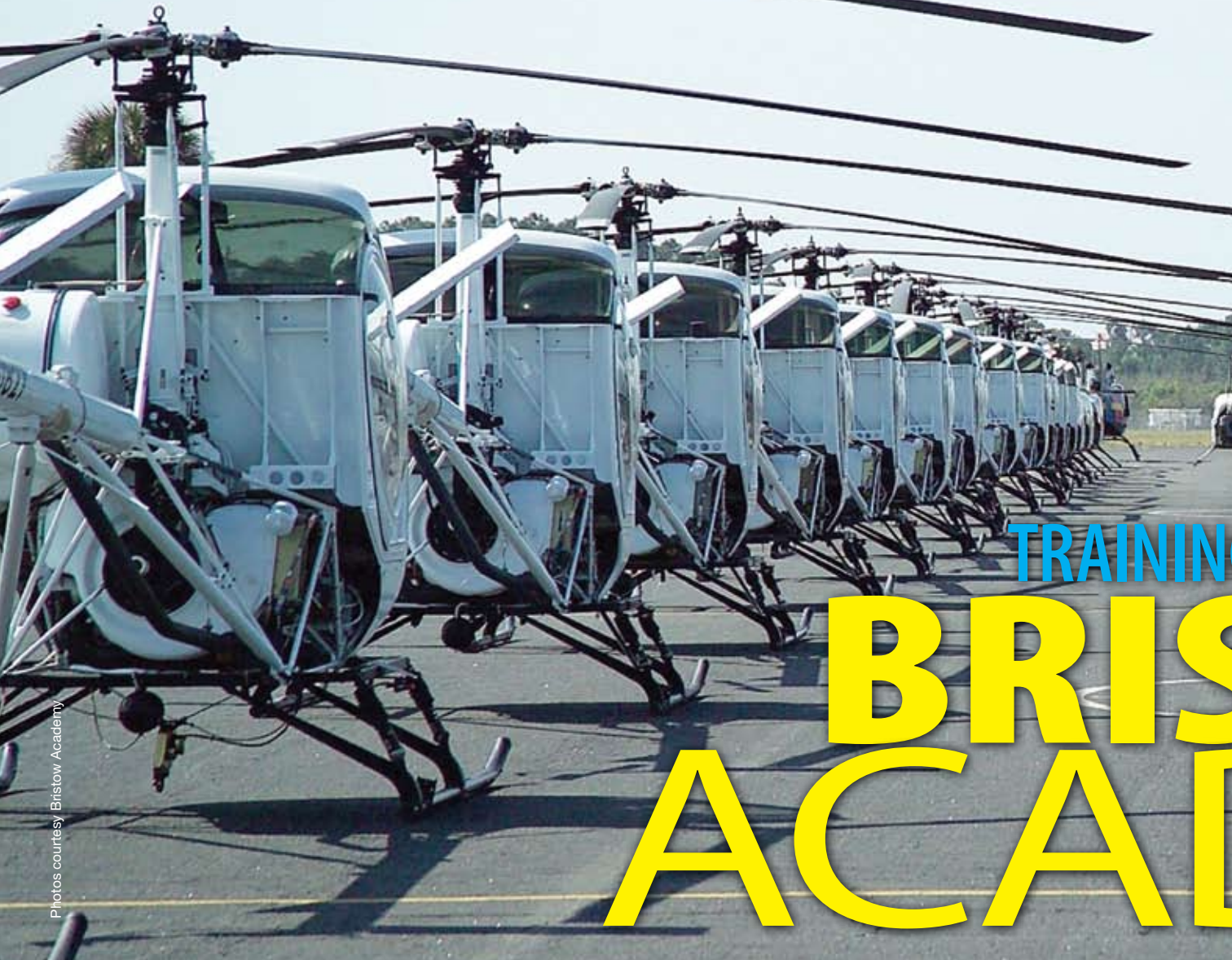


Line 'em up: Bristow Academy has a fleet of around 50 helicopters based at its largest campus in Titusville, Fla.



Photos courtesy Bristow Academy

TRAINING BRISTOW ACADEMY

Whether flying offshore in the North Sea, SAR in Western Africa or just for the fun of it, Bristow Academy gives its helicopter pilots a strong foundation of confidence, competence and safety.

