



***Makalaya
Biggers,
Helicopter Pilot***

Makalaya Biggers, Helicopter Pilot Big Hurdles and a Bigger Heart, in a Petite Package

By Mike Jones

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One of the great joys of flying are the wonderful, talented people one meets hanging around airports. Case in point: there's a new face at my local airport, a talented young flight instructor with big ambitions. But before you hear her story, crank up your memory machine. Dial it back to the that day long ago when you attempted something completely new.

I can think of several such moments in my life: my first day at college; my first day of duty as the newest second lieutenant in the Air Force; my very first "grown up" job at AT&T. Damn, those were exciting days. I had some butterflies but an exciting future sprawled out before me.

Plus, there was one enormous source of comfort: I was not alone. Colleges know all about welcoming freshmen. The military has centuries of greeting new recruits. Every company has "on-boarding" processes with forms to complete and an office tour to enjoy. It may be new to you, so it is stressful, but there's been busloads of people there before you.

Now put yourself in that same situation, but without the support team. You're attempting something outrageously ambitious. You're completely on

your own: no parents, friends, teammates, or platoon buddies. Oh, and it's ridiculously expensive. Talk about pressure.

Now, *do it as a teenager*. Did your stomach just flip-flop?

Allow me to introduce Makayla Biggers, pilot-in-command. At age 23, she's a SEL pilot with both her helicopter and fixed-wing commercial tickets. She's also a helicopter CFI with 30-plus students and about 900 total hours — mostly rotary-wing wing — working for Total Flight Solutions out of Pinehurst, NC. Her aviation story is brief but enticing.

Living the Adventure

There can be no doubt, Biggers is an adventurer at heart. Although she grew up in Rock Hill, SC — about as placid a town as one can imagine — by age



Makalaya Biggers is a professional helicopter CFI with about 900 total hours and more than 30 students in training or completed. Here she highlights some of the technical details of the Robinson R22 helicopter in which she trains.

17 she was an experienced scuba diver and had three American sailing association licenses. She “likes to get out there” on that crazy line between supremely skilled and exhilaratingly dangerous. Somehow, the tedium of college didn't seem to hold any magic.

“Late in high school, my parents had a come-to-Jesus meeting with me. What did I want to do? A sailing instructor? A scuba instructor?” Biggers related. “I'm thankful to have parents who are very supportive. They said, figure out what you want to do. If it's not college that's fine.”

Unemotionally, Biggers stepped back to reconnoiter the options. Upon urging from her father, she researched becoming a pilot. She noticed the exciting career opportunities in helicopter flying. Her parents only requested that she consider both helicopters and fixed-wing airplanes before making a final choice. Biggers tested airplanes and found them to be great fun. “But then I did an introductory flight in a helicopter. I just fell in love.”

Today, Biggers’ teaching schedule is jammed with students, many who are special forces combat soldiers from near-by Fort Bragg. There seem to be two general types of military students: either they are non-pilots looking to enter a different career when they get out of the military, or they’re military flyers looking to get valuable civilian experience. Most never expect their instructor to be younger than their own kids.

Some military flyers also have difficulty adjusting because there is no rank or badge. The military understands hierarchies, with sergeants and colonels and ranks in between. “But many of these guys have no experience with civilian instructors,” she explained. “I’m not their boss, I’m not their peer. They don’t know where they stand.”

“Some of my military students even jump back a little when they meet me,” she said, her voice strong and clear. “I mean, it’s about trust. You’re getting into a tiny helicopter, with no doors, and I’m young, and female, and they don’t know anything about me, and that makes people a little nervous. They simply don’t know what to think.”

But that situation changes after the first lesson. Biggers has noticed when she and a new student go to the helicopter for the first time, the military pilots usually walk ahead of her. But when they come back in, they’re directly beside her or even a little behind her. “You can see their mentality shift after just the first flight.”

Oddly, even the most skilled military pilots have difficulty transitioning to the tiny Robinson helicopter. “These guys fly Blackhawks, Chinooks and Apaches, the heaviest metal. All of them tell me the Robby is the hardest helicopter they’ve ever flown,” Biggers said. Military helicopters have more power, computerized controls, stabilization systems and hydraulic boosts. But the R22 is just simple, pure, raw helicopter. There’s nothing between the pilot’s hands and the machine; nothing between the pilot and his or her mistakes.

