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WHAT MAKES PALM BEACH HELICOPTERS A DIFFERENT KIND OF FLIGHT SCHOOL IS NOT JUST ITS WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE, BUT THE PARTNERSHIPS IT HAS BUILT TO HELP ITS STUDENTS SUCCEED.

by Brent Bergan



ABOUT An FAA Part 141 flight school, Palm Beach Helicopters trains about 20 full-time and 80 part-time students each year.

OPPOSITE PAGE Like many flight schools, the little workhorse R22 is a staple of Palm Beach Helicopters' fleet.

OPPOSITE PAGE Student pilot Greg Mazzei (left) and CFI Matthew Merriell about to take off on a training flight.

Mike Reyno Photos



LEFT The 16 miles of pristine beaches and sunny weather are not only attractions for vacationers, but also for pilots wanting to get their helicopter license. **Mike Reyno Photo**

BELOW CFI Mike Fahive went through PBH's pro pilot program, and upon graduation, was hired as an instructor. **Brent Bergan Photo**



The first thing you'll notice when you talk to Debbie Sparks, president and co-owner of Palm Beach Helicopters (PBH), a Federal Aviation Regulation (FAR) Part 141 flight school, is the passion and enthusiasm she has for her school, students and staff, and her focus on the general welfare of everyone involved. "It's just one big family," said Sparks.

As we toured Palm Beach's modern facility, with its immaculate classrooms, instrument simulator and student computer center, she proudly pointed to the wall of graduates. "The pictures," said Sparks, with her contagious smile and enthusiasm, "they help you remember."

Over the past seven years, since she and co-owner Dan Crowe, long-time owner of Aircoastal Helicopters, bought out her brother's share in PBH, the school has, each year, graduated between 15 and 20 professional pilot students and about 80 part-time, or a la carte students, who desired selective training.

Full-time or part-time, those students come from incredibly varied backgrounds. This includes a recent group of police officers from Puerto Rico who received their commercial license from PBH, then took the Bell course and flew their shiny new Bell 407 home.

A WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE

Many students are drawn to PBH because of that small-school atmosphere and the strong, positive vibe you get when walking

around the complex. Said former graduate and former PBH flight instructor Jamie Comar, "The climate when you walk in the door is just welcoming, that's the best I can sum it up."

Gabe Clements, a former student who graduated in 2002, is now chief flight instructor. He was drawn back because of that vibe. After one and a half years in the Gulf of Mexico and tour operations in Hawaii and Alaska, Clements was ready for the sunny beaches and family atmosphere once again. At a larger training school, where he also took classes, Clements felt like a number. But, at PBH, "it's different. They treat you like family."

Clements continues that tradition, along with Palm Beach's long-time focus on quality training. It's a focus that extends to PBH's ground school as well, which stands out, said Clements, because the school's small size gives it maximum flexibility. The student to instructor ratio is about four to one, allowing students more time with instructors, and more flexibility in the schedule.

With a fleet of eight Robinson R22s, two R44s, and two Bell 206 JetRangers; and a staff of seven instructors, two of which only instruct on the JetRangers, this small group still racks up a lot of fly-

ing time — on average 120-150 sorties per week.

The mix of a positive atmosphere, quality instruction and flexible scheduling has helped PBH build a strong reputation. Part-time student Mike Kiinge drives one hour each way from Miami to fly with Palm Beach Helicopters, bypassing several other schools on his way there.

TOP Students sit in on a pro pilot course geared toward those hoping to enter the commercial helicopter world.
Brent Bergan Photo

BOTTOM Co-owners Dan Crowe (far left) and Debbie Sparks (far right) have created a school with a family atmosphere.
Mike Reyno Photo



Klinge actually lives most of the year in Scotland, but when he's in South Florida he takes advantage of the favorable exchange rate to achieve his professional helicopter flight goals, for half the price of what he would pay in Great Britain. With nearby beautiful white sand beaches and the ability to train year-round, it's no surprise the majority of the 25 percent foreign students at PBH are from Great Britain.

PBH offers two large classrooms, including one with individual cubicles. **Brent Bergan Photo**

KEY PARTNERSHIPS

Any look at Palm Beach Helicopters will also reveal one of the keys to the company's success — collaboration. It began with its own internal partnership, when Aircoastal, a provider of executive charter and aircraft management services, merged with PBH a few years back. This was followed by Crowe and Sparks buying out her brother's flight school when he went to work for Bell Helicopter. Since then, the two have grown the school to its current size and created a business partnership with Night Flight Concepts (NFC). The alliance with NFC has allowed PBH to offer a night vision goggle (NVG) curriculum to its students. Crowe jumped at the opportunity to work with NFC, as it would not only enhance PBH's flight school curriculum, but would help it gain a FAR Part 141 training certificate.

Once certified, PBH will be one of only four Part 141 NVG flight schools. Said Crowe, on the advantage of having an NVG module at the school, "It's almost a double benefit, they [the students] need the R44 time, the night [flying] time; and the added information they get about night flying is valuable to teaching students about night flying if they go on to instruct."

