Helicopter students taking flight

Pilot degree focuses on filling local industry needs

BY KORAN ADDO kaddo@theadvocate.com

Thomas Daley remembers the day this fall when his helicopter lost power. The top rotor was still spinning, but only because of the wind.

Flight instructors say a pilot has two seconds at the most to recognize when the power is lost before the situation turns deadly.

At the crucial moment, Daley's training kicked in. He was taught to keep the helicopter level while maintaining a certain airspeed. The maneuver allowed him enough stability to pull the nose of the chopper off the ground just in time for a safe landing.

"Once I landed, that was one of the happier moments of my life," said Daley, a former Marine now enrolled at Baton Rouge Community College. The 25-year-old Atlanta native found his way to BRCC through a friend in the area and compliments of the GI Bill.

His harrowing experience was all part of a training exercise. It's called the auto-rotation drill, and there was an instructor with him the whole time.

"It's a little nerve-wracking the first time you do it," Daley said. "You're falling out of the sky."

Since that time, Daley, a man who says he has "no real education to speak of," has flown solo on three separate occasions — all within the first semester of BRCC's helicopter pilot operations degree program.

In two years' time, graduates earn associate of applied science degrees while

Matt Cavenagh, chief flight instructor at Guidance Aviation BRCC, stands in the BRCC hangar with two of the student helicopters.

also becoming certified flight instructors. It is the only collegiate helicopter pilot program in the state.

It's part of BRCC's plan to fill demands mostly in the oil and gas industry, but also in fields including emergency medicine and law enforcement.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that career opportunities for helicopter pilots could increase up to 21 percent between 2010 and 2020. The Federal Aviation Administration says that number could actually rise to 28 percent.

In Louisiana especially, there is a large demand for experienced pilots to ferry people and supplies to and from oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Helicopter Safety Advisory Committee says there were nearly 900,000 flights made in 2011 to support offshore oil rig operations in the Gulf. Industry watchers say the economic impact of just the helicopter portion of the Gulf's oil industry is worth more than $1 billion to Gulf Coast states.

Helicopter flight instructor C.J. Schneider said a student who applies himself can typically handle the actual flying of a helicopter after a few weeks.

But most of the learning, he said, is done on the ground.

"Becoming a pilot is about multitasking," Schneider said. "You have to be able to aviate, navigate and communicate at the same time."

Students have to understand weather and how different conditions, particularly, wind can affect a helicopter. Aspiring pilots also have to master advanced navigation on a map, finding very specific points, such as where a river meets railroad tracks. And they have to actually perform the mechanical function of controlling the chopper while also communicating with a control tower.

Schneider said students also have to master emergency procedures including flying in a low-gravity, or "low-g," state when the helicopter is in a free fall or losing speed at the top of a climb. They also learn how to avoid hazards such as bird flocks and power lines, the No. 1 killer of helicopter pilots, according to Schneider.

Despite the inherent risks in all forms of flight, Daley, the student, said the experience is worth it.

"It's been the time of my life," he said. "I have a new outlook on my future."

Contact Shondra Johnson, coordinator for technical education, at (225) 215-8289 or aviation@mybrcc.edu for information on BRCC's helicopter piloting program.