

# MEET A ROTORCRAFT PRO

*Matt Johnson*



Matt Johnson (left)

## RPMN: What is your current position?

After spending several years in the HEMS industry, I just recently started flying for a sheriff's office in southwest Ohio (Cincinnati). I came out of an EC145 in HEMS and am now in an MD500E and MD520N. I greatly enjoyed HEMS, however, it is nice wiggling the stick again and not just pushing buttons and turning knobs. My current position is never boring and allows me to fly much more than I did as a HEMS pilot.

## RPMN: Tell me about your first flight.

I was a young child and it was a tour-ride helicopter. I'll never forget it, everyone was amazed by the scenery and I could have cared less about that. I was grossly intrigued by the helicopter itself: how it worked, what the pilot was doing, the gauges, etc.

## RPMN: How did you get your start in helicopters?

From my first helicopter experience as a child I knew that I wanted to fly helicopters when I grew up. I dabbled into taking the plunge throughout my late teenage years and early 20s, and the financial reality always reared its ugly head. By the time I considered the military route, I was established in a successful law enforcement career. Although I don't like to admit it, I do have a private airplane single-engine rating (said with laughter). I did this

early on to appease my aviation interest and learn, at a cheaper rate, all that I could about basic aviation. Although I haven't flown an airplane in several years, I am glad I got the experience. In my mid 20s I decided to take the helicopter plunge and never looked back. I did my private and commercial over a two-year period and then followed with an instrument rating, CFI, and CFII rating a couple years after that. Then a couple years later, I followed up with an ATP rating.

## RPMN: Where did you get your start flying commercially?

I was fortunate to get a good start in my hometown. I initially flew for a local sheriff's office, flying state agents around doing marijuana eradication. I also did a fair amount of instructing. My first full-time flying job was flying news and then I flew agricultural work. After that I moved on to nearly five years of HEMS work. I learned a lot about the Part 135 world and flew a lot of nice aircraft, including the EC135 and EC145.

## RPMN: You have flown a lot of different makes and models of helicopters, which do you like best?

I was afraid you would ask that! That is a tough one. I have enjoyed most everything I have ever flown. For a piston helicopter I am very fond of the R44; they make a great trainer and great point A to point B machine. I'm also a big fan of the Enstrom

line and excited to see their recent progress. For the single-engine turbines, I absolutely love the MD500E. The iconic Bell 206 is near and dear to me as well. For the twin-engine turbines, I would have to say the EC135 is my favorite.

## RPMN: If you were not in the helicopter industry, what else would you see yourself doing?

Well, my answer isn't exactly something outside the industry. If I had to be doing something else it would most likely be turning wrenches on helicopters. I have a lot of respect for good mechanics and always have been extremely interested in the "what and how" of mechanical things.

## RPMN: What is your greatest career accomplishment to date?

Becoming an FAA Designated Pilot Examiner (DPE) has been the highlight of my career. I was honored in the beginning when selected by my FSDO (FAA Flight Standards District Office), but as time progressed I realized the magnitude of the opportunity. I conduct private through ATP-level exams as well as CFI and CFI-I. The people I meet, and seeing firsthand the dedication that CFIs and their students put into achieving a pilot certificate or rating, is extremely rewarding. My DPE designation allows me to appreciate the characteristics of many different makes and models of helicopters; it continually humbles me. Between my "day job" and

being a DPE, I've found myself in an EC145, R22, R44 and a S300 all in one week's time; and I enjoy each and every one of them!

## RPMN: Have you ever had an "Oh, crap" moment in a helicopter? Can you summarize what happened?

Yes, it happened several years ago while ferrying an R44 back to an owner after maintenance. It was winter - extremely cold. I did a weather check for the short 50-mile flight. The weather was forecast clear for my route of flight, the temperature was ridiculous, like -20 C, ceilings 3-5K, and 10-plus miles of visibility. Shortly after takeoff, I flew through an inverse layer with warmer air above which kicked out freezing rain. In a matter of seconds the entire windshield of the R44 was covered. It was surreal; I couldn't believe what was happening! The only emotion I had was being pissed off beyond belief. I couldn't believe I had encountered freezing rain in those temperatures. I concentrated on aircraft control and made a turn back to the departure point that I knew was clear. I ended up shooting a localizer sideways into the airport; the only unobstructed windows were the two sides of the aircraft. After landing, the radar replay showed what I had encountered. The area I'd flown into was about the diameter of one to two small dots from a pencil. Great luck I have, huh?

## RPMN: If you could give only ONE piece of advice to a new helicopter pilot, what would it be?

Do everything you can to stay sharp! Training doesn't end with wet ink on a pilot certificate at any level, private or ATP. Do this by

reading everything you can get your hands on, fly with different instructors, fly as many different makes and models of helicopters that you can. In essence, never stop being a student!

## RPMN: In your view, what is the greatest challenge for the helicopter industry at this moment in time?

I think the biggest challenge is changing the way helicopter pilots are being brought up and into the working helicopter industry. Much time is being spent on stick-wiggling skills, but much more needs to be spent on "soft" skills like decision-making based on real-world practical applications. We have a lot of good resources in our industry at the "professional" level. Unfortunately, so many pilots don't learn about a lot of these great tools until they hit 1,000-2,000 hours. Why wait? Anyone that has been a CFI knows all about the law of primacy: what is learned initially sticks best. Why are we waiting until a pilot hits at least 1,000 hours until we teach them how to utilize a risk-assessment system, work cohesively with other crewmembers, utilize enroute weather trigger points or even how to use the HEMS weather tool? Any pilot can use the HEMS tool! I've seen more than a few "professional" pilots struggle with soft skills because all they were ever taught was the flying portion of the industry. This needs to change.

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