

What exactly does it take to be a Professional Game Pilot?



written by John Bassi, as published in the SAFlyer magazine, April 2004

This is something more than being just an ordinary, part time game pilot and it is a question asked of me on a continuous basis for which there is not really a simple recipe to follow. The one thing I am completely certain about is that it has absolutely nothing at all to do with the S.A.C.A.A. requirements which is something about doing a five hour dual flight with a game rated instructor and then getting a letter of approval that the candidate has the necessary experience, which is usually nothing more than having a mild interest in his neighbors budgie. Opinions as to what makes a good game pilot or how do you become a good game pilot will obviously differ according to individual agendas. For example those in it for a fast buck, those in it for an image thing, or those in it to cut costs of hiring in a qualified game pilot, compared to those in it because it is a passion to strive for perfection, will have different views.

I am obviously only interested in perfection and so will only discuss this topic from my biased perspective. Now there are hundreds of excellent pilots out there and there are also many qualified pilots that have cattle herding experience from down under, but! This is not just about flying, in fact the flying part is almost secondary because the flying machine is just a useful tool to get a job done efficiently. The flying machine has to be flown instinctively by feel and sound and this can only happen when the pilot gets to the point where he straps the helicopter to his back and then the machine responds to his thought and sight. There can be no more flying with most of your attention on the manifold pressure, you have to instinctively know that you are on 22 inches and already be making a contingency plan to get out of trouble as you feel your way over 21 inches. This must happen without any thought process because your thought process is too busy taking in the line of flight of the weaving, galloping sable bull that is doing an awesome job of throwing you off and you have to get a dart into him before he runs too much and dies of capture myopathy. This can only happen if you anticipate his next move at 65 mph while you dive between the branches of the passing tree, holding the craft steady so the vet can aim and a split second later pull up to avoid colliding with the next tree while not losing visual contact with the darted animal since he turned 180 degrees on a dime and gapped it away in the opposite direction for cover. Obviously all this happened while you were flying down wind and the sable was galloping at speed toward the boundary fence where there were power lines right across your path. During this madness you are coordinating the ground crew vehicle to not get in your way but to be as close as possible to save time in recovering the animal and you dare not take your eyes off him as you are noting the female sable's position as she flushes out of a clump of bushes to the left. The owner of the farm is there and he is known to be a

difficult @!#%\$&^*+, he is watching the flying time and if you lose an animal you can bet he will sue you for the R90 000,00. More than that though, this sable bull happens to be the only one of its kind left and he is a trophy of note that is crucial for a breeding project where his genes are vital. There are huge koppies on the farm and it's the pilots job to make sure the darted animal does not end up high in the rocks or he will not be recoverable to load onto the bakkie and will have to be woken up, also there are not enough people in the ground crew so when the sable goes down you have to land right next to him to help hold and load him. All of this needs to be done without denting the helicopter, and to make it worse the owner did not want you flying there in the first place as his buddy also fly's and it's the vet that convinced him to use you. So what's my point, well, the whole affair becomes less about being a helicopter pilot and more about being a focused person with the right attitude. The focus is on the animals' well-being first and then your interaction with the client, ground team, vet and your ability to pull the entire operation off like grease lightning. All this can be learned in 5 hours according to the regulations.

Getting back to what makes a good game pilot, my opinion is that the person must first start off with the right qualities, which cannot be learned, like having a positive, humble attitude towards life, be determined to succeed but to understand and accept failure, be in touch with his female side and have a sensitivity for animals. There is no room for an ego, an arrogant nature, a chip on the shoulder or an, I am the best attitude. The pilot must be doing all this because it is a calling, have a professional outlook, but still know humor and to not be aggressive. Then the pilot must be able to read and understand animals of all types to the point of being able to anticipate each move and be a step ahead, knowing when to back off. We then move onto the human relations in dealing with the clients, which is a whole book on its own, trust me. A Bassair game pilot has no problem mucking in and getting his hands dirty helping with the ground team or doing maintenance to a helicopter, he is also able to make a plan under any situation and to act in the responsible manner. Game pilots never spend two nights in a row sleeping in the same bed and never know where the next meal is coming from, they have almost no social life because they are always in the bush while their friends are having fun in town. I can safely say that the game pilots I know are a dedicated bunch of down to earth professionals that live life on a plane far higher than most others will ever know.

