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Safety in Numbers

One Strike You’re Out

As spring blooms into action, the familiar sounds associated with baseball fill the air. Rather than arguing over balls and strikes, the consequences for helicopter pilots being called out on a strike are much worse than just being sent back to the minors. Sometimes the only difference between success and failure for helicopter pilots is how they handle those expected curve balls.

In looking at the scoreboard, analysis conducted by the US Helicopter Safety Team (www.USHST.org) reveals that approximately 16 percent of all helicopter accidents are attributed to wire/obstacle strikes. Furthermore, around 17 percent of these events result in fatalities. This unfortunate reality has led the USHST to emphasize greater awareness amongst helicopter pilots about the dangers of low-level flight.

Wire hazards are strung throughout all categories of airspace...from Class B to Class G. Whether in controlled or uncontrolled airspace, pilots must be vigilant, because wires and other obstacles can go undetected by human eyes. Wires are always lurking just waiting to ensnare their victims with little to no warning.

Also, complying with FAA weather minimums does not exempt pilots from run-ins with wires and other low-level obstacles. So, maximizing time and space for seeing-and-avoiding is a great way to help elude these often invisible hazards. Sometimes the only difference between escaping and being involved in a wire strike accident is a momentary distraction.

Many safety devices installed on helicopters can aid situational awareness for avoiding obstacles. The Wire Strike Protection System, otherwise known as wire cutters, is one of the most trusted and proven device’s. These wire chewing tools literally cut through undetected wires contacting the helicopter. Unfortunately, this system is not preventative, but rather, “cuts through” intruding danger for proving its worth. Talk about a hair-rising situation when it comes to breaking the “accident chain”.

Some newer detection systems use lasers to alert pilots of potential danger. These high-tech systems allow for greater use and flexibility on both Part 27 and Part 29 helicopters. Several of these devices can also detect current carrying and non-current carrying wires, regardless of its composition and diameter. Now that’s wired for success.

Agricultural pilots operate in wire infested environments all the time. These professionals divide their attention every second of every minute to ensuring their jobs get done efficiently and safely. The slightest distraction and these pilots can get tangled up without warning. A pilot must keep their head on a swivel to ensure their flight paths are constantly clear of danger.

During advanced training, helicopter pilots learn the importance of conducting high and low reconnaissance prior to conducting low-level missions. Forced landing zones clear of wires is also a must in case of emergencies. Sensory overload near the ground is bad news and can overwhelm even highly experienced pilots. Remember, pushing personal limits is foolish and can be deadly.

Meteorological Evaluation Towers (METs) are a major threat to helicopters. METs are used to gather wind data for developing new wind farm sites. These slender hard-to-see structures supported by invisible-like guy lines often stand below 200-feet AGL to elude having to comply with FAA obstruction markings requirements (AC 70/7460-1K).

FAA personnel have investigated several accidents involving aircraft colliding with METs. Pilots report problems seeing MET’s while flying until they come uncomfortably too close. As the US aggressively pursues alternate energy sources, the outcrop of MET’s will only intensify. If you know of any unmarked METs in your area, please contact Flight Service and/or your local FAASTeam Representative to report your discovery.

Helicopter pilots can follow some basic procedures to mitigate wire strike accidents. Pilots are encouraged to maintain maximum altitude as long as possible while also using conservative well known routes when transitioning from point A to point B. The extra minutes invested following these basic steps will help prevent unfortunate circumstances from happening near the ground.

Bottom line; high voltage lines, guy wires, and other low-level obstacles are lethal when mixed with helicopters. So, when it comes to maintaining safety, let’s all take the path of least resistance and leave the “shock factor” to the wires.