

# CAA meets GA on its home turf



*The full Board of the CAA gets up close and personal with general aviation and gains new insights into our world. By Pat Malone*

Something almost unique happened in March. The Board of the Civil Aviation Authority came face to face with general aviation, and it was surprised, impressed and perhaps a little bit inspired by what it saw. The Board spent a day at Denham looking at every aspect of the operation – the way the airfield works, how the flying schools are run, the commercial operations – and came away with a better understanding of GA's place in the world, and the issues it faces.

The visit came about at the request of CAA Chief Executive Andrew Haines, who asked AOPA's Martin Robinson to arrange it. Martin chose Denham, where owner Beatrice Paul was delighted to accommodate the Board. Apart from the Chief Executive, the visitors included Chairman Dame Deirdre Hutton, Gretchen Burrett, Richard Jackson, Mark Swan and Iain Osborne, and the non-executive directors Dr Catherine Bell, David Gray, Michael Medlicott, Roger Mountford, AVM Barry North, Captain Roger Whitefield, and Company Secretary and Legal Advisor Kate Staples.

Martin invited AOPA and British Women Pilots Association activist Pauline Vahey, who keeps her C172 at Denham, and in the afternoon arranged for the Board to



**Top: Heli Air's pipeline patrol covers some wild and remote corners of the country  
Above: some utilities specify that a turbine like the JetRanger should be used**

meet members of the General Aviation Strategic Forum. Afterwards he said: "I think it was an eye-opener for many members of the Board. It was a fantastic opportunity to show them a well-run GA airfield and to impress on them the range of services the industry provides, the jobs it creates and the obstacles it must overcome. They know that GA is bigger than Virgin Atlantic, with a turnover in

excess of £1.5 billion, employing more than 11,000 people directly – and as a happy accident, while we were at Denham two PC-12s came in carrying businessmen, just to reinforce the message."

The Board had a particularly enlightening presentation from Heli Air's Commercial Manager Richard Packe, one which gave a vivid illustration of the nature of a GA business. Martin Robinson says: "If any CAA Board member had a lingering impression that GA was just private aviators indulging themselves, the Heli Air talk would have given them a very different perception. I could see just how profoundly



impressed they were as Richard gave them an overview of the company's activities, and I believe that more than anything, the Heli Air talk improved their understanding of GA as it really is. Its pipeline patrols constitute a vital public service."

Richard Packe had only ten minutes to cover every aspect of the company's operations, but he covered a lot of ground. He explained that the company operates from four bases – Denham, Wycombe, Wellesbourne and Silverstone – and its fleet flies about 6,000 hours a year on a vast variety of jobs including flight training, ad hoc public transport for business travellers, charters for everything from

weddings to Grands Prix, film work, pipeline patrols and more. It buys and sells helicopters, it can operate them on the owner's behalf and can fix and rebuild them, it teaches engineering apprentices, and it teaches flying instructors and commercial pilots, arranges Instrument Ratings, and can sometimes employ the people it takes through the courses. It operates Silverstone heliport, the busiest in the world at the time of the British Grand Prix, and it maintains more Robinson helicopters than anyone else in the UK. Heli Air employs around 50 people full-time and many part-timers in all disciplines, and operates a mixed

helicopter fleet including the Robinsons, the JetRanger, LongRanger, EC120 and EC130 – nine of them on its AOC.

Although Packe didn't say it, it's worth noting that the company is regulated half to death – not only at great expense by the CAA, but it's audited four times a year by the utility companies for whom it runs pipeline patrols to ensure that it meets exacting health and safety standards. There's a lot of paper to be filled in at Heli Air.

While every aspect of the business has to wash its face, what makes Heli Air such a formidable operation is the integration of services, the mutual support that every corner of the business provides to the rest. Heli Air can sell you a helicopter, and it will also arrange your insurance for you, fix up the paint job you want, sort out the interior trim; it will teach you to fly the aircraft, it will maintain it for you, and it can put the helicopter on its flight line and help defray costs by using it to train others to fly. "There's stability in this kind of breadth," says Richard. "When sales became particularly difficult in 2009 because of the exchange rate, other parts

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**Top left: Heli Air's Commercial Manager Richard Packe with engineers at Wellesbourne**  
**Left: all pipeline patrol crews comprise a pilot and an observer**

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of the business remained strong. With sales, maintenance, training and charter, it's unlikely that they'll all be depressed at the same time."

What seemed to impress the CAA Board members most was the work Heli Air does for utility companies. It has contracts to patrol 3,000 miles of gas and oil pipeline, and it must cover every inch every two weeks, without fail. That means having the right helicopters on the AOC, and the right pilots, observers and engineers, and having back-ups for all without allowing the back-up requirement to rack costs in what is a very competitive area. This calls for a degree of organisational genius and flexibility that few companies can guarantee.

