

Richard Hayes is your traditional strong silent Southern Man. He is also a legendary helicopter pilot — the search and rescue guru they call when all else seems lost. PETA CAREY waited six months to get him down out of the clouds.

Fly Guy

PETA CAREY IS A NORTH & SOUTH CONTRIBUTING WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY DAVE COMER.







There is a sound that, until only recently, those living in the south of the South Island almost never heard at night. The few residents of the Muttonbird or Titi Islands, off Stewart Island, heard it late on Sunday May 7. As did those waking from their sleep in Franz Josef around midnight on April 21, and those of us living along the shores of Lake Wakatipu late last winter.

It's the sound of a helicopter passing overhead in the darkness. Last September it was well past bedtime, clear and cold when the unmistakable deep thwack of a Squirrel helicopter was heard flying west. Unlike fixed-wing aircraft with their innate stability, helicopter night flying — particularly in mountainous terrain — requires expert skills, a reasonably clear night and preferably “night-vision goggles”. Only one operator would fit those criteria. “Hannibal” barely disturbed our sleep that night before we rolled back into the arms of Morpheus. We heard him return to refuel twice, knowing something god-awful must have happened.

It had, and that night there was no happy ending.

As with almost every search and rescue incident, the newspaper report the next day merely stated: “A Te Anau rescue helicopter team equipped with night vision was at the scene.” But the pilot's name is a southern household name. From Central Otago, throughout Westland, Southland, Fiordland and into the hellish waters of the sub-Antarctic, behind almost every rescue story is legendary pilot Richard Hayes — known simply as Hannibal.

He was there lowering St John paramedic Doug Flett on to the foredeck of the fishing trawler *Aoraki*, bow rising and falling in the huge swells of the Southern Ocean (see *North & South* January 2005); he was there when climbers on Mt Tutoko, in Fiordland, found themselves between fog and crevasse; he's been there for countless trampers, injured fishermen, forest fires and missing aircraft. He was in the midst of the recent tragic Foveaux Strait sinking of the *Kotuku*: Hayes and winch operator Lloyd Matheson flew late into the night to find three of the nine crew alive, ferrying them to nearby Stewart Island before spending the rest of the night and following day searching for those still missing.

Behind each gripping rescue narrative there is a story of quiet determination, discipline, vision and extraordinary skill. Beginning shortly after the advent of helicopter flying in New Zealand, through the notorious venison-recovery era of the '70s and '80s in Fiordland, forging ahead in the tough business of mounting a commercial operation in a national park, Hayes is one of the few pilots to clock up more than 25,000 hours without (one is wary to commit this to print) an accident. He pioneered helicopter flight across the sub-Antarctic, was one of the first two civilian operators here to purchase and train with the latest generation of NVG (night-vision goggles) and is constantly pushing new ideas and technology to drive the efficiency and safety of rescue missions.

But Richard Hayes is a true southern man. You're more likely to see the departing skids of his new \$3 million B3 Squirrel disappearing into the dense green of the Murchison Range in Fiordland than you are to get him standing around talking about himself.

He rarely talks to the media, passing that responsibility to winch operator and operations manager (and former policeman) Lloyd Matheson. Finally, after six months of phone calls, the invitation finally came: “Come on down next week. Haven't got much on.”

At 55, after 30 years flying helicopters, Hayes is as driven as he was when he first took the controls of a Hughes 300 in 1974 at Momona Airport, Dunedin. Most of his peers, those pilots who survived the venison years with him, have settled back, taking a somewhat more relaxed

attitude to life and flying. Not Hannibal. Which begs the question: What drives the man?

The germ of this story was sown the night before Guy Fawkes 2005, close to home. The phone call came after midnight: “There's a big fire and it's coming your way”. In dry-mouthed panic we threw clothes on, swaddled newborn Billie in several layers and drove. The wind was a gale-force nor'wester, flames streaked 50 metres into the sky on the far ridgeline.

At the central Queenstown evacuation centre we huddled around the police radio at 3am, trying to gauge the extent of the fire. The relief and reassurance were indescribable hearing the unmistakable voice — calm and clear — of Hannibal. He was flying with goggles, operating a monsoon bucket repeatedly drenching homes in the direct line of fire. He was also the eye in the dark night, directing ground crews on what pathway the fire was taking. “I had the easy job. It was the ground crews who did the hard work. I was sitting in a nice, comfortable helicopter with a bird's-eye view.”

Another machine finally joined him that night, Dunedin's Lion Foundation rescue helicopter, piloted by colleague and friend Graeme Gale. Without a hook for a monsoon bucket, Gale was there standing by to evacuate people and watched from a distance. “That was up there, that night — the wind, the conditions, operating with NVG in thick smoke. Don't let anyone underestimate what Hannibal did.”

The wind changed before the fire made it over the ridge towards our home, but not before it licked at the multimillion-dollar mansions in Closeburn. Had Hayes stayed in bed that night there might well have been a few fat insurance claims, if not a few fatalities.

Ten minutes drive out of Te Anau is Southern Lakes Helicopters, Hayes' commercial business reliant on tourism, haulage, logging, Department of Conservation work and hunting.

A wide, white hangar opens out on to a helipad, next door to a modest home and office. Carol Hayes is running for the morning paper, youngest son Jonathon having just left on the school bus. Unbelievably, Richard Hayes sits quietly inside by the fire, coffee in hand.

