allow visitors to an area to get a better appreciation of the area.

In some places, like in Hawaii you might get a close up view of a waterfall or volcano. In others you might get a ride to the top of a glacier.

There are charter/tour pilots in every state of the union. Most charter/tour pilots are home nightly and spend little time away from home.

Most operators want to see at least 1000 hrs of helicopter time before they're consider hiring you. You also need to be personable because human interaction is a meaningful part of the job.

Charter/tour pilots start out at about \$35,000 and max out at about \$60,000.

Flying for the military offers many advantages and some disadvantages. One of the biggest advantages of flying for the military is you don't have to pay for your training.

Commercial pilot training can cost between \$45,000-65,000 dollars. In the military not only do you not pay but you learn on a turbine powered helicopter instead of a piston helicopter. Another advantage of the military is that you'll be paid a good salary to learn how to fly.

Another advantage is the wide variety of missions and experiences for military aviators. Helicopters perform an important role in today's military. They do a myriad of jobs such as



The Navy's TH-57 training helicopter.

transporting troops and supplies, anti-armor missions, search and rescue, anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare and inserting and extracting special operations forces deep behind enemy lines.



A U.S. Marine AH-1 Cobra gunship.

The Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Army and Coast Guard all make extensive use of the helicopter. The types of helicopters used varies and recently the long awaited V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor has come into operational service.



A U.S. Marine MV-22 tilt-rotor lifts off of an amphibious assault ship.

One of the disadvantages of being a military helicopter pilot is time. Depending on the service you can expect to spend at least six and up to ten years in uniform.

So if your ultimate goal is to become a corporate helicopter pilot it

would probably be quicker to accomplish that goal outside of the military.

You can also expect to spend a good deal of time away from home. The United States is at war and has other global commitments. If you deploy to a war zone (Iraq/Afghanistan) you can expect to be

there between 8-14 months. A deployment to a non war zone can last from 3-6 months.

In addition you can also expect to move approximately every three years.

The military offers superb training and a wealth of great experiences for people who are willing to put up with the disadvantages. Military aviation has a long tradition of training some of the best aviators in the world. Ultimately it's up to you to determine if a career in the military is the right move for you.

As a caveat, you might want to consider the National Guard and the Reserves. You'll receive the same training and fly the same aircraft but will only have to be in uniform for one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer (if your unit is not activated for active service).

Conclusion

There are a wide variety of pilot positions available in the helicopter industry. A combination of forces makes this a great time to enter the industry but like anything that will require a significant outlay of your money, your time, or both you should perform the necessary research to ensure you receive everything that you were promised.

You should also put some thought into the type of lifestyle you want to have. In this guide we took a look at many helicopter flying careers and they all have varying lifestyles. This is often one of the most overlooked aspects when a pilot is looking for a career but plays a major role a bit later. Put some thought into it now.

Flight training is not cheap. Make sure to ask pointed questions and make sure that your questions are answered. Talk to the instructors. Talk to former and current students. Ask them what they liked about the program and what they didn't. Check the Better Business Bureau for complaints. Most flight instruction companies are run and staffed by honest hard working individuals but there are some that are less than honest. r train Make sure you do your research and pick a company that meets your needs and that you're comfortable with.

Enjoy the journey. Sometimes we get so wrapped up in trying to get to our "destination" that we forget to enjoy the present. Relish the time spent in the cockpit.

Take the time to ask the instructor questions. They're professionals and will do a great job teaching everyone but, in my opinion, they're extra helpful with a student that's brimming with enthusiasm. Enjoy your solo flights and your cross countries. They're the beginnings of your career as a licensed aviator and a professional pilot.

Flight instruction is front loaded. Initially it takes a lot of study but one day it'll click and you'll have a much clearer picture of what you need to do to make the helicopter perform the way you want. This is where the real learning and incidentally the real fun begins.

Lastly, form a plan for your career. Partition it into short, medium, and long range goals. And take **action**. Make the short range goal something that you can accomplish in a matter of weeks, the mid-range goal in 6-12 months and the long range goal 2+ years.

For instance, your long range goal is to fly for an air attack company. Your mid-range goal is to take the next step in your career and get hired by a charter company that operates turbine equipment. Your short range goal is to

write your resume/cover letter, research the companies you want to fly for and submit resume/cover letter to them.

Don't be afraid to pick up the phone and call the companies that you want to work for. Speak to the Chief pilot or hiring manager and let them know you're interested in working for them. Always be courteous and polite. When they're hiring you want them to remember you. This gives your resume a "face" when compared to the others just like yours.

Pilots are passionate, intelligent, adventurous people.

Welcome to the club.



The "front office" of an Agusta/Bell AB-139.