

COOL FLYING *Jobs*



NOT YOUR AVERAGE DAY IN THE COCKPIT

BY BETH E. STANTON

MEET SOME PILOTS who are not content with the usual. They crave a challenge and are driven by the need to push their boundaries and seek new adventures. Every day greets them with new circumstances and people to learn from and serve. For these pilots, the extraordinary is ordinary as they fly in places and ways most of us can't fathom. It took hard work and risks to get here. They fly in remarkably different ways, yet have achieved one common goal: making a living doing what they love.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM KOEPNICK

AIR TRACTOR *firefighting*



"AS A KID, I knew I wanted to have a job where I spent my day flying cool airplanes," said Mike Rhodes, Air Tractor production and R&D test pilot and firefighter. "I've always enjoyed the challenge of flying, and there are always places I can improve. Landing on a beautiful remote lake, scooping 800 gallons in 10 seconds, hauling it through the mountains, and dropping it on a wildfire is pretty fun." Air Tractor manufactures the 802F Initial Attack Firefighter and the 802F Fire Boss amphibious scooper aerial firefighting aircraft. One has a tail wheel; the other is on floats.

The amphibious Fire Boss is used in areas with close proximity to a scoopable water source and can make 20-40 trips between the fire and the water. A scoop, located in the keel of the float, pipes water from the floats to the fuselage and into the 800-gallon hopper. The Fire Boss is built at the Air Tractor factory in Texas, then retrofitted with amphibious floats designed by Wipaire. The tailwheel firefighter is loaded with retardant at a tanker base and delivers it to a fire.

The agriculture and firefighting versions of Air Tractor 802s are nearly the same, with the exception of the equipment on the belly. Fire gate computer-controlled hydraulic clamshell doors replace the sprayers, and the hopper tank in front of the cockpit holds water or fire retardant rather than spray chemicals.

Air Tractor 802s are nimble tools in the aerial firefighting toolbox. With airspeeds approaching 200 mph, they are quick to dispatch and arrive at a fire. They are maneuverable in tight mountainous geography and can turn around in places that other tankers can't get into. They are relatively low cost to operate compared with helicopters and large multiengine aerial tankers.

When fighting fires, weather, terrain, and traffic avoidance are constant challenges. Close proximity to the ground and making drops at 100 feet or less near the treetops requires constant focus. "Fires burn when it's hot and windy, which are terrible flying conditions," Mike said. "You're flying in busy airspace with half a dozen other aircraft, using five different radios and communicating with five people at the same time." The stakes are high. "We need to make accurate drops," Mike said. "Our job can keep someone's house from burning. We're not just throwing water out; we are being ordered to drop it with pinpoint accuracy."

Steve Bailey is one of four Fire Boss instructors in the country, who spends fire season working in Minnesota, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and Alaska firefighting in the Fire Boss. "As you push the nose over going down the terrain, you try to time the release and acceleration to be on speed and on target where the guys want it," Steve said. Flying through the smoke, he uses infrared to hunt for hot spots. "I enjoy trying to be precise. No two drops, or scoops, are the same."

What Steve loves most about his job is contributing to a meaningful purpose. "It's important for me to have an objective and provide a service. Helping the men and women on the ground doing the real work is a good feeling. The air assets are tools; the folks on the ground put fires out."

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