Well over six feet tall, he looks the way one would imagine a helicopter pilot should — clean cut, broad shouldered, still dark haired and handsome, despite the years.

I have my seven-month-old daughter with me, and as she wakes I hand her to Hayes, who melts. His eyes light up and he talks eagerly of his own family: Michael, 18, and Caroline, 16, from his previous marriage, return to Te Anau from Christchurch for holidays. Georgina, also 16, Carol's daughter from her first marriage, comes home at weekends from boarding school in Dunedin. And finally Richard and Carol have Jonathon, now 10.

It's just over a week since the sinking of the *Kotuku* in Foveaux Strait, after which Hayes flew one of two helicopters searching for those on board, including the nine-year-old boys Sailor Trow-Topi and Shain Topi-Tairi. “I can handle the adults, as you have to in a professional way. It's the kids that get to me. Those boys were the same age as Jonathon.”

The *Kotuku* call came just before dark. By the time Hayes and crew made it to Foveaux Strait it was pitch black, with torrential rain and wind gusting 30 to 40 knots. Hayes reckons conditions were manageable, but challenging.

“You had to be completely aware of where you were at all times, what the attitude of the aircraft was. You're turning, panning the night sun [spotlight] around, boats beneath you, but all the time looking for anything in the water as well as keeping situational

awareness — how far you're off the water, how far you're away from the cliffs, scanning constantly."

Within the first hour they found two survivors on Womens Island, and on the second circuit of the rocky shore located *Kotuku* skipper John Edminstin, 56.

"It wasn't the kind of conditions to use the winch," says Hayes. "The wind was gusting around the cliffs, so it was a matter of hovering, one skid on a rock, tail into the wind."

While Hayes hovered, Matheson and a couple of policeman lifted Edminstin, by this stage unable even to stand, into the machine. "He'd already been in the water several hours, severely hypothermic. He reckoned he wouldn't have lasted another hour."

Hayes, and Graeme Gale in his Dunedin helicopter, continued searching until well after midnight before returning to Bluff for a few hours' sleep. Out again before dawn, they found the body of Clinton Woods, 34, half way up a cliff on the island. "We'll never know if we missed him, or if he made it to the island after we'd gone. The conditions were appalling: looking through the goggles, through driving rain. When we saw him that morning everyone had the same thought: 'Oh shit'."

Hayes was bitterly disappointed, but philosophical: "Eighteen months ago — prior to night-vision goggles — we wouldn't have found anyone alive."

The phone rings constantly as Hayes talks. In the midst of the morning maelstrom, a radio in the kitchen keeps him and Carol up to speed with another pilot and machine out on commercial work. They traverse meeting reminders, the day's flight bookings and discussion on children's movements. Any chance of Richard making Jonathon's cross-county race are dashed.

First up is a meeting with the armed offenders squad, discussing night-vision technology. Hayes' eyes spark as he explains the marvels of the latest-generation Aviation Night Vision Intensifying System. "From almost a mile away you can see something as small as the flick of a light off your Swiss army knife, or a digital camera, even the smoking embers of a fire — unbelievable."

Although one of many operators on call for emergency services in the area, Hayes' expertise and equipment mean he gets the bulk of callouts. Rescue equipment and training are in part sponsored by the Lakes District Air Rescue Trust and the Southern Regional Lions Air Ambulance Trust, but Hayes has paid for much of the equipment, including the NVG, himself.

The old adage "behind every successful man..." is particularly true in this house. This is one highly effective business team as well as a very happy marriage. They first knew each other in the late 1970s when Carol, then 18, worked for Alpine Helicopters in Queenstown. Nearly 20 years later, it was second time around and second marriage for both.

Carol Hayes is tall, slim, good-looking, smart and ever smiling. She's also the "rottweiler" buffer. Such are the demands on her husband's time that to get to Richard you have first to get past his wife.

There are three phone lines into the house and constant radio contact with both the office and helipad in Te Anau and also with any helicopter once airborne. Mobile and satellite phones have enhanced safety, but also mean callers can reach them at any time



Hayes performs a tricky patient recovery off a Japanese trawler near the Auckland Islands in September 2005.

of the day. One morning during the Foveaux Strait tragedy a reporter rang at 4 am.

Although they now have two other pilots involved in the business, it's 24/7 for Richard — and Carol. How does she cope? "I have golf," she says bluntly. "The cost is to the children. Dad doesn't make it to an awful lot of events that are important to them. Jonathon's most common question? 'Where's Dad?' and 'When's he home?'"

Hayes' childhood was a happy one. Born in 1951, in Milton (south of Dunedin), he was the fifth of six children. Father Cyril was a sawmiller and keen deerstalker who brought up his four sons to do the same. Richard's eldest brother, Juno Hayes, now Clutha District mayor, fondly remembers his younger brother shooting his first stag at nine. "When he left school he got a Monaro two-door called the 'green dog'. It had many a fast trip around the country."

Richard worked for the family business for a few years, before switching to aviation and the deer industry. The Monaro was swapped for a motorbike and he began flying out of Momona Airport on the Taieri Plains. The logbooks are all there on the bookshelf in the Hayes' home, each entry neatly penned, at the end of each page the hours, adding up to the thousands.

