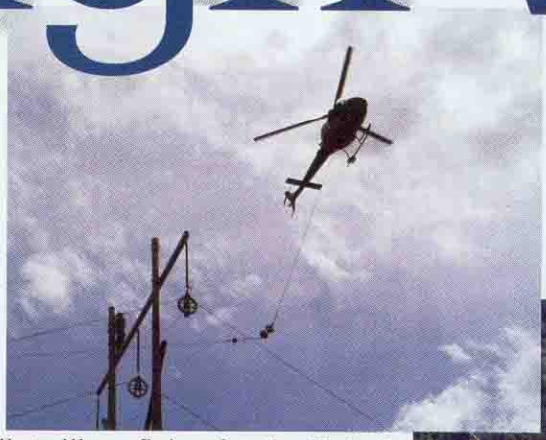
High wire



By Correspondent Tonia Jurbin

Stringing conductors and working in harmony with crews at high levels makes helicopter work a skillful art.

Whether you need fire fighting assistance, a chartered flight to a remote cabin, a knowledgeable, experienced flight trainer, or a pilot who knows the overhead transmission lines and pipeline right of ways, pilots like John Kennedy are valued and sought out by their regular customers.

Kennedy, chief pilot and operations manager for Kelowna Helicopters Charters Corporation of Kelowna, BC, and pilots like him, become known for their knowledge of the local terrain and weather patterns and for getting their customers where they need to go. A skill that comes with about 35 years of experience in Kennedy's case, he has about 16,000 hours of flying time, 14,000 of them as a helicopter pilot. Trained by the Royal Canadian Air Force in the early 1960s, Kennedy was a military pilot for about five years flying jets and training pilots on the T33's.

In 1965 he started flying for Okanagan Helicopters and has hardly flown a fixed wing commercially since, except for the odd Beaver or floatplane. After about five years with Okanagan doing mostly charters and mountain training, Kennedy took a hiatus from flying to study business administration. Later he flew with Frontier Air, the helicopter division of Conair out of Abbotsford, BC. He worked as a training pilot for Highland Helicopters of Castlegar in the 1980s and for a brief stint, he worked for Canadian Helicopters flying for the United Nations in Rwanda and Somalia, transporting personnel and materials, and training pilots. Kennedy has also spent a lot of time fighting fires with the various outfits he's worked for.

While with Frontier he fought fires in Europe and South America, particularly France and Chile. The firefighting pilot does primarily two things, water bombing and repelling.

"We used to just hover over a spot near a fire and let people down with ropes," says Kennedy. "These days we use hoists to lower people down which is better because now we can get them back up."

Kennedy doesn't do as much firefighting these days with Kelowna Charters. The smaller Bell 206 and the larger A-Star is used for inspections, ski touring, or dropping wireless companies' crews to remote repeater sites.

Approximately 30% of Kennedy's work at Kelowna Charters comes from BC Hydro. In addition to the spring transmission line hazard reviews, he also gets involved in some of the specialty construction work. He assists crews in changing out or hanging glass insulators (that sustain a lot of damage from wannabe sharp shooters), hanging marker balls that improve the visibility of the wires at river, highway or railway crossings, or stringing conductors across the tower spans.

Stringing conductors requires a lot of skill on the part of the pilot. Not all pilots can do this work regardless of how many hours they

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John Kennedy refuels one of his company's helicopters.

have accumulated.

To string conductors, a longline is suspended from a helicopter with a counterweight for safety on the long side that prevents the line from coming into contact with the rotor. A 'sockline' is attached to the longline and then pulled through a series of travelers (or pulleys) and fly arms (or levers) that are at the end of the insulator strings which hang from the structures.

Fly arms are operated remotely by the pilot as he passes over the structure. The outside phases are easy to string because the pilot never has to let go of the sockline. The middle phase is a little trickier because the sockline has to be gripped by a fly arm and released by the pilot on one side of the structure then picked up on the other side so that it is 'threaded' through the structure.

Structures located in holes are even trickier because of the uplift caused by the sockline on the uphill structure. Eventually the sockline is manoeuvered into the position that the electrical conductor will occupy. The pilot pulls the sockline along a number of spans and at the end of the run, the line crews will attach the conductor to the sockline with a swivel so that the conductor can twist independently of the sockline. The sockline is then reeled in by the puller that is still at the start of the run taking the conductor with it.

Flying over uneven terrain often makes the job of stringing conductors very tricky.

Kennedy spends another 20% of his time training commercial helicopter pilots, some who already have aviation training from military or RCMP.

One of the problems he sees in his industry is a common lament; "they spend about $35,000 to $40,000 getting their commercial pilots license only to find that they can't get a job."

Over the years, customers have become more sophisticated expecting more features, some of which are now mandated by Transport Canada. Extras like ambulance kits that allow a helicopter to transport stretchers, bubble windows in the back, which require special ventilation in the winter, shoulder harnesses all around (now required by Transport Canada) and powerful radio equipment all add to the weight of the machine and the operating costs.

The rest of Kennedy's time may be spent ski touring where he takes people to remote cabins for a week at a time, charter touring, assisting the Ministry of Environment with the wildlife game counts, or maybe even blowing water off of cherry trees in British Columbia's Okanagan.

"There's a lot of money in cherries right now," he says. "It takes a couple of hours to blow the water off an orchard, and I might have to go twice in one day."

Kennedy has also done some search and rescue work, but it is not a big part of the charter business.

"I like the work because I'm really attracted to the outdoors and I like flying," says Kennedy.

His scariest story? When he lost the drive shaft on a tail rotor. "I had to auto rotate (crash) into the bush near Cranbrook. That was pretty scary. I walked away, but my machine was toast." ◆