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MAVERICK HELICOPTERS

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Story + Photos
Lyn Burks





In 1995, former U.S. Army helicopter pilot Greg Rochna, along with his wife Brenda, made a decision to try and build a better helicopter tour company in a very competitive market. It was a bold mission, considering that the Las Vegas/Grand Canyon helicopter tour market was well established and dominated by several mature players. As it turns out, the couple's decision to start Maverick Helicopters was one of the best business decisions of their lives.

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The company's name was baked 20 years ago from an odd mix of ingredients that included a nickname, some external inspiration, and perhaps a pinch of spite. Prior to co-founding Maverick Helicopters, Greg was a minority owner in another helicopter operator in the Vegas area. When it came to the business and operations side of the helicopters, he was at odds with the other owners on many occasions. For example, one of his philosophies was: "The helicopters eat first." In other words, make sure everything related to running the helicopters was amply provided and paid for prior to the owners taking anything. His consistent desire to do most things contrary to his partners earned him the nickname "Maverick." So when the time came to break free and start his own company, it was a no-brainer.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

In 1996, Maverick Helicopters' flight operations were officially launched in the tourism capital of the world: Las Vegas — a destination known for high rollers and over-the-top service. The company mission is to provide the finest level of service, as expected by the VIP guests of the resorts and hotels in the City of Entertainment.

Despite its current appearance, Maverick Helicopters' humble beginning was not all that different from most startups fraught with dirty hard work, long days, and sleepless nights. Armed with one helicopter, the Rochnas set out to build a helicopter tour operator their way ... the Maverick way. Greg was the tour pilot, the passenger briefer, as well



as the hangar floor sweeper and aircraft washer. From that first helicopter in 1996, Maverick's fleet has grown to 44 Airbus EC130 helicopters. The company now employs 350 people, including 80 pilots and 60 maintenance personnel. By mid-2015 they will have added three more helicopters.

In addition to its helicopter operations, Maverick Airlines was formed in 2008 and currently operates six fixed-wing aircraft flying to the Grand Canyon as well as charter flights. In 2009, another division, Mustang Helicopters, was launched to provide flights departing from Henderson Executive Airport to the Grand Canyon.

Over the years, Maverick Helicopters has received an array of travel industry accolades. It is the only company in the world to twice be named to the Travel Channel's "Top 10 Best Helicopter Thrills in the World." It has also been involved with numerous filming projects, including work for NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox, E! Entertainment Television, Food Network, Travel Channel, Golf Channel, Discovery Channel, and movie studio DreamWorks. In 2014, Maverick was awarded the Best of Las Vegas award by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, was a winner in the Best of Nevada survey by *Nevada Magazine*, and also was awarded the prestigious Southern Nevada Hotel Concierge Association's Best Tour Company award for the fourth consecutive year.

HIRING, TRAINING, AND KEEPING PILOTS

Some people might think flying tours is a cakewalk, and in some cases it might be. In The Ditch (tour pilot slang for the Grand Canyon) there are many factors that can make tours very challenging. For example, extreme high desert temperatures create high density altitudes. Combine that with helicopters that are loaded either at or near maximum gross weight, and suddenly pilot technique becomes very important.

Physiologically, long days in extreme temperatures can have an impact on performance. Physical endurance aside, much of the game is psychological. Pilots are required to interact with dozens of passengers all day, every day. They are required to be at the top of their social game in order to give their customers more than just a flight in a helicopter. Rather, they are expected to create an amazing experience. Second, performing similar flights over and over again, to the wrong person, may seem monotonous. When a pilot views something as monotonous, complacency can set in. Everyone in this business knows that there is zero room for complacency in the cockpit, as it is a common link in the accident error chain.

The point is that it takes a certain type of person to succeed at flying tours: the job requires much more than just flying a helicopter.

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Understanding that point is critical to Maverick's longtime chief pilot, Joe Munoz, as he is mostly responsible for hiring the company's pilots. Although a minimum of 1,200 hours helicopter experience and 300 hours of turbine time are required for consideration, many new hires will have much more than that. They may also have previous experience with another tour operator. Once hired, as a FAA Part 135 air carrier, all pilots will go through FAA-approved ground and flight training. The training is conducted in-house by one of three training pilots. It can be several weeks long and culminates in an oral exam and flight check by the company check airman.

According to Assistant Chief Pilot Jim Ogletree, the biggest difference between its new-hire training program and other operators is that the flight operations management team is very hands on during the process. Class sizes are kept to only three pilots. The chief pilot, asst. chief pilot, and training pilots regularly fly the line. Once a new pilot has completed both training and the flight check, he or she is not just thrown into the mix. There is an extended mentoring period in which a management pilot is always present. He or she may be in the same aircraft with the new pilot during a tour, or in one of the helicopters in a tour group. Tour groups always go out in groups of 3-8 helicopters and are in close communications, allowing management to keep a close eye on new pilots while keeping standards very high.