"We'd get cunning," he remembers. "Once I'd gone solo I'd hire the aircraft late in the day — tell the instructor I'd be doing stalls and steep turns — and head out over a bit of country I knew might hold a few deer, spot where they were, then head back out on foot next morning with my brother. Target the animals we could comfortably carry out."

A wry smile: "It wasn't always public land. Back then deer meat was a dollar a pound. A Cessna 150 was \$13 an hour to hire, so a 150-pound animal paid for a good few hours' flying."

By then the helicopter venison industry was already cracking along. "We thought helicopters were the cat's pyjamas — to be able to just fly over a bit of bush and catch a deer."

DOUG FLETT



Former police sergeant Lloyd Matheson became Hayes operations manager in 2002. As winch operator his role is crucial as “eyes and ears” for the pilot.

Hayes put himself through flight schools in Wanganui and Nelson and by December 1974 had qualified as a commercial helicopter pilot, but no one would give him a job.

“I phoned every company here and in Australia. But it was impossible to get a job straight off the ranks. Even phoned Tim Wallis [of Warbirds Over Wanaka and Alpine Helicopters fame] but the answer was the same, ‘We’ll give you a call!’”

Not to be thwarted, Hayes hired a Hiller helicopter for \$65 an hour and started hunting. “I’d grab my brother or whoever was free and away we’d go chasing deer, thundering all over Central Otago with a truckload of deer hanging under us.”

Six weeks later Tim Wallis did call. “19th of January, the phone went,” Hayes recalls. “They’d obviously heard of this Hiller cutting up the country. Tim had tracked me down... ‘Understand you’ve got a helicopter there’. January 20th I flew from Taieri to Lake Hauroko [in Fiordland] and started work for Tim. I knew nothing of the aviation business, just wanted to fly.”

And the boy from Milton has rarely left Fiordland since.

Early morning in the Southern Lakes hangar and it’s colder inside than out. Hayes has a reputation for being meticulous and orderly, and for an aircraft hangar it’s certainly exceptionally clean — few traces of oil or dirt and equipment stacked neatly. The brand new Squirrel B3 sits centre stage, beside the smaller, more economical Robinson Raven 44.

Hayes, dressed smartly for the day’s flying, is atop a ladder polishing the tail of the B3 — “the V8 of commercial helicopters”, he says proudly, talking over the top of the machine to Lloyd Matheson. (It’s also the only helicopter to have landed on the summit of Mt Everest.)

Matheson, a former Te Anau police sergeant with 25-plus years in Fiordland search and rescue, was offered the job of operations manager immediately after he retired from the force in 2002.

As winch operator his role is crucial to most rescues. “Usually the pilot has actually lost sight of the subject on the ground, so you

have to position the aircraft and tell the pilot what to do,” Matheson explains. “If it’s on to a fishing boat, you’re watching the rigging, the timing of the swells, the rise and fall of the deck. You have to watch his tail rotor, and at night particularly you’re his eyes and ears.”

Matheson attributes much of Hayes’ success to the instincts of an experienced hunter. He cites the time three schoolchildren went missing in the hills above Te Anau. It was right on dusk when Hayes was called in. “It was simply a case of lateral thinking,” says Matheson. “Richard was able to get his head inside that of the kids, working out which way they might have gone. He’s got the ability to spot anything out of place — a broken branch, a disturbed piece of ground.” They found the first two children safe and well. The third was hypothermic, and stripped of his clothes having fought through bog and scrub. Another happy ending.

Matheson wouldn’t work for anyone else: “Always the best possible equipment, always meticulous about his machine. Twenty-five thousand hours and not even a scrape — that tells you something about the man.”

Hayes refuses to accept any particular accolades. He regards what he does as a team effort. As far as he’s concerned he’s simply using a set of skills he’s acquired and he’ll never risk his life or that of his crew. “There’s a line in the sand. You have the choice of saying, ‘We’re out of here’. There are no guns at anyone’s head. The pilot has first and last say. I’ll go out and do the best I can, but I’m not going to jeopardise the safety of the crew on board. Doesn’t work that way with me.”

He does acknowledge he wouldn’t be where he is today without the “hell apprenticeship” — more than 25 years chasing deer in Fiordland.

Red Deer was a landmark film about the 1970s venison industry. In the opening frames young, devastatingly good-looking Richard Hayes with long straight hair and sideburns slips behind the controls of a Hughes 500, registration HKI, and proceeds to carve up the sky and



The “Deer Wars” venison recovery years. Young fliers worked hard, played hard, made a lot of money and, frequently died.

mountains of Fiordland. Proximity to the ground, the speed and sudden change of direction are barely believable.

They called it the “Deer Wars”, the notorious era of venison recovery from the late 1960s until the mid 1980s when young men pitted themselves against often-appalling weather, topography, the limitation of rotor blades, and a rapid evolution of machinery and capture systems. Life revolved around working hard, playing hard and the tally of animals at the end of every day. There was an appallingly high attrition rate — in 20 years, 11 pilots and 16 crewmen died, and several others were injured more than once.

“We all knew we *could* slip up,” admits Hayes, “but we never thought we would.”

He was one of the few who didn’t, but picked up plenty who did.