“I’ve been told I probably could out-fly some of the military pilots because they’ve never had to handle something so small and sensitive in a 20-knot crosswind,” she said.

After they’d flown maybe ten hours together, she asked one military pilot his opinion of training with her. He confessed he had initial doubts.

“He said, I’d never flown a piston-engine plane, never flown anything so small, never flown civilian, and here’s my instructor who doesn’t look old enough to have a license,” she related the conversation. “But he said I was confident, I never had to show-off or prove myself, and I knew what I’m doing. I let my flying speak for itself.” That’s a compliment that Biggers’ took to heart.



A helicopter cockpit features an alarming amount of glass and a scary lack of instrumentation. A helicopter pilot uses four controls simultaneously to stay in the air: the cyclic down by each pilot's side, the collective, a throttle mounted on the collective, and anti-torque pedals under each foot. Just to make things really special, a helicopter PIC always sits on the right side of the aircraft.

Biggers' principle goal in the helicopter is just to get the students to relax and have fun. She was working with one student who was doing great in the air but struggling to land the helicopter smoothly. “The closer he got to the ground, the squirmier he would get,” she recalled. “Then I noticed he was

perfectly calm until the moment I said, ok, let's set the helicopter down. That's when he'd get all squirrely. So this time I said, just hover as low as you can. Suddenly, he was just hovering lower and lower, totally in control. Then we felt the skids touch. Perfect!"

"It's definitely a special moment when I can get somebody to see what they need to see; when the switch clicks into place," she laughed. "Teaching is so rewarding, I enjoy it so much. It's a victorious moment for your students which makes it a victorious moment for the instructor as well. Small things, big things, those are the moments which makes teaching so powerful."

Hurdle After Hurdle

To break in into the rarified world of commercial helicopter operations, there were more than a few hurdles over which Biggers' had to clamber. A less confident or a less courageous person would never have challenged all these dragons. She tells the tale with a slight smile, almost disbelieving all the forces which could have derailed her dream.

Hurdle #1 — Finding a School: A helicopter rating requires a helicopter flight school, and it turns out they're pretty rare. She and her Dad started traveling. "It was almost like a 'college tour' that the other kids were doing, researching where to go," she explained. "Except we toured different flight schools; because there aren't many that offer helicopter instruction." After looking at choices all over the country, she selected Oceans Helicopters.

Hurdle #2 — Longest Long Distance. Oceans Helicopters was far away from tranquil Rock Hill, all the way down in Florida near West Palm Beach. Undaunted at age 17, Biggers pulled the trigger and moved to the Sunshine State. "I got in my car and moved to North County Airport (F35). I was completely on my own, twelve hours from my closest relatives."

In retrospect, Biggers feels Oceans was a great choice. It was a privately-owned family flight school; a classic mon-and-pop operation. They used the small but affordable Robinson R22 helicopters. Their son was the chief flight instructor. At any given time there were three busy instructors and between 20-25 students, mostly men, cycling through the program. “I was adopted into the company like a little sister,” Biggers laughs.



Biggers chats with one of her first students before he solos the aircraft. Helicopters are very sensitive to weight-and-balance, winds, density altitude, and many other factors which need to be incorporated into the planning for every mission.

Hurdle #3 — Total

Immersion: Being a student pilot became an all-encompassing, full-time job. The training

was like “drinking from a firehose.” She averaged one flight each day, normally in the morning before the humid Florida skies became too turbulent. Ground school consumed her afternoons. Most evenings involved more studying at home.

“I went from a total rookie to helicopter instructor in eighteen months,” Biggers said. Her social life was almost nil. Just like many college students, she also worked evenings and nights as a waitress to help pay for it.

Biggers is particularly proud of her work learning to be an instructor. Many students buy “canned” lesson plans to “teach” to their instructors, but Biggers chose a harder route.

“I wrote all my own lesson plans, which is really time consuming,” she said. “But I understand the material better than those students who simply purchased lesson plans. I can teach it better.”

Hurdle #4 — The Weather: Florida is a great place to be a student pilot. In the morning, the air is calm and the winds are gentle, which is perfect for beginners. The afternoons are reserved for the more experienced students.