Richard Packe says: "For the pipeline contracts, some companies specifications differ from others – some demand an autopilot, a radalt, high-intensity strobes, a high-vis paint scheme, and HUMS engine monitoring. It is obviously not a matter of picking a helicopter from the hangar and firing it up. It is a highly competitive field; as I said to the CAA Board, we are bidding against companies which are not regulated to the same degree that we are, people who are not FTOs or TRTOs.

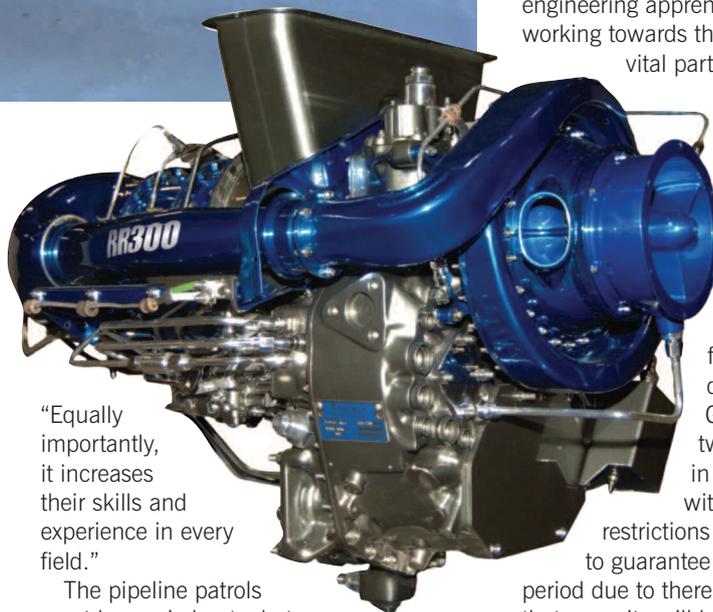
"It's high-intensity, lower-margin work and we're competing with the a wide range of operators – we have to offer the highest standards of safety and the best equipment. We're also competing with small operators who don't have our



overheads. We don't have to outsource our engineering or our training, and we can ensure that when an aircraft goes tech it can either be replaced or returned to service in the shortest possible time.

"The patrols take us right across the country, from London to Bridport and up to Manchester and Carlisle, on to Glasgow, Aberdeen and Inverness, back down via Newcastle and Hull. We have 11 full-time pilots on the staff and another ten part-timers, all with commercial qualifications, and all are able to do every flying job in the company, although only full time pilots perform pipeline patrol work."

The exchangeability of personnel is important, because pipeline flying can be quite onerous for a pilot – it's not unusual to fly six or seven hours a day – and the ability to mix and match people is essential. A pilot might be on the pipeline for a few days, then be switched to flight training at one of the bases, then on to an ad hoc charter job. "It keeps people fresh and they don't feel jaded," says Richard.



"Equally importantly, it increases their skills and experience in every field."

The pipeline patrols must be carried out whatever the weather, either by air or by ground patrols on foot, and Heli Air's flexibility was tested to the limit last December when Britain had its worst weather for 30 years. "Even four days of fog can make life very interesting for us," says Richard. "Weather like last December's could have knocked us sideways, but we were able to fulfil the

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**Left: patrols must be undertaken whatever the weather – on foot if necessary!**  
**Below: Heli Air also runs a training school for engineers working on the RR300**  
**Bottom: one advantage for crews – they get to stay in some upmarket hotels**

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contract by providing extra helicopters, extra pilots and observers, all of them fully equipped and capable. When the weather improved we were able to put up two extra helicopters to complete the work, which shows the wisdom of training all our pilots to do all the work."

Part of Heli Air's engineering operation is the new training school at High Wycombe for engineers working on the RR300 engine that goes into the new turbine Robinson, the R66. The school serves the whole of Europe and runs back-to-back training courses. Heli Air itself has seven engineering apprentices at any one time, working towards their licences, and is a

vital part of the creaking 'system' that produces the engineers of tomorrow. There is increasing concern over future provision of aviation engineers. Like other GA concerns in the south of England, Heli Air faces a major problem during the Olympic Games in 2012 – their two busiest schools are in the restricted zone, and with the proposed

restrictions it will be very difficult to guarantee some flights in this period due to there being no commitment that capacity will be available. This will make training for Heli Air and all flying schools around London very difficult to organise during the Games. Not only that, but the prohibited zone over London will mean they can't run the London sightseeing flights that represent a significant chunk of their revenue. Unlike some companies, Heli Air has the strength to withstand the loss of so much business at the busiest time of year, but it will be a major blow.

Relaxing the Olympic restrictions, however, is not within the gift of the CAA, although they do have some influence and they are in accord with general aviation on the need to minimise disruption in what, they now know, is an industry that needs all the support it can get. After the Denham visit the CAA Chairman Dame Deirdre Hutton said "GA is a vital part of UK aviation and the CAA Board was therefore very interested in the visit to Denham and grateful for everyone at the airfield for hosting us. All the presentations were useful in providing the Board with the views of the various GA representatives." ■