So, how do you become a good game pilot? I will stick my neck out and say that it is either in your blood or it is not and that of all pilots I know may be 10% make good game pilots and 2% make awesome game pilots. The learning curve starts during your journey through life because that journey determines your attitude. A person with the right attitude can learn anything. Within the first few days of starting to learn to fly, your attitude will surface and if it has the right qualities, then you will naturally flourish and the doors will open. The first step is to complete the private pilots license since this is the basic foundation and is the entry requirement to write the commercial license. Once through the PPL you become an apprentice to one of the full time game pilots and over a full season of eight months become completely involved in all aspects of the industry. This exposes the student to every situation imaginable with exposure to every type of wildlife capture, management and helicopter operations possible. The interaction with veterinarians, wildlife managers,

land owners and ground teams provides the student with the background needed to gain acceptance into a closed industry. The exposure to helicopter operations in the field and the opportunity to fly along and observe capture as it happens ensures the best chance of learning while providing a means to build hours in a real working environment. This intense time away builds camaraderie and the truth will always come out, if it is positive then the student is on the way to a career of opportunity, if not then at the end of the season the student is back to the drawing board on his own. The next step is to take six months off to attend a commercial ground school and to study to pass the theoretical exams. This is the leveler because up until now you are just another wannabe, but once past this hurdle the doors open wide to the real training. The flight training is split into phases and the pilot's ability determines whether or not he moves to the next phase. Usually at this point the pilot will have around 80 hours total and will need another 120 hours minimum before he is ready to pass the comm. flight test. Our first phase is simply becoming more confident and comfortable in the aircraft and this is achieved by 5 hours of dual flying brushing up on all aspects of the sequence of instruction. This is followed by 2 hours of solo consolidation, another 1 hour of dual checks and then 10 hours of navigational exercises to pre-selected destinations where the student will have a task to perform, for example identify and record a specific item. The next hour is spent dual practicing precision exercises, followed by an hour solo doing the same. Now the fun starts with 3 hours of emergency procedures, 2 hours of advanced low level flying, 2 hours of confined landings and take offs, 5 hours of game capture techniques, 2 hours of flight safety procedures. 2 hours is now spent on landing and taking off from a trailer, 1 hour landing, taking off near fuel drums for hot re-fuelling, 2 hours darting and shooting from a helicopter. Depending on the progress we now spend 1 hour re-capping on emergencies, 1 hour on down wind, out of wind conditions, 1 hour limited power operations, 1 hour advanced slope landings, 1 hour mountain flying, 1 hour low level mountain flying and 1 hour mountain landings. Now in case you felt that was not enough we then go onto the next phase which is around 30 hours broken into 1 hour of helicopter operations-airmanship, 2 hours of basic helicopter aerodynamics, 5 hours of game capture overview, 2 hours of game capture helicopter safety, 2 hours of chemical immobilization, 8 hours of mass capture techniques, 1 hour darting techniques, 1 hour culling techniques, 1 hour aerial census and 8 hours covering accidents, incidents, operational hazards and extreme confined landings. Obviously there are many hours spent in the classroom briefing and de-briefing during all of this along with literature for reference to each task. The remaining 45 hours are used up in solo consolidation and preparation for the comm. flight test, which is a happy day. But the troubles have only started because now the pilot has a fresh comm. with a game rating but no capture team will use him because he has no experience and no insurance company will cover him until he has at least 500 hours. This is the frustrating time where it is vital to not take chances because the result will end up in unhappy clients and a crashed helicopter so the next 100 hours is spent on the safe kind of bush flying in the form of game counting. At the

end of this then we do some more dual flying to brush up on the darting exercises and that is the first type of capture work to partake in. Easy animals that do not run too fast, building up to the more difficult species and then the first mass captures of antelope. It's a long journey that can take up to two years of dedication but at the end of that journey a bigger and better journey begins with amazing adventures.