“Like clockwork, every afternoon the thunderstorms would come in, the turbulence wrenching the helicopter, constant hot air and bumps,” she said. “I can remember coming back and seeing rainclouds right over the airport. I’d say, ok, we’ll just hang out over here until the weather improves.”

“The flying... was overwhelming,” Biggers sighed. “There were times when I cut my flight short because I was tired or overwhelmed. But I enjoyed every minute of it.”

Hurdle #5 — Presidential TFRs: Presidential security indirectly forced Oceans Helicopter out of business. When Mr. Trump was elected, Air Force One would fly to West Palm Beach Airport and the Secret Service would establish a “no-fly” zone for miles around that airport, which encompassed many smaller GA airports.

“Basically, every time he came to golf they would shut down all the small airports in the area for as long as he stayed in town. A flying school that can’t fly? It killed their business; all their students went elsewhere,” she said nostalgically. “They kept one helicopter just for me and one other gentleman until we could get our check-rides. They actually kept the business open one more week, just for us.”

Hurdle #6 — Finding a Job: There are dozens of opportunities for experienced helicopter pilots, such as flying for oil companies over the Gulf of Mexico, executive transport, police work, or air ambulance services. But those

types of companies want seasoned professionals. Biggers didn't have those credentials, yet. That made finding a job a challenge.

Biggers began looking at local flight schools but found most prefer to hire their own graduates, because they know how those instructors fly and how well they were trained. Unable to find a CFI job right away, Biggers took the time to add fixed-wing ratings to her resumé. Then she discovered Total Flight.



The Robinson R22 is the best-selling helicopter in the world today. Although the machines are very small and somewhat cramped, they offer exceptional capabilities at a very reasonable cost-per-hour. The biggest weakness of a Robinson, or any helicopter? They require an extravagant degree of maintenance, far more than a comparable fixed-wing aircraft.

Total Flight runs a busy helicopter school with two locations in North Carolina. They were willing to hire Biggers for the Pinehurst location to support two specific students. This was a good news/bad news situation. The good news was that it was her entry gig into professional flying. The bad news was with only

two students her schedule might be mostly empty. Since instructors only are paid when they fly that meant there would be no guarantee of an income. Always confident, Biggers jumped at the chance. Today, she has built the business to the point where she is flying four or five hours virtually every day; more on weekends.

Was It a Good Decision?

Today, life is becoming more normal. She has an apartment and a roommate who's a fixed-wing flight instructor herself. "We split the rent so it's

easy and affordable. It's good to have a roommate. She's going to be a life-long friend, for sure."

Either way, her parents remain super-supportive. "My Mom was the first person to fly with me in a helicopter, and my Dad was the first with me in an airplane," Biggers said.

She said other family members thought she should have done something different, and there were times in Florida when even Biggers was overwhelmed with self-doubt.

"One big moment going through CFI training, I called my mom. I told her I didn't know if I could do this, not even 19 years old and teaching people how to fly! And my mom said, you have the mentality already, you have the skills, you're going to be a great instructor. My parents have been a huge support factor, all the way through."

When Biggers graduated high school and moved to Florida, many of her high school friends drifted away because she wasn't flowing along the typical college route. Was that a mistake?

Definitely not, she answered confidently.

"I've found new friends in aviation. People come from every direction, every walk of life, which is so cool. You land at an airport someplace and sit down with somebody. There can be two pilots, one guy who saves nickels and dimes to fly and the other guy can be a million-dollar CEO, completely different worlds, but everybody just loves to fly. You don't see that in other industries or professions. One simple factor binds us together: We all love to fly."

Biggers' happy at her job but thinking long-term; looking at bigger helicopters, bigger responsibilities and bigger paychecks. Police and medical ambulance flying have her particular attention. But she'll always be flying.

About the Author

Mike Jones once flew as a passenger in a helicopter flying out of campground at the bottom Grand Canyon. That exciting ride only lasted a few minutes as it transported him to a short turf-strip on top of a cliff where a sturdy Cessna waited. The helicopter ride was fun but the Cessna flight was terrifying. The runway was so short pilot literally drove the fully-loaded plane off the cliff and dove into the canyon to pick up flying speed. Coming up next month: On to Oshkosh!



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