By Dale Smith

BIG PROFILE:

BRISTOW ACADEMY

2 1:30 Local time. Your Sikorsky S-92 is two hours out of Bergen, Norway. Tonight's destination is the company rig's 50-by-50 helipad located 225 feet above the churning North Sea. OAT: -5° C. Wind Direction: 290. Speed: 30 kts, gusting to 57 kts. Ceiling: 800 broken. Visibility: Partially obscured by blowing snow and fog. The weath-

er isn't your friend, but you've seen worse. Cold. Wind. Fog. Darkness. Big helicopter. Small helipad. It's a challenge many pilots wouldn't want. But delivering your 17 passengers safely is who you are. It's what you've been trained to do.

As a major provider of personnel and equipment transportation, search and rescue, and practically all things

helicopter related to the oil and gas industry, Bristow Group is a big helicopter operation. The company currently flies more than 520 helicopters and 40 fixed-wing aircraft to support the global exploration and production of this valuable resource. But Bristow's philosophy is that while providing rapid, consistent response for their customers are key, the most important

thing they can offer their customers is safety.

Bristow Group's safety culture starts at the top and works its way throughout the entire organization. Its "Target Zero" program is aimed directly at "zero accidents, zero complaints from customers and zero downtime." It's working. Bristow recently received the National Ocean Industries Association's (NOIA) coveted 2011 Safety in Seas Award.

Part of the program's success is, no doubt, based on everyone, especially upper management, understanding what the company's pilots do every day. "At the end of 2006, Bristow's senior management team spent a week at the Titusville Campus receiving ground and flight instruction," explained Samantha Willenbacher, director of Bristow Academy. "Bill Chiles, our CEO, wanted everyone to have a greater understanding and appreciation for what they were asking our frontline pilots to do on a daily basis."

During this visit, "it also became apparent that there was a strategic advantage in having an ab initio flight school as part of the Group," she added. "Bristow recognized that there was a need for creating safe, skilled and knowledgeable pilots for our rapidly growing commercial operations."

In fact, filling the need for the huge numbers of qualified, professional pilots to crew their aircraft 24/7 in some of the most extreme environments on the planet is a challenge that even Bristow would find hard to overcome. So rather than compete with other global operators for the few qualified helicopter pilot candidates available, Bristow decided to groom pilots to meet its own strict standards.

Bristow Academy was formed in April 2007, with the acquisition of Helicopter Adventures, Inc., with which Bristow had contracted to provide its training for European and Nigerian operations in 1998. "Soon after its creation, the Academy acquired two other helicopter schools. Now we have four training locations

with three in the U.S. and one in the UK," Willenbacher said. "We are an FAA Part 141 flight training academy with a full range of approved programs from private through the commercial/instrument helicopter rating. Our largest campus is here in Titusville, where we have 50 helicopters based. Our other major U.S. location is in the heart of Gulf of Mexico operations" in New Iberia, La.

Gregory Popp, business development manager, added that, "From a program perspective, there are no other 'one-source' providers that offer our array of FAA-approved courses and can add specialty programs like external load, mountain operations and night vision goggle training." The academy is also the only Joint Aviation Authority-licensed rotorcraft training provider outside of the European Union, he added. Since its creation, the academy has placed 106 graduates into Bristow Group's commercial operations around the world.

Currently the Academy has a mix of both self-pay and company/government sponsored students. "All of the students go through the same ground school basics for six to seven weeks," explained Francois Ganswyk, chief flight instructor (FAA) for Bristow Academy. "They have ground school in the morning and they fly in the afternoon."

Ganswyk said that all students undergo basic training in the Sikorsky S-300CBi and have the option to transition to the Robinson R22 or R44 for instrument and commercial training. Turbine work is done in either the Bell 206 or Eurocopter AS355, depending on the student's needs or location.

"We stress professionalism in all aspects of our training," he said. "We are in no hurry to solo anyone here. We average 15 to 20 hours of time before approving a student to solo. We spend considerable time making sure the students achieve a higher level of proficiency than you would have seen five years ago." Ganswyk also explained that the students are given more time



Bristow Group Sikorsky S-92 landing on an offshore platform in the Gulf of Mexico. Bristow Academy trains for a wide variety of helicopter markets in addition to pilots that serve in the offshore industry.

to get familiar with the avionics in the helicopters than in past years.

