

Rotor Curious? How to get the Helicopter Add-On

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There's a moment every fixed-wing pilot experiences: you're standing on the ramp watching a helicopter rise into a hover, balancing on the air like it's defying physics, and something inside you goes ...*okay, I want to try that*. You just became "Rotor-Curious", and once it hits, it's hard to shake. The good news is that adding a rotorcraft rating is far more accessible than most airplane pilots ever realize. It's challenging, humbling, unbelievably fun, and it gives you that feeling you got when you were first learning to fly; excitement!

Why Pilots Decide to Add Rotorcraft

Most airplane pilots don't pursue helicopters because they "need" to. They do it because helicopters unlock a kind of flying that feels intimate and alive. Hovering is the closest thing aviation has to UFO's, except the B2, but good luck flying that... Confined area work, slope landings, quick stops, and autorotations all demand a level of finesse that airplane flying rarely touches. It's a challenge, but a deeply rewarding one.



There's also the practical side. In Minnesota, helicopters make sense. They're perfect for cabin access, remote lake landings, short-range hops, skipping traffic, and backcountry missions where runways simply don't exist. And if you're thinking about career flexibility, a rotorcraft add-on opens doors to EMS, utility work, tours, fire operations, and aerial survey. Regardless of your goals, the rotorcraft rating adds a level of experience very few pilots have.

What Privileges You Actually Gain

Once you complete the add-on, you're a helicopter pilot — full stop. You can act as PIC, carry passengers, fly day or night VFR, pursue commercial rotorcraft privileges, and eventually add instrument-helicopter if you desire. It's not a "limited" rating or a novelty endorsement. It's a full expansion of your certificate into a completely different category of aircraft.

How Long the Add-On Takes

One of the best surprises for fixed-wing pilots is how short the rotorcraft add-on actually is. There's **no written test**, and you're not repeating the entire private or commercial curriculum. You're simply learning to fly a new category of aircraft.

Most pilots finish the private add-on in **30–35 hours**. Commercial add-ons typically take **55-60 hours**, depending on proficiency.

SFAR 73: What You Should Know When Choosing a Helicopter for training

Choosing which helicopter you are going to fly can be a larger decision than most people think. Most helicopter training in the U.S. happens in Robinson aircraft. Robinson makes affordable, smooth flying, capable helicopters; however, many new helicopter pilots are unaware of the SFAR 73 requirements that come with the Robinson R22 and R44.

What is SFAR 73? SFAR 73 is a special training rule the FAA created specifically for the Robinson R22 and R44. It requires pilots to receive *mandatory awareness training* on the unique aerodynamic risks of these helicopters. Things like *mast bumping*, *low-RPM rotor stall*, *LTE*, and *vortex ring state* are covered in the training (§SFAR 73(2)(A)(III)). You must complete this training before you can touch controls of the aircraft.

Where SFAR 73 becomes a problem for add-ons is (§SFAR 73(2)(B)), which requires non-rated rotorcraft pilots to have 20 hours of dual received in the respective Robinson airframe before the pilot conducts solo flight. This rule changes how the training is conducted. Essentially, putting all of the solo time at the back end of training. So which aircraft is best for your training?

The **R22** is light, twitchy, and extremely sensitive. It's the cheapest option, but it demands finesse. Hovering in an R22 feels like balancing on a bowling ball — it's doable, but it takes patience.

The **R44** is more stable, more comfortable, and more forgiving. It has more power, more room, and a smoother learning curve. Many fixed-wing pilots find hovering easier in the 44, and some

choose it specifically for checkride confidence. The tradeoff is cost — the R44 is significantly more expensive per hour.

Other models of helicopters can certainly compete with the Robinson models in performance, however cost and accessibility become large problems for other piston or turbine helicopter models.

If budget is the priority, the R22 is the workhorse. If comfort, passengers and stability matter more, the R44 is worth every penny.

What You'll Learn: The Training Flow

Helicopter training feels different from airplane training because it's so hands-on. You'll start with hovering — the hardest part early on — and slowly build the muscle memory that makes the aircraft feel like an extension of your hands and feet. From there, you'll move into normal and steep approaches, running landings, slope operations, confined area work, quick stops, and emergency procedures.



And then there are autorotations. This is how the helicopter glides if the big fan on top stops working. They sound intimidating, but once you understand the aerodynamics, they become one of the most satisfying maneuvers in aviation. You'll practice straight-in autos and 180-degree autos until the flow becomes second nature.

By the time you're ready for the checkride, you'll have a solid foundation in every maneuver required to safely operate a helicopter.

What the Checkride Is Actually Like

The rotorcraft add-on checkride is focused, efficient, and surprisingly enjoyable. The oral portion centers on rotor aerodynamics — retreating blade stall, LTE, vortex ring state, translational lift, and emergency procedures. It's conceptual, not overwhelming.

The flight portion is a demonstration of your ability to control the aircraft: *hovering, approaches, running landings, slopes, confined areas, quick stops, and autorotations*. Most fixed-wing pilots say the helicopter checkride feels more “hands-on” but less stressful than their airplane checkride. You're showing competence, not perfection.

Okay I'm Sold, What Does It Cost...

Costs vary by school and which type of certificate you do, but here's a realistic Minnesota estimate:

- **R22 training:** usually \$12,000–\$20,000 total
- **R44 training:** usually \$18,000-\$35,000 total

If you are doing a Private add-on expect the lower end, If you're doing Commercial add-on expect the higher end.

Add-ons are cheaper than initial ratings because there's no written test, few required Cross Countries and your airplane time covers most of the requirements. You're paying for pure helicopter skill development.

Private Requirements Minimum 30 Hours

40 hours total time (*Airplane Counts*)

20 hours dual received

10 hours solo

3 hours dual XC

3 hours solo XC

3 hours dual night

One 100NM XC

3 solo takeoff and landings at towered airport

Commercial Requirements Minimum 55 hours

150 hours total time (*Airplane Counts*)

100 hours powered lift (*Airplane Counts*)

50 hours helicopter

100 hours of PIC (*Airplane Counts*)

35 hours PIC helicopter

10 hours PIC XC

20 Hours of dual training including

5 hours instrument training

One 2 hour XC in night time conditions (50NM)

One 2 hour XC in day time conditions (50NM)

10 hours of solo including

One 50NM XC including at least 3 points

5 hours of night flying

10 takeoffs and 10 landings at night with a traffic pattern in between each

How do I Get Started?

Transitioning from airplanes to helicopters is unlike any other step you'll take in aviation, and it's one I know from both sides of the cockpit. I fly airplanes and helicopters professionally, and I've completed multiple airplane-to-helicopter add-ons myself. I know exactly what that early hovering frustration feels like — and the exact moment it finally clicks. I've watched fixed-wing pilots instinctively press “rudder pedals” that suddenly behave nothing like rudder pedals, and I've helped them unlearn the habits that don't translate while building the ones that do.



More importantly, I know how to explain rotor aerodynamics in a way that makes sense to airplane pilots. Concepts like translating tendency, dissymmetry of lift, and LTE can feel abstract to new rotor pilots. The checkride itself is a different experience than anything you've done

before, and I can guide you through that transition with the perspective of someone who's lived it — not just taught it.

If you're feeling that spark of rotor-curiosity, you're already halfway there. A helicopter add-on is absolutely within reach, and it's one of the most rewarding upgrades you can make to your certificate. When you're ready to take the next step, reach out to **Hennen Aviation Services**. I'll help you map out your training, choose the right aircraft, and turn that curiosity into a rating you'll be proud to carry.

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