



FROM SHED

TO SKY

How often does someone look up into the wild blue yonder while milking cows and see his future? Hard to say, but that's what a young John Bitcon did back in 1967. **Tim McKnight** follows Bitcon's career from Geelong to Ulaanbaatar.



THE ODYSSEY

John Biton, a dairy farmer from Freshwater Creek, just outside Geelong, was assisting his father to sell the family farm and needed a new career. Observing the occasional chopper beating at the air above on SEC (Southern Electric Corporation) power line inspections and catching a radio ad that invited him to 'become a helicopter pilot and see the world,' a fateful thought crossed his mind: 'This has got to be easier than milking cows!' There was only one way to find out. Before signing up for lessons with Victorian Helicopters at Moorabbin Airport to embark on an odyssey that would last more than 35 years, Bitcon completed his fixed-wing private pilot qualification at Grovedale Airport. This gave him the essential navigation skills required for flying. And that's just how it was done in those days.

Although Victorian Helicopters soon closed its doors, Peter Clemence and the late Gordon Rose welcomed 28-year-old Bitcon into Jayrow's adjacent hangar as their first student pilot in March 1969. Clemence and Rose mentored him and fuelled his passion to continue his training. With 60 hours under his belt in the two-seat Hughes 269A, Bitcon earned his commercial rotary wings and immediately set off for his first assignment, a stint in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

A snippet from Jayrow's August 1999 newsletter marks Bitcon's 30 years at the company, recounting the tale of a pilot affectionately known as JB among his colleagues. Aside from his skill with rotary-wing aircraft, he earned fame for the whitest shirts in camp and catching the biggest barramundi. He denies the second charge, but an 11.8-kilogram (26-pound) fish makes a solid meal. And anything bigger is not worth eating anyway.

FIRE AND ICE

Flying with Jayrow throughout his career afforded Bitcon some rare and fascinating experiences, as the company only pursued large contracts, with a few short-term jobs to fill the occasional gaps. Many a summer was spent based at Victoria's Country Fire Authority facility at Fiskville, flying agile AS350s to spot fires and bird dog for water bombers over Victoria's fire-prone bush.

Ferrying mineral prospectors across the wilds of outback Australia, the rugged terrain of tropical Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and even the endless steppes of Mongolia has taken this versatile pilot to places few others have ventured to visit. This was frontier flying with little back-up. Playing a part in one sparkling moment in history, Bitcon and Peter Clemence were on hand at Smoke Creek in the Kimberley region, having flown in the CRA (later to become Rio Tinto) exploration team who discovered the now famous Argyle diamond pipe. "No souvenirs though," he laments.

For one summer in 1972/3, the scorching desert gave way to the frozen midnight sun of Antarctica. Bitcon joined the Jayrow contingent to fly the three



Hughes 500s based at the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) Mawson Station. “Our job mainly involved flying biologists to penguin rookeries and seal colonies, and geologists, glaciologists and every other kind of -ologist around their research sites. We also picked up supplies from ships,” recalls Bitcon. “And the cold, dense air did wonders for aircraft performance. It improved rotor efficiency, meaning we could lift more, and it kept the engines cooler.”

Most of the work hugged the coastline, but Bitcon’s team also ventured over 640 kilometres (400 miles) inland to Mount Creswell to service a large encampment of scientists studying rock formations and the creeping rivers of ice. Despite the popular perception of Antarctica being a lonely, isolated outpost, Bitcon says this was not his experience; Mawson was temporary home to a multitude of researchers, cooks, mechanics and pilots over the summer, offering good company, but no replacement for family.

THE MONGOLIAN CANDIDATE

Many years later an opportunity arose to fly deep into the heart of Central Asia. Mining giant Anglo American needed an experienced pilot to check its mining leases in the vast landlocked nation of Mongolia, and who better than senior pilot JB to get the job done?

By 2003, Mongolia had significantly opened up to the outside world, but the operation’s logistics were somewhat more complex than merely winding up the motor and flying off into the sunset. No, Jayrow had to

break up an AS350B2, freight it over to Beijing and have a couple of engineers spend three weeks putting it back together in an Air China hangar. Then there was the language barrier; with Bitcon’s conversational Mongolian an indefinite article or two short of native-speaker level, he needed assistance. This came in the form of a Mongolian Mi-8 pilot who travelled with him to handle all air traffic control communications and avoid any international incidents.

