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Unlike Their Airline Peers, Some Pilots Who've Taken The Route Less Traveled Are In Demand



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Aerospace & Defense



Ag pilot Scott Palmer sprays fungicide on an Iowa corn field. Unlike airline pilots, aerial. [+]
SCOTT PALMER

Things are dour in the airline business. In late October the International Air Transport Association [presented analysis](#) projecting that airlines worldwide would have to make workforce reductions of approximately 40%-52% just to break even in 2021, with 1.3 million jobs at risk.

Many of the most lucrative jobs in aviation are held by airline pilots, positions thought to be highly secure and in-demand just last year as a wave of older pilots retired. The pandemic has upended that assumption, for a few years at least. In its wake, anxiety and a search for alternative employment is pervasive among air transport pilots.

Pilots in other sectors of the civilian aviation market know the feeling. Unpredictable demand cycles in niches from offshore oil rig transport to infrastructure inspection have made job insecurity a fact of life for years. But in a few places, the upheaval from Covid-19 has flipped the script.

Down In The Weeds

Scott Palmer spent two weeks in Iowa this summer spraying fungicide on corn crops from a Schweizer Ag-Cat biplane. Over 14 days he flew 116 hours, spraying over 13,000 acres. As Palmer's beautifully filmed YouTube video illustrates, none of the flying is above 500 feet.

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Palmer is a crop duster, or aerial applicator, as the industry calls it. He flies for a small company in Pullman, Washington, called Inland Crop Care and, like other ag pilots, he's seen no drop in business since the pandemic hit.

"I'm very fortunate that I was in this job at the right time," Palmer says. "Farming has to happen no matter what. We have to feed America."

There are approximately 1,560 aerial application businesses and 2,028 pilots who treat 127 million acres of cropland in the U.S. annually, according to the [National Agricultural Aviation Association](#). According to national recruiting firm, [ZipRecruiter](#), ag pilots make an average of \$71,189 a year though salaries range up to \$147,500.

NAAA CEO Andrew Moore points out that aerial application was deemed essential work during the quarantine. According to association surveys the number of hours flown per ag aircraft in 2020 was 274.5, down from 329.1 hours in 2019. Lower commodity prices stemming from the pandemic likely account for the 16% drop says Moore, who adds that in 2018 the number was 278.2 hours flown per aircraft. Hours flown in 2020 were 10.8% lower compared with a six year average indicating a slip but comparatively strong demand.

Palmer was lured to ag flying by its dynamic nature and less rigid structure than airline work, common themes among non-air transport pilots. Prior to his aerial application job he spent over a decade as a professional skydiver, base-jumper and instructor following non-flying service as a forward air controller in the Air Force.

Despite a family background in aviation and farming, Palmer didn't start flying until in his 30s but quickly built time in tail draggers, attained flight instructor and commercial ratings, and bought a Kitfox sport aircraft with his brother to do recreational back-country flying in his native Idaho. Unlike his peers, he didn't follow the prescribed route to the airline business.



Palmer with his Kitfox short takeoff and landing (STOL) sport plane. Palmer occasionally flies... [+]
SCOTT PALMER

“I wasn’t in a hurry to go be an airline pilot,” he says. “I didn’t really have a plan for my aviation career. Similar to skydiving, I went with the flow to see where it took me.”

It took him to a job that requires study of pesticides, highly developed stick-and-rudder skills, and a tolerance for G-forces and risk. Aerial applicators approach their work with a safety mindset but its proximity to the ground and obstacles is a danger, one borne out by the death of veteran ag pilot and flying school owner Randy W. Berry, who died in a crash in Florida in September.

“You have to accept a certain amount of risk,” Palmer concedes. “Some of the planes we’re flying are a little bit more on the well-used side than most [professional] pilots are used to.”

A lifestyle akin to a small business person is part of the territory as well. The aerial application season lasts four to five months for Palmer, beginning with wheat crops in Washington State in April, moving to corn crops in Iowa in mid-summer and responding to calls to battle insect infestations in between. The work can be non-stop for periods, requiring Palmer to closely monitor his fatigue level and manage his flying.

“We have to have a level of pride in our work and make sure we’re doing it safely. It’s always a balancing act,” Palmer affirms.

By fall, he’s piloting a Cessna Caravan hauling skydivers up to jump altitude. He takes a break during the winter and seeks out additional flight training. He’s grateful that Covid-19 hasn’t affected his business. “It’s something we couldn’t really foresee ... Just a year ago those jobs seemed super-secure and my job didn’t seem secure.”