Few pilots or shooters went by their given names. In the mid-1970s Hayes’ regular shooters were “Toothpick”, “Woody” and “Boozy Bob”. A television Western, *Alias Smith & Jones*, was playing at the time (Smith and Jones being the aliases for Hannibal Heyes and Kid Curry) — so *Hannibal* he became.

Woody, otherwise known as Derek Wilson, still shoots on the occasional hunting trip with Hayes. “We were kerosene cowboys, all gung-ho. You had to have flair to catch the animals. We were in the prime of our lives, and they were fantastic times. You get quite nostalgic for the four o’clock starts. Like a lot of things, you forget the snow dripping down the back of your neck. You remember the good times.

“Hannibal? Would have gone anywhere with him, and still would. He’s a hunter himself, so he knew what he was about, where to find the animals. And he was determined. Even with a huge hangover he’d be out the next morning finding animals.”

Malcolm Wheeler (“Toothpick”) was Hayes’ first shooter. “He had a special ability, that boy. He was part of the machine. Never saw the guy under pressure and he was meticulous with his machine

and any piece of equipment. He was always polishing, always inspecting, looking for any potential problem.”

Off the cuff, Wheeler (and later Hayes, when prompted) can remember the date of their biggest tally. “December 28 1978,” recalls Wheeler. “We were both a bit crook, post-Xmas, weren’t even considering going out hunting. But it was a magic day. Shot 121, and caught nine fawns.”

In the ’70s the market demanded only meat, each carcass fetching around \$200. But when the idea of farming deer began to catch on, live hinds (females) and fawns sold for up to \$3000 apiece and some operators were turning over a million dollars a year.

Live capture had its price. Retrieving animals uninjured meant flying helicopters ridiculously close to the ground with the risk of lines or nets getting caught on skids and tail rotors. The archive footage is exhilarating and compelling — shooters balanced precariously on skids, dart guns poised, Hayes, like a stunt pilot, putting the machine through its paces.

“It was great flying,” he recalls. “To manoeuvre into position and catch a fleeing wild animal without injuring it. We got very smart at knowing just where to catch them. Not on steep cliffs. You’d time it for just before they went bush. You didn’t think you were clever, there was just a sense of satisfaction.”

Another of his shooters was Colin Yates (“Yatesy”), who played support “star” in *Red Deer*. In the film he can be seen “bulldogging” (jumping from chopper skids on to the backs of animals), shooting tranquiliser darts from dizzying angles and climbing back aboard the chopper from treetops as the machine is already turning and diving downhill.

“He was a very good friend,” says Hayes. “Yatesy shot for me for over 7000 flying hours — a gentle giant of a man.” He died working with another pilot in Doubtful Sound. “21st April 1983,” Hayes says straight off. “Pisses you off ’cause it shouldn’t have happened.

DEREK WILSON



A quick crayfish lunch, summer 1976.

“We didn’t have counselling in those days. After the funeral there’d always be a party and then we’d pull it all to bits, the how and why; all try and learn something from it.”

Any close calls himself?

“You always had wake-up calls. In the early days you often didn’t realise just how close you were to making a mistake.”

Best years of his life? “Best flying, yes. Best of life was yet to come.”

Hayes left Alpine Helicopters in December 1979 to set up his own company with fellow pilot Dick Deaker, hunting on until 1986. “It was a huge wave, and everyone in the deer industry was riding the crest. We couldn’t see there would be a sudden abrupt halt.”

Supply of farm animals had almost reached demand, and as finance minister Roger Douglas wiped out tax incentives for venison farming, the price of a hind fell from a few thousand to a few hundred dollars. “Overnight the price started sliding,” Hayes says. “Suddenly you couldn’t go out and catch a deer for what it was worth.”

For the next 20 years Hayes worked at the vagaries of commercial work: lugging crates of live crayfish, logging, DOC contracts and scenic flights. There were lean times, and even today, after 30 years in aviation, “we run a very tight ship. New Zealand is the cheapest place in the world to hire a helicopter because there are so many operators out there doing it for a meagre subsistence”.

“In 1999 we were charging one overseas film company less than our hourly rate of \$1600, simply because competition was so fierce. They told me that to hire the same machine in Europe would cost \$2500.

“We should be charging 30 per cent more, as the cost of compliance is huge. You’ve got training and retraining, yearly checks, keeping current with NVG, instrument and night ratings, and on and on those costs go. If you’re not realising the correct hourly rate, it becomes increasingly difficult to stay afloat. There are few operators here who can say that in five years they can replace their aircraft with a new one. Which should be the case.”

Hayes says buying the new Squirrel B3 was a major financial commitment and not a risk he’s entirely comfortable with at this stage in his life. “Wealthy? Financially no. In other aspects like family, yes. You can’t buy those things.”

Has he ever thought of doing anything else? “Not good at much else.”

Few of the pilots and shooters from the Fiordland venison-recovery industry have gone far; most are still scattered around Te Anau, hunting on a spasmodic basis as venison prices rise and fall. All are regarded and sought after as some of the finest pilots in the world, yet every one acknowledges the skill and sheer gall required to undertake what Hayes still does almost every week.

Mark Hollows, a fellow pilot, shakes his head in admiration: “It’s hard enough flying in Fiordland in the daytime, let alone at night. Worst place in New Zealand, if not the world, to do search and rescue. While we’d prefer to sit home with a glass of wine, he’s out doing it.”