The NVG course offers tremendous insight into nighttime flying, courtesy NFC's United States Army trained NVG specialists, and gives students an excellent opportunity to enhance their understanding of the hazards involved in nighttime operations. Said Crowe, "The students need night flight time anyways, it's just a bonus they get an NVG endorsement."

With more and more parapublic operators starting up NVG programs, the endorsement certainly couldn't hurt a student's job search chances either.

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

Beyond its internal partnership and its collaboration with NFC, PBH has formed other partnerships to help its students. When it comes to funding, the school teamed with Palm Beach Community College to allow students to take advantage of the college loan system. In a tight credit market, said Sparks, where training loans are becoming more and more difficult to come by, this can mean the difference in being able to afford training. Also worth noting is the 20 percent enrollment of armed services veterans, who are able to take advantage of G.I. Bill funding. While it doesn't pay for the private license, it will help finish off Palm Beach's professional pilot courses, and ends up footing about 50 percent of the training bill. PBH also helps with affordable student housing, which is just two miles away from the facilities. Said Sparks, "All they need to



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do is show up with a suitcase and we'll take care of the rest."

The typical training time is eight to 10 months to complete the professional pilot curriculum and receive a commercial, instrument, certified flight instructor (CFI), certified flight instructor instrument (CFII) and NVG initial. Once complete, students may be hired by PBH as instructors, continuing to learn and instruct, and gaining the hours required for their entry into the commercial world. In total, PBH ends up hiring about one quarter of its graduates as instructors. The majority, though, aren't Florida locals, so several return home or go to other flight schools to instruct.

PBH also gives students an up-close look at real-world operations, while keeping its own business outlook strong, through its diversified opera-

tions with Aircoastal Helicopters, who have operated a charter service for the past 27 years. Aircoastal's pilots and PBH's flight instructors fly corporate travel to Miami International Airport in a JetRanger, fly Sky 12 in electronic news gathering operations and fly Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission waterways management personnel in a JetRanger equipped with floats.

The charter business allows PBH to infuse a student's education with short hops in the turbines, giving them an idea what it's like to fly a JetRanger and a chance to log a few free hours of turbine time. Said Aircoastal's chief pilot, Terry Jones, "It's a hoot when you put them [the students] on floats."

MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE

Even with the opportunities PBH provides, there really isn't an easy way for new graduates to build flight hours before being hired on in the commercial world. New instructors need to meet the new helicopter minimums of 1,250 flight hours before they can head out to the Gulf of Mexico to get hired on for offshore work, build more time and eventually end up with an emergency medical service (EMS) or local police unit.

Dedication and the choice of an appropriate school can help in that process. Jamie Comar is a great example of that. He graduated from PBH in 2003 and was a former flight instructor there. Even though he jumped between Helicopter Adventures Inc. (now Bristow Academy) and Palm Beach for student loan purposes, he had set his sights on instructing for PBH. From there, he moved on to PHH Inc., then to Air Methods in Albany, N.Y., and is now back in Florida flying EMS. To top it off, he was recently selected to instruct in the Sikorsky S-92 at FlightSafety International's West

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OPPOSITE PBH joined forces with Night Flight Concepts to offer students NVG training. NFC utilizes an R44 modified by REB Technologies to have an NVG compatible cockpit — the first of its kind in the world.

RIGHT PBH operates a fleet of eight R22s and two R44s, as well as two Bell JetRangers for turbine ratings. **Mike Reyno Photos**

Palm Beach Learning Center. His time at PBH set him up perfectly for success. Said Comar, "I suppose I'm the poster child for Palm Beach Helicopters."

A recent graduate and new instructor pilot hoping to follow that example of success is Michael Flahive, who took us flying in the school's R44 for one of Vertical's photo shoots. A former ROTC Marine from Ohio, Flahive's bad knee meant he couldn't get his commission. So, he decided to try helicopters on his own, and found PBH. He checked out three or four other schools and Palm Beach just seemed right. Of course, it doesn't hurt that he gets a wonderful, scenic view any time he flies. (Although scenery should never be the main reason you choose a flight training school, it's certainly a nice bonus.)

Finding the right helicopter flight school can be a daunting task. For aspiring pilots, there are a lot of options and a whole slew of terms you've probably never heard of, like Part 141 and Part 61. Do your homework, find out the pros and cons, the costs of what's included and what's not, and sign up for a school that meets your needs and will help you achieve your professional goals, whatever those goals may be.

In the end, a school like PBH, which looks to create new industry partnerships that give students better training, better chances at funding and better chances at jobs, might just be a solid bet. It doesn't hurt that the southern Florida climate ensures PBH can provide year-round flight training and a scenic setting. And, with its instrument flight simulator cutting down flight costs, student housing cutting down living costs and a team of dedicated professionals helping you out every step of the way, it's tough not to be drawn to this close-knit group. After all, as Sparks has often said, "it's just one big family."

The views expressed herein are those of the author and are not to be construed as official or reflecting the views of the commandant or of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Lt.-Cmdr. Bergen is a safety officer with the U.S. Coast Guard at Air Station Miami, where he flies the HH-65 Dolphin.

He graduated from the Navy's flight school in 2001, but also holds a degree in mechanical engineering and is currently working toward his masters in aeronautical sciences.

