

Phoenix Heli-Flight

Underneath the boreal forests of northeastern Alberta lies one of the world's largest oil reserves.

The development of the Athabasca Oil Sands has transformed the remote community of Fort McMurray into a boomtown and locally based Phoenix Heli-Flight into aviation trendsetter.

A new chapter opened in the history of the 23-year old helicopter company in 2014 when Phoenix President Paul Spring was delivered a new twin-engine Airbus EC135 T2 helicopter in Fort Erie, Ontario for emergency medical service (EMS) and rescue use in Fort McMurray and the vast Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

Paul Spring began his aviation career as a fixed-wing aircraft pilot and licensed aircraft maintenance engineer (AME) in the mid-1970's, but soon transitioned into the helicopter industry.

In 1985, Spring moved north to Fort McMurray to manage a base for a major helicopter charter company as a pilot/engineer. After seven years on the job he decided to go into business for himself and founded Phoenix Heli-Flight with wife Andrea using a single AS350 AStar.

Spring was convinced that customers would support a new company if he provided them with high quality service and utilized high technology helicopters with excellent performance and safety features.

Since 1992, Phoenix has operated 17 different helicopters and all of them made by Airbus Helicopters.

Like most northern charter companies, Phoenix grew its business on flying a wide variety of missions, including; wildfire suppression, oil exploration, cargo transport, surveys, environmental monitoring, aerial construction, photography, hunting, tourism and VIP transportation.

During the first seven years, the 2 AS350's were the mainstay of the fleet but in 1999 Phoenix became the first Canadian charter company acquire a new Airbus EC120 Colibri and the first commercial operator in the world to employ the five seat aircraft for utility operations in remote locations.

Paul Spring had participated on the Eurocopter Customer Advisory Team for the EC120 and was impressed by its quiet comfort and safety features, including an enclosed Fenestron tail rotor.

In 2002, Spring introduced a more powerful AS350 B2 to the fleet and in 2005 introduced a powerful EC130 B4, which had a spacious cabin and fenestron.

Rising oil prices have helped stimulate increased international investment in the oil sands of northern Alberta, which contains the world's third largest reserve of oil (169 billion barrels) after Saudi Arabia and Venezuela.

The international investment also brought an important shift in what helicopters were contracted for oil sector infrastructure projects.

In 2005 the first European-based oil companies to apply International Association Oil & Gas Producers (OGP) helicopter operating guidelines to bush flying in northern Canada began to arrive.

“We were very surprised when company's told us they were not going to hire single engine helicopters anymore,” recalls Spring, who embraced change to meet OGP twin-engine helicopter requirements when he bought an Airbus AS 355 in 2006 with superior Category A one engine inoperative (OEI) performance capabilities.

The decision to purchase the Airbus AS 355 helicopter was part of a larger strategic shift to establish Phoenix Heli-Flight as one of first OGP-compliant helicopter charter operators in northern Canada.

“After talking with our clients about their charter helicopter requirements it was clear to me that raising the equipment and procedure standards at Phoenix would put the company in a good position to attract work from more OGP compliant oil producers.”

The transformation included many important changes to the company's safety management culture as well as, the acquisition of new technological tools such as satellite-based communications, flight tracking systems and small compact and affordable Helicopter Flight Data Monitoring (HFDM) recorders.

In fact, in January 2008 Phoenix was the first Canadian operator to introduce HFDM technology on its aircraft and Spring now regards HFDM “as the most significant safety advancement in decades” and has openly shared his experience and lessons learned with helicopter operators around the globe.

In 2008, Phoenix became the first Canadian operator of the high performance twin engine Airbus AS 355NP and in 2009 the company added an AS350 B3 for heavy external lift work

New Emergency Medical Services

“Fort McMurray has a population of 80,000 and there are another 50,000 to 60,000 people living in the dozens of work camps at oil sands projects which comprise the largest industrial complex in North America today,” explains Spring.

“Our helicopters have always provided medical transport and rescue services, but even with the acquisition of the twin-engine AS355's we were limited to

daylight only because two pilots are required for night operations and the second pilot seat occupies the space where a stretcher can be installed.”

In early 2013, Phoenix Heli-Flight ordered for a new Airbus EC135 T2 helicopter to launch a dedicated day/night EMS program to serve northeastern Alberta. It was a bold move funded by the company but Spring was confident that financial support would be forthcoming from the community, the oil industry and Alberta Health.

“Our requirement was for a twin-engine helicopter less than 10-years old (to meet OGP guidelines) that was equipped with skids, very quiet and had an enclosed tail rotor for safety when working around the rear doors of the helicopter on a highway at night.”

Phoenix leased an Airbus EC135 P2 helicopter in 2013 to launch the new air medical service and gain operational experience in the summer before the onset of the long, dark and cold winter in northern Alberta.

The leased EC135 P2 entered daytime service on July 26, 2013 and was upgraded to 24-hour day/night availability by the end of December 2013.

The new service was welcomed by the local community with the Fort McMurray Fire Department stepping forward to provide a 911 emergency dispatch service and the paramedics to crew the helicopter for its missions.

Virtually overnight, emergency response times were reduced as the helicopter responded to calls to remote areas which previously required the use of a ground ambulance, boat, all terrain vehicle or snowmobiles in the winter.

With only one major hospital in the region, the vast majority of helicopter missions are scene calls to accidents in the wilderness, oil company camps or along the accident prone highways that link Fort McMurray with the south of the province.

In August 2014, a brand new Airbus EC135 T2 entered service in Fort McMurray.

“The team at Phoenix was thrilled to finally take delivery of our new EC135 and we really appreciate the technology advancements that Airbus has incorporated into the latest version of this very successful helicopter. We are very proud of our ability to help save lives, at the same time I must provide our employees with the best helicopter to ensure their safety. The EC135 T2 meets all our needs.”

The new EC135 T2 helicopter has higher operating weight, a dual screen Garmin GPS synthetic vision system, newer instrumentation, a rescue hoist and a state-of-the-art night vision system. The EC135 T2 has Turbomeca engines, like all other Phoenix helicopters, to provide fleet commonality.

In parallel, the Local HERO Foundation was created by community supporters to secure the necessary operating funds for the dedicated helicopter service with a major fundraising campaign, which has intensified and is ongoing.