“He’s the man,” says younger brother and pilot Kim Hollows, who owes his life to Hayes. Hollows’ machine crashed in the Seaforth River, near Dusky Sound, in 1988, when the tail rotor came away. Although his emergency beacon had gone off, he and his shooter were submerged up to their necks in the wreckage and river, both suffering from advanced hypothermia when Hayes finally found them. “It was touch’n’go,” remembers Hollows. “There’d be a lot of boats on the rocks and skeletons in the bush if it wasn’t for him.”

The Southern Ocean is traversed by the occasional fishing boat, but little else. Between Stewart Island and the Auckland Islands at 50 degrees south, the sea is more grey than blue, the wind — from the roaring forties to the furious fifties — commonly gale force, and landing possibilities, like islands, are few and far between.

When Hayes first flew to the Auckland Islands in 1990 it was on a DOC contract to eradicate introduced French blue rabbits from Enderby Island, northern-most of the group. Long-time friend and pilot Allan Bond flew with him. To make the distance they jury-rigged fuel drums in the back of the machine and hand-pumped extra fuel mid-flight.

Hayes wasn’t the first to take a helicopter across the Southern Ocean. North Island pilot John Funnell had flown to Campbell Island to save a shark-attack victim years earlier.

But Hayes went back, again and again, usually to search for missing fishermen or uplift injured crew members from Southern Ocean fishing ships. With engineer Allan Mincher he developed a specialised fuel pod for extra endurance. The Royal New Zealand Navy now transports Jet-A1 fuel to landing sites at Campbell Island and Enderby Island (but Hayes still has to pay for the fuel and the cartage).

It’s the logistics of such missions that provide the challenges Hayes relishes. He swings open a cupboard in the Southern Lakes hangar to reveal equipment he hopes never to have to use. “We’ve got full-immersion suits to wear in flight, a five-man liferaft, dry bags, rations, sleeping bags, oxygen, stretcher, harness...”

“When the kids are home they know exactly what to do, loading gear, pulling the hangar doors open. From a cold start we can be ready in 15 minutes.”

Hours of boredom over the relentless Southern Ocean are followed by minutes of precision flying, “the interesting stuff”, says Hayes. “You get the ship to turn downwind, stern to the swell. You

MALCOLM WHEELER

can get 50 to 60 knots of wind with five- to six-metre swells. If you can't see the ship between swells, it's go home. All you'll end up doing is hurting someone."

A "dirty" ship is one with a lot of rigging around the mast and little deck space to work over unhindered. "Everything's going for it. The ship's rigging is going up and down and side to side. You can't follow it, have to ignore it. If you follow it you get a pendulum effect with the guy below you on the end of the line."

"I look down the side of the ship, keep all mast bullshit in my peripheral vision only. It's all about timing, because the deck's heaving up and I can't see. Lloyd will talk me in... 'deck's coming up, might pinch a little bit of lift to keep it quite subtle...five feet to go, and then gently go down to meet the ship'."

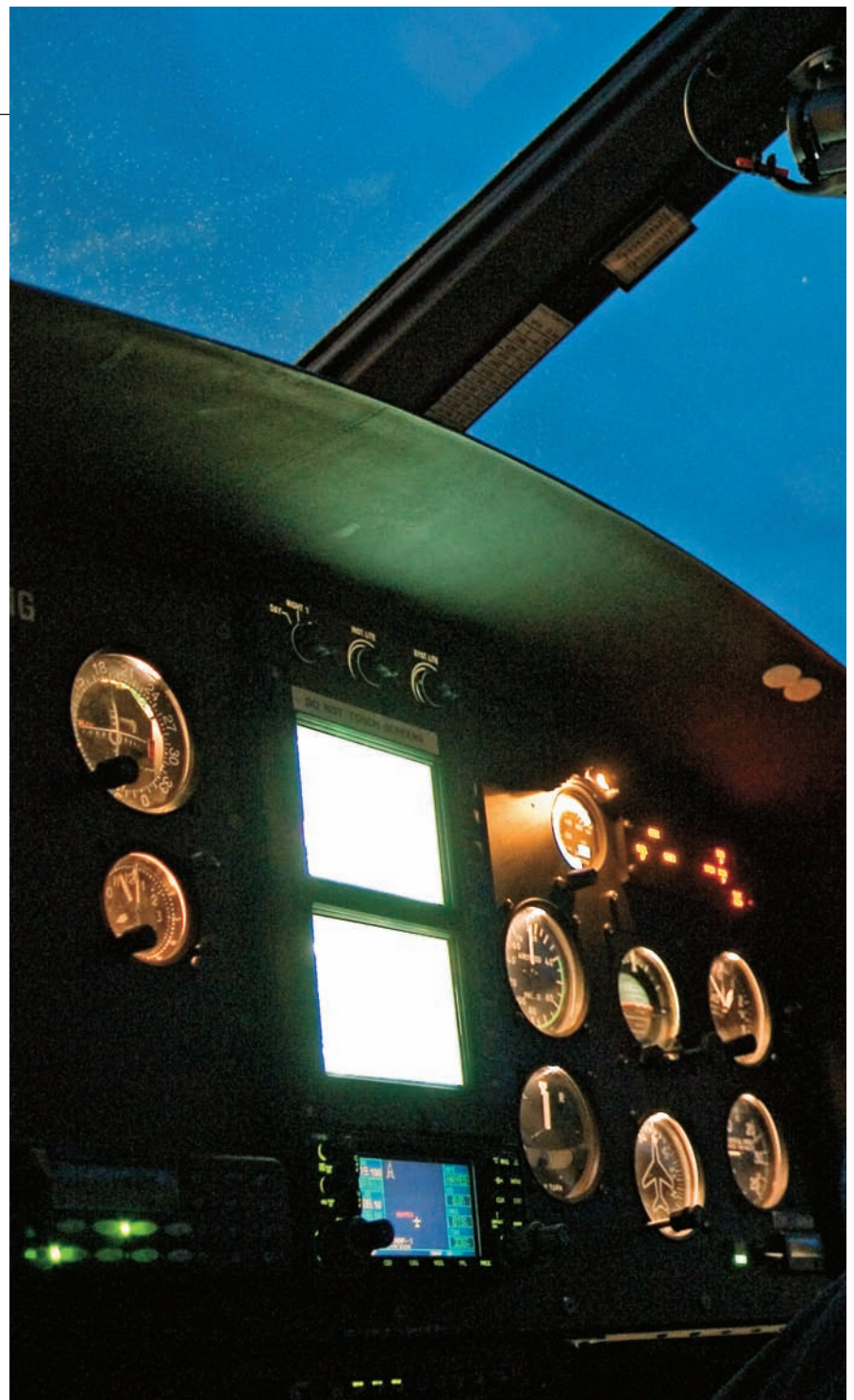
On a recent rescue of a Korean fisherman who'd lost an arm, the deck was so "dirty" the crew had to hold the stretcher out over the edge of the vessel. "Suddenly the bow dropped away and the guy was in the air. All of a sudden we had him." It was just before nightfall, 300 kilometres south-east of Stewart Island.

