

CAMP CURTIS: A WEEKEND AT THE YOUNGBLOOD ACADEMY

Feature Article

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as told to Maria Veres

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In issue after issue of MHT, you read the same message: Get out and learn from other heli pilots! While fun flies and local flying clubs are great places to sharpen your skills, you can accelerate the learning curve by enrolling in a helicopter school.

This spring I attended my first session at the Youngblood Helicopter Academy. I came back home with a new level of skill and confidence, feeling that I'd crammed an entire season's worth of learning into just a few days. Mike and Maria encouraged me to describe my Academy weekend for other MHT readers.

What It's All About

As most of you know, Curtis opened his doors to students back in 1997. Classes meet several times a year and run for three days, from Friday morning to Sunday night. Students are asked to arrive by Thursday evening so that flying can start bright and early the next day.

All sessions take place at the Youngbloods' home in rural Texas, about an hour's drive from Austin. Curtis is one of the few guys lucky enough to have a flying field right outside his back door. To ensure individual attention for everyone, each class is limited to three pilots. Students originally had to use their own helicopters, but now this is optional. Pilots can also choose to fly one of the JR Ergo helis available at the school.

So those are the basic facts, but what really goes on at a Youngblood Academy weekend? That's easy to answer: You fly. Then you fly some more. And after you've burned more fuel than you thought possible in one day, you go back out and fly again. When it's finally too dark to fly anymore, you hang around the shop and talk helicopters or get help with setup problems. No question about it, you definitely get your money's worth in instruction!

Setting High Goals

Our opening flying session on Friday morning was the most nerve-wracking one for me. After we walked out to the field, Curtis stepped back and said, "OK, show me what you can do." Well, I don't do much, but I did it, whatever it was! With one of the world's best pilots watching my every move, my fingers felt like spaghetti, but somehow I managed to keep the machine in the air.

After our first "test flights," Curtis took each one of us aside privately and asked us about our goals for the weekend. I came up with three goals, which in retrospect were probably about two and a half too many. I wanted to master nose-in hovering, become more comfortable with autorotations, and learn inverted flight. The other two students, Grady and Cary, also had plenty that they wanted to accomplish, so we got right to work.

We used the "buddy box" system for all our flights. Grady and Cary had brought their own helicopters, and Curtis set up his radio to link with theirs. I chose to use one of the school machines. The three of us took turns flying, one of us burning a tank of fuel with Curtis while the others observed and took a much-needed rest.

Just knowing Curtis was right there to correct my mistakes gave me the courage to try maneuvers I wouldn't have risked on my own. He had to rescue me any number of times, but he only stepped in when he needed to. All in all, he really didn't take over the controls very much.

I worked on nose-in first. I already knew what controls to use when a helicopter was coming at me. I just didn't do it because I was afraid of damaging my machine. As Curtis and I practiced, with each hover I got a little closer to the ground before he took over. Finally I landed on my own.

I looked at Curtis in surprise and said, "Weren't you going to take it from me?"

He shook his head. "No, you had it. I knew you could do it."

It was official. I had learned nose-in.

Later that weekend, after we'd moved on to other things, I would rest by hovering for a minute if I got tired in the middle of a flight. When I did this, I instinctively began turning the helicopter toward me instead of away. Then I realized what I was doing: In a very short time, I'd gotten so comfortable with nose-in that I was hovering that way without even stopping to think about it.

Unfortunately, I didn't do quite as well with my other goals, autos and inverted flight. One problem was that the weather refused to cooperate. On Saturday we had to practice autos in a thick fog that gave us only about a twenty-foot visibility ceiling. Not the best conditions for any type of flying, especially autorotation work! We adapted the best we could, and I practiced some lower-level autos. At first Curtis took over and bailed me out, and later I bailed out on my own. I did get a little more comfortable with them, but I admit to being frustrated by the bad weather.

As far as inverted flight, we ran out of time to do much more than make a token nod toward that goal. We did practice a little, but I didn't even begin to master it the way I did nose-in. Maybe next time....

You Want Me to Do *What*?!

In the end, it didn't matter much that I hadn't achieved all my goals. I gained something more important than the ability to hover nose-in or do any other specific maneuver. The best thing the weekend gave me, in a word, was confidence. That buddy box worked magic. Free from the fear of crashing, I took risks, succeeded, and discovered I was a much better pilot than I'd given myself credit for being. In that sense, the lessons from this one weekend will last for a lifetime of flying.

One of the most memorable confidence-building exercises took place on Saturday night. After dinner, Curtis pushed back his chair and said, "Come on we're going back out to the field." The fog outside had cleared by then, but we had a new problem. It was pitch dark. Cary and I, both first-time students, were mystified. Grady had been to Camp Curtis once before and obviously knew what was about to happen, but he just sat there with a big grin on his face.

At the field Curtis told us, "We're going to do night flying." I looked at Cary, Cary looked at me, and we said, "You've gotta be kidding." Night flying?! Curtis already knew how aerobically challenged I was even in daylight. Now he wanted me to try zooming around in the dark?