Reaching Mongolia involved a short cross-country hop from Beijing to the city of Hohhot in China’s Inner Mongolian semi-autonomous region, before continuing to the remote Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar. For the next month, Bitcon and his team covered vast tracts of this sparsely populated land. The Squirrel delved in among soaring peaks and broad valleys of the country’s mountainous north and west, and scooted across the treeless expanse of the Gobi Desert, ever mindful of the Chinese and Russian borders. With roads amounting to little more than wheel tracks traversing this terrain, the Squirrel proved itself as a most versatile mode of transport.

ENDORSEMENTS

While clocking up 37 years in the pilot’s seat, Bitcon earned endorsements for a good range of choppers. After launching his career in the Hughes 269A, he progressed to the Hughes 500 A to E variants, describing the 500 as a great performer in the early days. At times, he also flew the iconic bubble-canopied Bell 47 G and J models.

Advancing years and technology brought JB into contact with larger and more powerful aircrafts, including the ubiquitous Bell 206 JetRanger and its long-legged cousin, the LongRanger. The French didn't miss out either: Bitcon regularly piloted the Aérospatiale/Eurocopter AS350 A and B2 Squirrel types, plus the AS355 Twin Squirrel.

He fondly recalls the B2 in particular as a terrific chopper for forestry and lifting – a task it performed admirably when long-lining new plastic water tanks into place at the lighthouse-keeper's residence at the tip of Wilsons Promontory in Victoria. The lighthouse's remote location prevented trucks from carrying the new tanks in by road and carting away the old steel one. So it was up to Bitcon and the trusty B2 to lift the steel tank – cut into three sections – out of the ground and onto a ship moored nearby, and replace it with the new plastic tanks, lowering them into place using a 30-metre (100-foot) long line.

Choosing highlights from a long and rewarding career where every assignment is a new adventure isn't easy, but Bitcon lists gaining endorsement on the Bell 407 in 2003 as one such moment. Having been at the controls of Bell helicopters for much of his profession, this was the first time he had visited Bell's headquarters in Fort Worth, Texas. Those memorable two weeks were spent soaking up obligatory theory before finally taking to the air in the muscular yet sleek 407.

CLOSER TO HOME

Not every assignment took Bitcon to the outer tendrils of civilisation. Before the television networks began operating their own choppers, he flew reporters out on-site as big stories broke. He also carried camera crews filming aerial shots for *The Man from Snowy River*. And VIPs regularly featured on his passenger list: Malcolm Fraser filled a passenger seat, as did Bob Hawke before he became PM. In addition to transporting various sporting identities, JB also carried a moderately successful gentleman crooner by the name of Rod Stewart while on tour in Australia. Apparently Mr Stewart has done quite well for himself since.

The toughest part of his career, he says, was all the time spent away from family. Tours lasting five to six weeks with nine days at home in between could take their toll at times, so those periods of flying close to home were cherished.

SOME FREE ADVICE

If a budding chopper pilot were to ask for advice on breaking into the industry, what would a seasoned veteran like John Bitcon suggest?

“Get all your theory out of the way, then go for your senior commercial licence,” he advises. “Make sure you learn from a highly reputable school, and then just keep plugging away at helicopter operators to build up your hours.

“It's a highly competitive field, and traditional resumé builders like mustering are harder to come by. Cattle farmers need pilots who can read the herd intimately, and that comes from years of experience. Like in so many other fields, getting a flying job is frequently a case of being in the right place at the right time.”

And, like most chopper pilots with as many years under their belt, Bitcon has encountered his share of minor mechanical incidents in his time. “But,” he waxes, “you just don't dwell on them; otherwise you might as well give it away.”

RETIRED PILOTS ARE WELL-GROUNDED

Following Jayrow's change in focus to offshore contracts, Melbourne-based Heli-Serv purchased several of the company's JetRangers and Squirrels with a pilot or two thrown in for good measure. As Bitcon was keen to spend more time closer to home, the move to Heli-Serv seemed a natural progression that allowed him to concentrate on the old favourite of forestry flying. He spent his final 18 months as a pilot with Heli-Serv before retiring in 2006.

He now lives with his partner Veronica by a canal on the sunny Gold Coast, and keeps his feet firmly planted on the ground – or in his boat. **HN**