It's not uncommon for long-time friend and colleague Dave Kershaw, former deer-recovery pilot, now manager of Heliworks in Queenstown, to get a phone call after midnight from Hannibal reporting in from the Southern Ocean via satellite phone.

"There's always a bond there," says Kershaw. "Last one he flew to the sub-Antarctic we talked at length when he was returning at night. He was mulling over the conditions, not really a safety issue, just giving me an idea of what was going on."

"At times I do fear for him. Or rather, it's more of a concern. He's taking a calculated risk involving a huge amount of planning. But there's always a percentage there that you can't foresee. Some of those rescues he's done down there have really been on the limit. Sure, the machine doesn't know it's flying over water. It's just that if anything happened, there wouldn't be too many people out looking for him."

Allan Bond ("Bondi"), who flew on Hayes' first flight to the Auckland Islands, was killed shortly afterwards, looking for missing fishermen in the Rakaia River in the middle of the night. Long before the days of night-vision goggles, it was suspected that in pitch-black and cloud he simply lost orientation and flew into a line of pine trees.



Pre-NVG there were many times Hayes was asked to fly search and rescue at night, but he would only ever attempt it if visibility was good on a moonlit night. In 2000 he saved three trampers suffering from hypothermia on the Kepler Track, flying in darkness in a short break between blizzard-like squalls.

He ached to get his hands on night-vision equipment for years. It took three years of negotiation — "jumping through burning hoops" with the US State Department and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). In April 2005 Hayes and Graeme Gale became the first New Zealand civilian operators to complete the FAA training and begin work with the latest generation of ANVIS (Aviation Night Vision Intensifying System) goggles.

Hayes had used an earlier version of ANVIS, but nothing came close to the new system. "It blew me away. On a moonlit night with starlight you'd put the goggles on and it turned into green daylight. They intensify any light 3500 times. We can spot a tea-light candle, even the fluorescent face of your watch."

They do have limitations, he admits. Helicopters and cloud don't mix, day or night. Legal flying limits, known as "met minima", still apply: eight kilometres of visibility with no less than 2000 feet of cloud base. Blinkered by the goggles, the pilot's peripheral vision





is limited; instead he's trained to scan, constantly moving his head from side to side.

On the night last April Hayes and crew picked up a stranded trampler near Franz Josef he could see the white of the glacier 80 kilometres away. "Magical", he says. A southerly front was advancing up the West Coast. He simply flew up the face of Mt Cook at midnight and flew home down the eastern side of the Main Divide.

His only frustration now is the time it's taking to find out whether he can get another three sets of NVG, so when airborne he'll have "four sets of eyes doing the searching, one on every corner of the aircraft, instead of just the one which should be concentrating on the flying".

Again, it's a matter of the US State Department agreeing, and he's been waiting two years already.

The day we fly to Breaksea Sound a strong northerly's building, a dark pall of grey settling over the Main Divide. The rain scatters on the perspex as Hayes nonchalantly chats over his shoulder to the fishermen clients. Lake Manapouri comes and goes in the gloom before we enter

the labyrinth of vertical granite of the 1.2 million hectares that makes up Fiordland.

"I have a love-hate relationship with Fiordland," says Hayes. "Weather's always the commander. Longer you're in Fiordland, the more it gets under your skin."

Hayes has no need of a map. As we attempt one mountain pass — only to find the cloud down low — it's a sharp 180-degree turn and try for another, the route circuitous and disorientating. "The venison pilots and shooters know this place better than anyone. I can close my eyes and see this vast huge map of Fiordland. There's not one gut, valley, ridge, creekbed, or slip we don't know — we've been into them all."