But once again, Curtis's confidence in our abilities was justified. I actually flew at night, and it was phenomenal! You have great orientation with the helicopter in the dark. I liked it so

much that I bought myself a set of night blades and a night kit after I got home from the weekend.

Giving It All

Counting the night flying session, I flew ten times on Saturday, and almost as many on Friday and Sunday. Altogether I put in almost seven hours of stick time. When I came in each night, I was physically and mentally exhausted from concentrating so hard on trying to learn new skills and not make mistakes. I was so tired and saturated by Sunday night that I probably couldn't have learned another thing.

And for everything the other students and I did, Curtis was doing three times as much. Unlike us, he never got a break between flights. He had to concentrate on helping us, concentrate on the helicopter, and in an instant, without thinking, he had to take over an errant helicopter and recover it. Yet he had a smile on his face the whole weekend. He never acted tired or grumpy. I honestly don't know how he did it.

In addition to being remarkably patient, Curtis was flexible. He had a good sense of when we were getting a little numb from flying the same maneuver over and over, and he'd switch us to something else for a while. As a break from autorotation practice, for example, he taught me flips and stationary rolls. They hadn't been on my list of goals, but they were quick skills to learn and broke the monotony.

In both the flying practices and the evening setup sessions, he was there for any problem or question we had. No one in the hobby has earned more right to a big ego, yet he remains humble and approachable. He's the kind of guy you can enjoy learning from. So for those of you who have been wondering if he can teach as well as he flies, my answer is a definite yes.

A Weekend with Family

Curtis's ability to make us feel comfortable extended to our time away from the flying field. Like most of his students, the three of us who came that weekend chose to stay in the Youngbloods' home. We were treated just like family, not like paying students.

I experienced Curtis and Julie's Southern hospitality the moment I first walked through the door... or maybe "stumbled through the door" would be a better way of saying it. One of my wisdom teeth had abscessed on my way to Texas. I had spent the previous night sitting in an Austin hotel room, in excruciating pain. In the morning I got the tooth pulled and then made my way to the Youngbloods' house, exhausted and still in pain. Curtis and Julie hovered over me, helping me settle in and offering me a bowl of homemade tomato soup.

As I ate, I reflected on how amazing the situation was. Here I sat face-to-face with one of the world's greatest model helicopter pilots, and the first thing he did was to take care of me and feed me tomato soup. After lunch, he and Julie left me to rest while they picked up the other students from the airport—trusting me, a near stranger, alone in their house.

The Youngbloods continued to go out of their way to make us feel welcome throughout the weekend. They gave each of us students a comfortable private room. Food was good and plentiful: three full meals, plus a hearty mid-afternoon snack that Julie brought out to us in the field, plus soft drinks and treats that were always available in the shop. Julie even noticed my love for jellybeans, and one evening I found my bed covers turned down and a little cup of jellybeans on my pillow. Unfortunately, one of the dogs finished them off while I was out of the room the next morning, leaving only an empty cup. It made a good joke for the rest of the weekend.

But to me, the ultimate proof of the Youngbloods' graciousness as hosts was that they let me watch the finale of my favorite TV show. Not only that, but it turned out to be their favorite show, too. We all sat down and watched it together, like a family. Who could ask for more?

If Only....

All in all, my only real complaint about the weekend was something the Youngbloods couldn't control—the weather. Although central Texas has plenty of great flying days, the climate can be unpredictable. We flew in rain on Friday, fog on Saturday, and more rain on Sunday. But running into bad weather is a risk you take any time you attend a helicopter event. Flying in those conditions was good discipline. It taught me a valuable lesson about how often we use bad weather as an excuse not to fly.

I wish Curtis would hold his classes more often. Between my work schedule and his other flying commitments, it will be a whole year before I can get back down to Texas for another session. Unfortunately, the class schedule isn't totally under the Youngbloods' control. As a sponsored contest pilot, Curtis has to travel a lot, and of course the guy occasionally needs a weekend off. But I hope that in the future he might be able to spend more weekends teaching.

When I finally do go back for my next session, I plan to do one thing differently. I'll bring my own helicopter. Originally, I didn't want to risk flying my own ship, and I even put off enrolling in Curtis's class until he made school helicopters available. But the buddy-box teaching method reduces the chance of crashing when you're trying a new maneuver, and it's easier in the long run to learn new skills on your own ship. Plus, if I bring my own helicopter next time, I can get Curtis's expert help with any setup problems I might be having.

My advice to anyone else considering a session at the Youngblood academy is simply this: Come with a clear idea of what you'd like to accomplish, and be prepared to do lots of flying! Altogether, I probably burned three gallons of fuel during the weekend. By comparison, I normally use about a third of a gallon during a weekend of flying at home.

Since the class size is so small, with lots of individual attention, pilots of any skill level can benefit from a session at the Youngblood Academy. Pilots who haven't spent much time flying may find the length and intensity of the weekend overwhelming, however.

If you're able to absorb a lot of new skills in a short time, and if you're committed to practicing what you've learned once you get back home, a helicopter school is definitely an option worth considering. I found my weekend at the Youngblood Academy to be well worth the investment of time and money. I recommend it to anyone who's serious about becoming a better pilot.