



# HELICOPTER HEROICS

For three years, freelance cameraman and GTC member John Anderson has been filming and flying with the crew of the Yorkshire Air Ambulance

I hope it's not just me but every now and again a job comes along that just, well ... makes you smile. I know we've all had jobs that certainly don't, but hopefully the former outnumber the latter. Any filming that happens to combine a personal interest just adds a certain spark and, for me, any job that involves helicopter work is a particular bonus.

I guess like many wanting to become cameramen, I was influenced by the television shows I watched when I was young and a huge influence for me in the 1980s was the Channel 4 series *Treasure Hunt*. As a young teenager, I had already developed a desire to work behind camera but also harboured a yearning to become a helicopter pilot. So when I saw *Treasure Hunt* and realised my two favoured careers could work together ... well, you can guess the rest!

Over the years various opportunities to fulfill that ambition of combining my love of helicopter

flying with camerawork have come along, but none more exciting than the latest one.

### Aerial opportunity

About three years ago now, a phone call came from the BBC asking if I'd like to shoot a pilot programme about the work of the Yorkshire Air Ambulance (YAA). Naturally, I said yes. Not only did it tick all the above boxes, but also a very good friend of mine, pilot Steve Cobb, with whom I'd flown many aerial shoots when he previously worked for a helicopter charter company, had since taken a new job as chief pilot for the Yorkshire Air Ambulance. I was really keen to fly with Steve again and to see his new work environment.

The project would involve filming and flying with the paramedics of the charity-funded YAA in their state-of-the-art £2 million, 150 mph, MD Explorer helicopter, call sign Helimed99.

After a series of meetings with the paramedics of the YAA, production meetings and flight safety briefings, filming began in summer 2006.

Unbelievably, the air ambulance was experiencing a really quiet time (...'You should have been here last month!...'). Typical! How many times have we all heard that?

*“about a week after we'd stopped filming, the Yorkshire Air Ambulance attended an incident that would catapult them into the headlines in a quite extraordinary way”*

Call-outs were few and far between, which of course in this case is actually a good thing (apart from for the filming) since you know that when they do get called out they're going to

someone who's been seriously injured. When we were dispatched to incidents, though, I was working on my own, acting as camera/director and, certainly for the first few jobs, it was fair to say the pressure was on. As well as all the shooting, I had to interview the paramedics as and when possible, obtain consent to film from patients and any relatives,

fly, which is tiring in itself, and of course deal with the incidents themselves, both from a personal and a safety point of view. I also had to liaise with emergency services



on the scene and, most importantly, make sure I didn't get in the way. I certainly knew I'd done a day's work at the end of a 12-hour shift. We spent a couple of months with the Air Ambulance, covering the few jobs there were, which was enough for the pilot programme, and this was duly compiled and sent off to the 'powers that be' at the BBC. It was now a case of waiting to see if they would commission a series.

**YAA in the news**

Bizarrely, about a week after we'd stopped filming, the Yorkshire Air Ambulance attended an incident that would catapult them into the headlines in a quite extraordinary way. The BBC's *Top Gear* presenter Richard Hammond had been seriously injured in a jet-car crash at Elvington Airfield near York. Paramedics Darren Axe and Pete Vallance were on the scene, flown in by my mate, Captain Steve Cobb. I, however, was sat at home with a cup of tea and a bun! Sod's law I think?



▲ John and recordist Nigel Chatters shooting programme links with presenter Rav Wilding

I don't know if the Hammond incident had anything to do with the BBC's decision, but anyway they commissioned 10 x 45 min episodes for transmission from September 2007 and someone came up with the idea of having Richard Hammond present it. *Hammond's Heroes* was the working title.

Filming proper started in April 2007 with me once again working as camera/director. The series was to be shot on DV CAM and although I have a trusty Ikegami camera, I'd decided to use a Sony DSR 570 with Canon J9 wide-angle lens (later exchanged for a HJ11). The 570 is just that bit smaller than the Ikegami and space can be at premium in the helicopter. The standard crew is two paramedics plus pilot and sometimes a doctor may fly as well, so with me plus a patient onboard it could all get a bit cosy!

There were occasions when I was left behind at the site of an incident when the pilot was unable to take a full load with a patient. I was basically left to make my own way back to base - stranded, often in the middle of nowhere in full flight suit, with helmet and camera kit, but this was all part of the agreement. Sometimes, they'd even tell me where I was before flying off into the distance!

### Mini-cams

Two onboard mini-cams were fitted in the aircraft, one giving an external POV and the other looking back into the cockpit to give a wide angle of the pilot and front seat paramedic. Both were rigged for sound from the helicopter's comms and fed into Sony DV clam-shell recorders with a one touch button for standby/record. A Sony MiniDV camera was also rigged for an over-the-shoulder shot of the front seat paramedic who would wear my Micron Explorer radio mic fed into the 570.

During flights, I also had a comms line feed into my camera for in-flight interviews.

The rear seat paramedic sitting opposite me from my rearwards-facing seat was fitted with a body camera, affectionately known as 'Paracam'. The first incarnation of this was a small PCB type camera recording onto a mini DV camera. This proved temperamental at times and was later changed for a compact flash recorder unit which was not only less susceptible to problems when the

paramedics were running but also proved a lot lighter for them to wear. It provided us with some great close footage at incidents and, more vitally, audio from the second crew member.

It was then a case of waiting for the so-called 'Bat Phone' to ring. When it did, Helimed99, the crew and myself were ready to fly off to the incident in question.