Towards the entrance to Breaksea Sound, the *Uni*, an ex Australian Navy support vessel, sits calmly in the water, fishing charter vessels moored on either side. Landing sites are few in Fiordland, so Hayes bought the vessel in 1994 and uses it as a base for crayfishermen and charter boats to load and unload.

Even within the sheltered bay the squall lines whip across the water. Hayes' personality comes out in his flying — each manoeuvre completed decisively, cleanly.

How bad do conditions have to be before he can't fly?

“When it’s blowing 100 knots nor’west off Five Fingers Point, or when you’re sitting right in the middle of a stationary low pressure system and there’s not a pass open, nothing above 2000 feet.”

The cloud, he says, is what you’ve got to watch. “Years ago, on the side of Mt Christina, we had to pick up three climbers — one had slipped and broken his leg. There was nowhere to land, we were just in the hover, one skid towards the slope. Then the cloud came up around us.”

Even for a pilot with Hayes’ experience, flying a helicopter without visual reference to land — particularly in the mountains — is unthinkable.

“We had people half in, half out, people on skids. You had to say, ‘Be patient’, and so we waited and we waited, just sitting in the hover — one eye on the mountain out the side, the rest a white-out. Someone said, ‘How much fuel you got?’ I said, ‘Enough’, hoping like hell we did. Finally, after about half an hour, it cleared. Someone was kind enough to open a tunnel to the valley floor.”

There’s an omnipotence to helicopter pilots, particularly in this part of the world. Perhaps it’s in part to do with their being in control of what must be considered the ultimate vehicle — able to traverse country it would otherwise take weeks, if not months to negotiate on foot, if at all. One can only begin to imagine the feeling of being in immediate peril and hearing a machine coming overhead. It would be, quite literally, as though your prayers had been answered.

Sadly, not every search and rescue is successful. Not even the new B3 with extra power could have helped the night of the Greenstone Station Road tragedy, in late winter 2005, near Glenorchy on Lake Wakatipu.

Sonja Poplawski was driving home from a school meeting in the late evening, her three children in the car, when the vehicle slid off the road into the lake. Sonja and her eldest daughter, Jesamee, managed to escape. But her other two children, John, 7, and Georgia Rose, 5, were trapped in the car, 30 metres down. Because of the icy water temperature there was still believed to be a window of opportunity to resuscitate them — a phenomenon called “cold-water immersion”.

The speed of organisation was a tribute to the small community of highly skilled rescue personnel. As Hayes was airborne, local divers Daryl and Gary Wright were kitting up with scuba gear. Hayes picked them up on the road out of Queenstown and flew directly to the scene.

“The awful thing was that time had elapsed,” says Hayes. “There was still hope, but you knew all the time that you were racing against the clock. You think maybe there’s an air pocket or maybe they’ll have made it to shore. There’s always that chance.”

“Things seem to work, with me anyway, that if there’s a chance someone is still alive I seem to be able to think things through without panicking, bearing in mind you’ve still got safety issues, still got crew working around you; you can’t be reckless. I jumped out myself and did the doors because I didn’t trust anyone at night. But foremost on my mind was the kids. I didn’t want anyone holding me up; we were running, literally.”

As Hayes lit the scene from above, the divers located the car and managed to attach a line from the helicopter overhead. Hayes put the machine on full power. “I thought, ‘I’m going to bring this thing to the surface’. I’d done a quick calculation and knew I had the power. I was everyone’s one hope.”

What the rescuers hadn’t realised was that as the vehicle slid down the steep shore of the lake, the windscreen had caved in, weighing the car down with a mass of thick silt.

“I couldn’t budge it. It felt like it was coming up and then it just

stopped. I thought maybe it was snagged on a big log, so I let the power off and let it slide back down, but I just couldn’t lift it. We didn’t want to give up. We kept going till we were *told* to stand down.”

Reluctantly, Hayes landed and shut down the machine. “It was a bastard of a thing. I was disappointed. Not angry with myself, just disappointed with the whole situation.”

Three days later the children’s bodies were recovered. Such was the weight and “suction” on the lake floor from the vehicle that a barge needed three times the pulling power of a helicopter to move it.

Friend Derek Wilson saw Hayes shortly after that incident. “He was pretty cut up about it. Reckoned going to the funeral was the saddest thing he’s ever done. He was pissed off he didn’t have the suction, the power.”

Ask Carol how her husband copes after an event like the Greenstone and she replies: “He comes home, hugs his wife, hugs his children and counts his blessings.”

A month or so later the Poplawskis, the community and mayor Clive Geddes held a special ceremony to thank the Wright brothers and Hayes. All three were honoured with a citation, but Hayes was unable to attend, called away, again, on an urgent mission.

Ask Hayes if the Greenstone incident took him to “that line in the sand” and he dismisses the question, shrinking from unnecessary praise.

But fellow pilot Graeme Gale has no such reservations and says the risks were considerable. “It was a black night, no moon. Working over water, you don’t have any depth perception. Here’s Richard with this bloody rope under his machine going for it. You only need a rope to break and come up through the rotors. It’s a touchy move, and there aren’t a lot of pilots who would have attempted it.”