Through Smoke and Ash



A Coulson Sikorsky S-61T positions for a fire retardant drop over a ridgeline. Such work has been... [+] COULSON GROUP

Mel Ceccanti is director of flight operations for rotorcraft with British Columbia-based Coulson Group, one of the premier aerial firefighting and helicopter utility services firms globally.

Contrary to fellow pilots in rotary and fixed-wing transport jobs, Ceccanti has been busier than ever.

“The economic [downturn] is not as much of a threat to our sector as Mother Nature. Unfortunately, when it comes to wild fires, Mother Nature seems to have gotten angrier as we go further along in time.”

The 2020 fire season has been record-setting. In California alone, [more than 4 million](#) acres - 4% of the state’s land area - have burned. Ceccanti, who joined Coulson in 2018, says the company used to plan on 90 days of firefighting a year in the U.S. for its air tankers and helicopters. Other heavy lift jobs would be scheduled alongside the fire season. Now, he says the fire season in southern California is year-round.

According to market research firm, [Mordor Intelligence](#), the compound annual growth rate for the firefighting aircraft market is expected to increase 5.2% by 2025 with the rotary wing segment leading growth. The Helicopter Association International (HAI) reports that its upcoming virtual Aerial Firefighting Conference in mid-November is seeing remarkable growth with pre-registration up over 600 percent and over 500 registrants, dwarfing previous numbers.

Coulson has an additional preventative fire mitigation contract funded by Southern California Edison. Other utilities like San Diego Gas & Electric have increased budgeting for year-round firefighting services, part of a trend that Ceccanti observes is injecting unprecedented amounts of capital into the aerial firefighting market.

The demand is reversing a cycle which Ceccanti says has seen the U.S. commercial helicopter industry lose 200-300 pilots a year to the airlines for the last six years according to HEI statistics. ZipRecruiter puts annual aerial firefighting pilot salaries at \$55,292 on average but lower pay in the eastern part of the U.S. skews the median. [California’s Department of Forestry and Fire Protection](#) (CalFire) for example, offers annual salaries of \$102,000 to \$109,000 for forestry fire pilots.

“A lot of people have been leaving [utility helicopter flying]. There’s a drastic difference in careers compared with the airlines. A lot of [the outflux] was schedule-driven, money, union and retirement-driven. Now there are probably a lot of folks who’ve left the helicopter industry who are kicking themselves.”

Ceccanti himself has had doubts. “There were times when I thought, gosh, am I making a mistake? Maybe I should think about going to the airlines? I didn’t because I enjoy what I do.”

He started doing it in Olympia, Washington, learning to fly small Robinson R-22 helicopters and working as a flight instructor. A couple years spent flying helicopter tours in Las Vegas was followed by a job with Oregon-based Columbia Helicopters, learning to fly the Boeing Vertol 107 (CH-46 Sea Knight) twin-rotor helicopter on heavy-lift construction and logging operations.

Six years with Columbia led to the job with Coulson and taught Ceccanti what makes a good firefighting pilot and team member. “You’re going to see us with oil-stained flight suits and mud on our boots. Everybody has to wear ten hats. There’s nothing I stress more when looking to hire someone than positive work ethic.”

Coulson’s helitanker crews go on-the-road, working 12 days on, 12 days off. Air and ground crews spend all their time together. “The only time you’re not with the crew is when you’re sleeping in the hotel,” Ceccanti says.

A culture of safety is paramount but the combination of low altitudes, multiple aircraft operating in smoke and terrain over a fire, constant coordination and flight plans that change on-the-fly, draws pilots who can accept, even thrive, on risk.



A Coulson CH-47D Chinook helitanker sits on fire alert. California utility companies have contracted... [+] COULSON GROUP

“There is an adrenaline surge when you’re on a large fire,” Ceccanti explains. “It attracts certain people...There’s a lot of blind faith when you’re down low in the smoke with your eyes down.”

Part of the compensation he says is the ability to use his skill set to “help my fellow man, to make a little difference to somebody having a bad day.”

Steady work doesn’t hurt either though Ceccanti says he never looked at his career from a purely financial standpoint.

As for the unexpected fortunes of his compatriots in the airline business he acknowledges, “It’s certainly an interesting discussion to have. Looking back, this utility helicopter industry has survived multiple downturns, economic and natural. Now there’s a pandemic but this [sector] certainly doesn’t seem to be going anywhere.”

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