"Helicopters are unstable enough. You can't be spending your time staring inside at the equipment. We have Garmin 430s in our basic helicopters. It's not a complicated piece of equipment, but you have to be knowledgeable about how to use it before you take off," he said. "We know that we don't have the same equipment that our students will find when they go to work, but we can lay down a great foundation for them now to make their upgrades faster and safer."

It's clear that no matter what aspect of training is being discussed, the key differentiator for Bristow Academy is always looking to provide the best foundation of knowledge and confidence. That's critical because it's never clear where or what type each student will end up flying. "We provide a lot of different people the opportunity to pursue their dream of becoming a heli-



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Instructors from Bristow Academy use Sikorsky S-300s for flight training.

copter pilot," Willenbacher said.

Unfortunately, while the recent economic downturn hasn't dampened prospective students enthusiasm about attending the Bristow Academy, the difficulty of finding financing has. "Interest in flight training has never died down. But, since the beginning of this year, it's really picked up," explained Anisha Hopkinson, student services manager. "Especially when there are so many of the first-time commercial jobs available, it gives students the confidence that there are a lot of good jobs available."

"About 60 percent of our students are coming from overseas with funding from back home," she added. "For everyone else, finding funding is the biggest problem they face."

Hopkinson continued that Bristow Academy has "seen the numbers of our self-funded students reduce over the past few years. Funding is a huge hurdle. We need the helicopter indus-

try to come together to explore ways to find a solution to the funding crisis or there won't be anyone to fly the new-generation helicopters."

Offshore and More

While Bristow Academy's primary focus is to give pilots a strong foundation to build an offshore, SAR, EMS or other helicopter career, the school has grown beyond its roots. There are no other training providers with a U.S. Army-based initial entry rotary wing (IERW) program that meets both Department of State and Department of Defense standards, according to Popp. "We are doing direct training of that nature to a number of U.S. allied military customers. We do a lot for countries in Central and South America—drug interdiction, counter narcotics efforts, counter narco-terrorism. This is highly specialized training."

The academy "also provides civil-

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Ron Bower is a respected columnist in numerous aviation publications. He's logged over 8,000 flight hours. He holds two world speed records for circumnavigating the globe in a helicopter. Ron has been buying and selling helicopters worldwide for the last 18 years, and has been involved in the purchasing of over 362 helicopters. With the founding of Bower Helicopter, Inc., Ron Bower can now share that expertise with helicopter buyers worldwide.

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ian qualification training for military pilots," he continued. "This FAA/military program takes the pilot through FAA commercial qualifications, then they can continue through specific military training programs such as military tactics, night vision goggle (NVG), formation flight or mountain flying—specific programs to meet specific needs."

Oddly, the one type of training that you'd expect the Bristow Academy to offer as a mainstay isn't even a stand-alone program. "We don't really offer offshore operation training because that is so specific to the needs of the company they will be flying for," Willenbacher said. "Once they get hired that will be covered in their LOFT [line oriented flight training] program. We do have a helipad out in one of our practice areas in Titusville. Our commercial students can get some practice to understand how to set up an approach to land on a helipad."

For more advanced training needs within its JAA instrument program at its facility in Gloucester, U.K., "we have flight training devices that can simulate landings on oil rigs and other sites," she added. "We also offer advanced training for commercial pilots including synthetic instructor qualification, CRM training, LOFT, and introductory training for offshore, and police operations," Willenbacher said. "We can create training packages to meet practically any special operator requirements."

Whether it's offshore or in the jungles of South/Central America, Bristow Academy reviews the types of programs it provides and tailors its courses to use the best of available training styles and technologies.

"You hear a lot about situational based training (SBT)," Ganswyk said. "Some schools see it as an all-or-nothing prospect. We see it a combination. A private pilot student would not

benefit from SBT because they lack the experience to make high-level decisions. But, you can conduct instrument or commercial training almost purely as SBT."

Safety is critical at the Bristow Group and Academy. "We have an extremely robust safety management systems here," Popp said. "We recognize, that in a very real sense we are able to influence the helicopter industry one graduate at a time. Quite frankly, it's probably one of the most rewarding aspects of what we're doing here," he added.

Of the pilots flying in Bristow's Norway operations in the North Sea, nearly 50 percent come from the academy, Willenbacher added. "Among all of these graduates, not one has had a serious helicopter accident or incident," she said. "There is no better testimony than that to show how well the academy prepares pilots for real-world operations." ✈

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