### First call-out

My first proper job for the series was an RTC (road traffic collision) in North Yorkshire, near Settle. As we flew in, it suddenly dawned on me that normally I'd be stuck in the line of queuing traffic, frustrated and wondering how much longer before I could be on my way. Now, I was flying over the traffic jam, to be deposited right at the heart of the accident. And this time it was serious.

A BMW, which was now half its original length, had hit a Transit van at high speed, head on. Amazingly, the van driver had walked away with cuts and bruises but the BMW's occupants had not been so lucky. The front seat passenger had been killed on impact and the driver had suffered severe leg and chest injuries along with a broken neck.

The YAA paramedics worked tirelessly along with fire crews to free the trapped driver and to attend to his life-threatening injuries. At first, I did feel very uneasy about being there. It was a strange feeling being right there seeing at first hand what was causing the tailback through the Dales. As I filmed the line of traffic, I could see people trying to peer over their cars to see what was happening - little did some of them realise the severity of the situation.

I had to work quickly. At any incident I would only have the time it took for the crew to attend to the patients, and during that time I would have to try to interview the paramedics at convenient points about the situation and the condition of those involved, plus talking to the fire crews and police officer in charge at the scene, before boarding the helicopter and getting the patient off to hospital.

On this occasion, back at base at Leeds Bradford airport, a call came through an hour or so later to say that, despite everyone's efforts, the driver had died in hospital from his injuries. We later found out that the driver of the BMW



▲ Attending an M62 Motorway emergency



▲ Interviewing Chief Pilot, Steve Cobb about motorway landings

***"at any incident I would only have the time it took for the crew to attend to the patients"***

had been under the influence of drugs - apparently overtaking dangerously and driving far too fast for the type of road. His family gave permission for us to use the footage in order to show the horrific consequences.

The BBC had decided to base itself at the Air Ambulance HQ, with full edit facilities on site. By now though, they were looking at being there seven days a week - enter the producers with Z1 cameras.

In fairness, there was no way I could film and fly on all the missions (even though I would have liked to). It was just too tiring, but even the producers admitted themselves that some of their Z1 items were better shot than others!

### Air to air

Another key element to the programme was to feature the Air

Ambulance Explorer helicopter, which involved shooting aerial sequences.

For these I recorded onto DigiBeta using a FLIR Ultramedia camera, a system I'd acquired when Steve previously flew helicopters for HeliJet Aviation in Leeds. This is a gyro-camera system ideal for the type of air-to-air work required. The camera is nose mounted to a Bell LongRanger helicopter based just across the road from the Air Ambulance, at Leeds Heliport. The kit takes about an hour to rig and I would operate from the back seat of the aircraft.

I was keen to have Steve fly the Air Ambulance on our aerial shoot days, not just because I trust him but having flown with him for many years I knew he was aware of the Ultramedia's blind spots and would know where to place Helimed99 in relation to our camera platform.

The producers were keen to chase the Air Ambulance to emergency jobs and this worked to a certain extent but I did suggest we should also do some specific air-to-air days. Part of the problem was that the Explorer helicopter could easily outfly the camera helicopter and I was struggling to provide them with dynamic shots. Usually, I don't like to film above 80 knots but there was no

own Z1 shooting now, as it's virtually a 364 day a year operation with the two full-time aircraft. I am still flying though and am now trying out the new Sony Z7 camera for some of the jobs. It's a great little camera, far better than the Z1, and the size is ideal for use in the helicopter. The pictures in DVCAM mode are very good. Dare I say it though, it's a bit too lightweight for me; I'm

***"the rear seat paramedic was fitted with a body camera, affectionately known as Paracam"***

way I could limit the speed of the Air Ambulance when they were attending a call-out. Eventually we managed to do several choreographed aerial sorties coordinating both helicopters to obtain some great footage.

Presented by Richard Hammond as a thank you to the crew of YAA for helping to save his life, series I of *Helicopter Heroes* (so called by the commissioners and not much liked by the paramedics!) aired on BBC1 in September 2007 and was subsequently re-commissioned as a 20-part second series for transmission in 2008.

### Series II and III

As well as a new presenter for series II, *Crimewatch* frontman Rav Wilding, there was to be a new addition to the Air Ambulance fleet. A second Explorer helicopter, Helimed98, had been bought and paid for through extra donations made to the charity as a result of Hammond's accident.

Amongst other things, I am currently working on series III, yet another 20 programmes to be broadcast in September this year. The producers are having to do yet more of their

finding it very difficult to run along with the paramedics and get steady, usable pictures as per the DSR570.

But the best thing is, I am still enjoying this. I started by saying how some jobs just make you smile and, for me, being in the privileged position of spending nearly three years filming and flying with a fantastic team of dedicated, hard-working, life-saving professionals has done just that.

There is something in all this that I wish not to overlook though.

Throughout my time spent with the Yorkshire Air Ambulance, I've witnessed some terrible accidents. I've filmed incidents that have changed people's lives forever and, worse still, seen some tragic fatalities. It could happen to any one of us.

I consider myself extremely lucky to have realised both my boyhood ambitions of working behind the camera and in the air. I, we, have a great job, one of the best jobs in the world. Smile and enjoy every minute of it – because, believe you me, things could be a whole lot worse!



▲ John Anderson with the Yorkshire Air Ambulance

## Fact File

Lighting cameraman John Anderson turned freelance in 1992 after working for an independent production company. In 2006 he was awarded a Royal Television Society Camerawork of the Year award, as well as an RTS Best Documentary award for a 90 minute BBC *Timewatch* programme. He was part of the camera team which gained a GTC Award of Excellence in 2007, and in 2009 won two RTS documentary awards for the tragic story of Michael Barnett, who died whilst trapped in a drain during the freak floods of 2007. In 1999, John realised a life's ambition and learnt to fly helicopters.

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