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Pilots in demand

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NEW IBERIA - With the oil industry booming, offshore aviation companies are facing a near critical shortage of helicopter pilots, which has led to an increase in demand, higher pay but also long hours for some.

At Petroleum Helicopters, one of the largest helicopter companies in the country, pilots now are facing mandatory overtime, according to pilot Mike Dorsett, the union vice president. Dorsett, who works seven days on and seven days off, said he had to give up three of his days off last week.

"Morale is pretty low," Dorsett said.

In the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the oil industry is experiencing one of its busiest times ever. Oil companies are spending more time in the Gulf due to increased oil prices while also making repairs to hurricane-ravaged rigs. Helicopters to transport workers to and from offshore rigs are in constant demand.

New Iberia-based Air Logistics is another major offshore aviation company in the region.

"From a business perspective, we're as busy as we've ever been," said former pilot Michael Suldo, now president of Air Logistics. "We're limited right now only by the number of helicopters and pilots and mechanics we can get."

Due to a union contract, Air Logistics cannot force pilots to work overtime, and voluntary overtime currently costs the company time and three-quarters, according to Ken Bruner, a veteran pilot and union president.

"I think things are going pretty well at Air Log," Bruner said.

At PHI, pilots who Dorsett said work upward of 14-hour days, eight to 10 of which are spent in the air, have been negotiating a new contract for more than a year. One of the items in the union is seeking is a pay increase for pilots.

"We're optimistic in that we hope something will happen, but I'm not optimistic that something is going to happen," Dorsett said.

Representatives from PHI did not return phone calls.

Toward civilian pilots

Bruner of Air Logistics said the major issue industrywide is retaining experienced pilots.

In the old days, a company had to look no further than the military to meet all its pilot needs. However, today the military is not turning out pilots like it used to and now holds on to the ones it has.

Suldo said the military has deployed 20 of his pilots to Iraq.

For years, many in the aviation industry have known that the time would eventually come when the huge glut of Vietnam-era pilots, who came back from war with hundreds and sometimes thousands of flight hours beneath their belts, would begin to reach retirement age. Some now are doing just that, while others have lost their medical certificate due to their age.

Aviation companies, most of which require their pilots to have 1,000 hours of flight time, are struggling to fill those vacancies, due to increasing competition from several other industries that are starting to use helicopters more and more. They include the air medical industry, news agencies, hospitals, tour guide companies and even a growing number of wealthy individuals who seek glorified chauffeurs. All are competing for experienced pilots.

So, companies have turned to a growing number of flight schools that are working overtime to turn out pilots to meet the growing demand.

The future of flight

Vortex Helicopters, which moved its operations from Long Beach, Miss., to New Iberia in March after the school was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, currently has 70-plus students enrolled in its flight programs and more steadily trickle in as the weeks pass. With its temporary facility in the old Air Traffic Control Tower at Acadiana Regional Airport, it is now one of only two helicopter flight schools in the state.

Air Logistics, which had taken a number of pilots from the school beforehand, has partnered with Vortex. Graduates are eligible for an Air Logistics internship, and the promise of a job has lured many students into the program.

The problem, however, is that when students finish the one-year course, which usually costs between \$40,000 and \$50,000, they still are around 800 hours short of being employable at Air Logistics, according to Suldo.

So, students there, who range from women in their early 20s to end-of-their-career 50-year-olds seeking something new, usually remain at the school as flight instructors to build up their time in the air until they can reach at least 500 hours - the point at which they truly become employable. When they reach 1,000 hours, Suldo is the first to know.

"We really see the future as the young civilian pilots coming up, the Vortex-type guys," said Suldo, himself a Vietnam pilot.

So does Joe Sheeran, the owner of Vortex. Sheeran, a soft-spoken, focused pilot with years of experience in the cockpit, said there has never been more of a demand for pilots than there is today.

"The time is really right for pilots," said Sheeran, who practically guarantees that his students will find a job when they finish. If not, "they're not looking," he said, laughing.

Cost and benefit

It's this demand, which is now met by pay that would make many recent college graduates envious - usually beginning in the mid-40s for a beginning pilot - that has led to an increased interest in helicopters.

"I chose to be a pilot because I think it's an excellent career to get into right now, especially the rotorcraft end of the industry," said Mike Walker, a 51-year-old who enrolled in the school after leaving his gaming supervisor job in Las Vegas.

But, the high cost associated with learning how to fly a helicopter, which stems from fuel, insurance rates and the costs of helicopters and their maintenance, is a huge barrier for some.

"With the insurance rates and fuel costs, they're only going to increase. It makes it very difficult for a new pilot coming into the industry," said Craig Simon, 28, a Lafayette native who saved for two years to go to the flight school.

The lure of offshore

Dorsett said those costs can keep a lot of students out of the business or at least away from offshore flying, which demands that many pilots live where they work during their week to two-week shift.

"The pay just doesn't justify that kind of dedication and expense," Dorsett said.

However, the students at Vortex appear well-briefed in the realities of offshore flying. Future pilots like Walker, Simon and Mel Barkley, 49, of Montgomery, Ala., said they knew that's where they would go when they finished their training, at least temporarily.

Barkley, who decided to learn how to fly a helicopter after working 25 years in the lumber industry, has a son who came to Vortex two years ago. He's now a command pilot flying for Chevron.

"He's 24 years old and got more money than he can spend."