Hayes has, however, accepted some praise graciously. In 2000 he was made a Member of the NZ Order of Merit and in 2002 he and Lloyd Matheson received a New Zealand Police award for services to search and rescue.

The accolades are many. Carol Hayes has files crammed with thank-you letters from rescued people, the police and government ministers. But while the glow of appreciation passes the frustrations are mounting for Southern Lakes Helicopters.

As DOC finalises the latest Fiordland Park Management Plan, air operators — including Southern Lakes — are facing significant operating restrictions. The very organisation that relies upon helicopters to service its business, and regularly calls upon Hannibal to pull people out of the wilderness, is threatening his business’s viability.

Hayes says carefully: “DOC are our biggest client. But it’s becoming increasingly difficult to derive a living out of Fiordland National Park because of DOC’s increasing compliance restrictions and demands.”

Roger Wilson, Hayes’ friend and accountant, is less restrained. “All operators are under immense pressure and threat by the new plan. It’s bloody hopeless, an attempt to close the park significantly to helicopter access. It’s driven by DOC’s obsession to cater for the people that like tramping and mountain-climbing as opposed to 95 per cent of park users who want to get to a place, and the only way to get there is by helicopter.”

“I’ve never seen, another helicopter land within miles of where we land; never seen a group of trampers on top of a peak saying, ‘Bugger off, you’re in my space’. We’re talking about a huge area.”

Lloyd Matheson is also spokesperson for the Fiordland Aviation User Group: “Search and rescue is not a day-to-day business. But to be able to provide that service you need supporting income to

exist, and being close to a national park you need tourism work.”

The architect of the new Fiordland Park Management Plan is DOC community relations manager Martin Rodd, based in Invercargill. He says that the number of landings permitted per year per operator is based on their historic concession and that “the framework of the revised policy... still provides for some flexibility”. He’s also at pains to point out that if the present draft plan is approved, “Fiordland National Park will have far greater aircraft access than any other national park in New Zealand and, if managed carefully, will still ensure Fiordland retains its remote and wilderness qualities for which it is famous.”

Matheson again: “One struggles to think of a national park as inaccessible, and therefore as dependent on aircraft, as Fiordland.”

There’s a physical assuredness to Richard Hayes, a man as much at ease with himself as he is with his machine. The modesty is genuine. He expresses merely “satisfaction” with a job well done and is reasonably matter of fact when it doesn’t work out.

“It feels good when you have a win. And I say it’s a win, because a lot of time the cards are stacked against the victim. It’s good when you end up with someone still kicking.”

Two weeks after the *Kotuku* tragedy, skipper John Edminstin rang to thank Hayes. “Yeah, it’s nice when people drop you a note, or the phone goes and someone says thanks. The whole team appreciates it.”

Talk to *anyone* in the Te Anau community — particularly those who live and work in Fiordland — and all express heartfelt appreciation for Hayes’ simply “being there and doing what he does”. Many who work fishing boats or jobs in remote locations keep the Southern Lakes phone number alongside their satellite phones. Their most pressing concern, however, is who could ever fill his shoes.

Friend and colleague Dave Kershaw says he and Hayes talk about it quite frequently. “There’s no one I can rely on to the same extent for advice in aviation,” says Kershaw. “He’s not a person who wants to hog the limelight, he’s keen to pass on his skills, but you can only pass on a percentage of the knowledge, you can’t pass

on the actual skill of flying or the intuition that comes with it. It’s all those years in the venison industry — nothing can replace that wealth of experience.”

Most of Hayes’ associates from the deer-recovery years, although still flying and hunting, are nearing an age when priorities are taking a more leisurely bent. And while they admire what Hayes does, they also have their concerns.

Dick Deaker is one of the elder statesmen: “He does a lot of things I wouldn’t do, the night vision and sub-Antarctic... If anything went wrong down there you wouldn’t come back, not when you’re in a dinghy no bigger than a bathtub, not in water that temperature.”

Another close friend and fellow pilot Noel Boyd: “He just doesn’t stop. You try ringing him now and he’ll be away flying. He’s been at it over 30 years. We were younger and more bulletproof back then. Every night was a party; it was work hard and play hard. Now he’s working hard, without the play, which he needs to re-introduce. He needs to relax more. About bloody time he went fishing.”

Richard Hayes laughs at the suggestion. “In five years I’ll be 60, so I do have a plan to ease back a little by then.”

Handing over the reins? Perhaps.

Mark Deaker is the obvious candidate. Son of Dick Deaker, he’s flying for Southern Lakes Helicopters now, has also completed the night-vision training and, according to all who fly with him, is as relaxed and competent as Hayes.

Carol Hayes insists there are many occasions when her husband has simply said “No”. Often if conditions are marginal the two of them will stand out on the helipad, pacing the night, looking at the sky, discussing the weather, timing, flying conditions. And on a number of occasions, it simply hasn’t added up.

Asked if she ever fears for him, she pauses for quite a while. “No. I have absolute confidence in him. I have far more concern for the poor bugger he’s going off to find.”

As for what drives him, Carol Hayes laughs and suggests, “He’s not one to sit on local committees or the PTA. Might be his way of giving something back to the community.” But she says she’ll think about that one overnight.

The following day she decides the answer is as simple as, “He loves it”. ■

Flying and family don’t always mix: Richard snatches some quality time with wife Carol, Georgina and Jonathon.