In the tour industry, pilot turnover is traditionally high as the job is viewed by many as a steppingstone to other sectors, such as electronic newsgathering and HEMS. Maverick is not delusional about that fact; they understand that it comes with the territory. However, the company is not resigned to accepting an average turnover rate. They realize that having a well trained and highly experienced pilot,

with the right attitude, is essential to giving every single customer an amazing experience.

Therefore, the company is not only religious in its approach to hiring the right people, but proactive in creating an atmosphere that is conducive to keeping people around. From a pilot's perspective, Maverick has a reputation in the area for having not only very competitive pay, but also for creating a family atmosphere. It helps that they boast some of the newest and best maintained equipment in the business. For its efforts, Maverick contains its pilot turnover rate to less than 50 percent. The management team, among both flight and maintenance departments, has virtually no turnover, with most top positions held for 15 years or more.

MAINTENANCE MAKES THE SHOW GO

Since pilots have the most direct connection with passengers, they naturally play a critical role as to whether or not guests walk away having had an amazing experience. This connection impacts word-of-mouth, internet reviews, and return business.

However, if pilots are seen as the "stars" of the show, it is maintenance that makes the show go. Without an expert team of mechanics and support personnel working around the clock, the entire production would come to a screeching halt. In 2014 alone, the company flew over 41,000 flight hours. John Mandernach, vice president of maintenance, and his team have their work cut out for them to keep their availability rate at 100 percent. At these flight volumes, staying ahead of the maintenance curve is a balancing act of science, planning, and art.

From an outsider's perspective, one might take a look at Maverick's maintenance program and sum it up in one word: overkill. But after scratching



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the surface a bit and understanding their business model, one can see that there is a method to the madness. A legitimate philosophy does exist, and again it all comes back to one thing: provide guests that amazing experience. An unscheduled maintenance event could well be the difference in a guest having a great time — or a crappy one.

Although unscheduled maintenance events are inevitable in any helicopter operation, in a busy tour operation they are deemed the devil since downtime equals dollars. Maverick takes a pragmatic approach and views extra money and man-hours spent on maintenance as an investment. When I was in the maintenance facility, I witnessed mechanics working together to complete a task. One mechanic would perform a

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maintenance procedure, and then another would step up a couple of minutes later with a manual in hand to inspect the work. The price paid for this approach is that they may spend two to three times more labor hours on a procedure than estimated in the manual.

Aside from planning the maintenance schedule 90 – 120 days in advance, the other area that the company's maintenance is known for is not cutting corners when it comes to replacing parts and maintaining a large supply of spares in-house. One saying that I heard from several different sources within the company originated with the owner: "When in doubt, change it out!" Most operators will try and operate certain parts or components right up to the end of their life-hours, a function of pinching pennies and improving cost efficiency. Maverick Helicopters does not do that. As an example, if there are 10 hours left on a part and the helicopter is down for maintenance after 100 hours of operation, the mechanics may go ahead and remove the part so as not to

take the aircraft out of service again, or worse, encounter an unscheduled maintenance event.

The other tool in the company's arsenal for maintaining an uber-high rate of availability is the dedicated safety ship. This is a spare helicopter ready to fly at all times, but kept off the flight line. Should an unscheduled maintenance event occur, say during startup for example, passengers can be immediately moved to the spare aircraft, avoiding a delay, or worse, cancellation. Maverick views paying for these extras—which come at *considerable* cost—as investments toward achieving their goal of 100 percent availability. The return on that investment is a very satisfied guest who will return again, or better yet, refer others.

SAFETY IN ACTION

Since Maverick has one of the best safety records in the tour industry, I asked the team how they approach safety.

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They, like everyone else, have a formal safety program . . . yada, yada, yada. However, I like to see if I can recognize elements of safety culture in a more informal manner. Usually I notice it in visible actions, as well as hear it in company mantras. Maverick Helicopters was no exception. For example, I heard "No one is above safety, not even the owner." Another company mantra is "Everyone in the company has a say." From the executive level down to the floor sweeper, if someone sees something unsafe or that can be improved, they are encouraged to speak up. The company's safety culture trumps everything: maintenance, training, customers . . . *everything*.

NEW HORIZONS

By the time this article goes to press, Maverick Helicopters will hit two major milestones. First, they will pass the 300,000-hour mark in the Airbus EC130. Second, they will cross the 350,000-hour line as a helicopter operator. So after 20 years building up a 350 employee operation with 47 helicopters that have flown over 350,000 hours, one would think that it is time for owners Greg and Brenda Rochna to retire, relax, and soak up some of that Nevada sun while sipping on something cool. Right? Wrong!

This coming spring, Maverick Helicopters will be opening its new tour operation in . . . drumroll please . . . Maui, Hawaii. (Yes, it's tough duty, but somebody's got to fly there 😊) Only time will tell if the Maverick spirit will prove successful in the land of *mahalo*. I have a good feeling that it will.

