



# THE Cowboy Pilot

MONTANA RANCHER AND PILOT BILL GALT BRINGS A PROFESSIONAL, SAFETY-MINDED APPROACH TO A SECTOR OF THE HELICOPTER INDUSTRY MORE OFTEN KNOWN FOR ITS RISK-TAKING.

Story by Elan Head | Photos by Kari Greer



DIGITAL BONUS!



Download as wallpaper at [verticalmag.com/wallpaper](http://verticalmag.com/wallpaper)

Spanning more than 100,000 acres near White Sulphur Springs, Mont., the Galt Ranch is one of relatively few North American ranches that have effectively integrated helicopters into their daily operations. Here, owner Bill Galt flies his Bell 206-L4 LongRanger while gathering cattle.





ABOVE: Bill Galt has been working on ranches and flying airplanes since he was a teenager. He began flying helicopters in 1995.

Loretta Lynn once sang, “There’s a built-in troublemaker in every man.” That may or may not be true. But there is undeniably a built-in troublemaker in every cow, and on this bluebird May day in west-central Montana, the troublemaker is acting up in the black heifer who is darting in and out of view through the chin bubble in Bill Galt’s Bell 206L4 LongRanger helicopter.

I’m riding along in the left seat; Galt is in the right, using his L4 to urge a dozen cow-calf pairs toward a crossing of swampy, overgrown Birch Creek. Or trying to. Every time Galt gets the bunch moving in the right direction, the unruly “dry” heifer, who doesn’t have a calf to slow her down, leads them off in a wrong one. Thirty feet above the ground, Galt is doing his best to head her off, maneuvering the LongRanger back and forth like a particularly quick and nimble cowhorse. Reinforcements

soon arrive in the form of Galt’s nephew’s wife, Tanya Hill, on an actual horse, but the heifer only redoubles her efforts to evade us.

Finally the troublemaker peels off on her own, giving Galt and Hill the opening they need to turn the rest of the bunch — now relatively well behaved — toward the creek. Hill’s voice, a little breathless from the hard riding, crackles over the aircraft radio; she tells Galt that she’ll move these cattle upstream, where the crossing is a little easier. With the situation under control, Galt turns upstream himself, to see what other cattle he can flush out of the brush along Birch Creek.

By this point, the wayward heifer has scrambled up the slope overlooking the creek from the east, and she glares at us at eye level as we fly past. “We’ll leave her,” Galt says, his attention already focused on the next bunch of





Lon Wimberley of Helicopter Safety Training says his visits to the Galt Ranch are the highlight of his year. When he isn't in the cockpit providing flight instruction, he can often be found in the saddle.

cattle to gather; the next cluster of obstacles to avoid. The purpose of this morning's activities is to gather calves for branding, and the dry heifer isn't worth the jet fuel it would take to bring her in.

The last time I rode along on a flight like this was in 2008, with a friend who was mustering cattle in outback Queensland, Australia. The landscape could not have been more starkly different — the parched red dirt of the Australian outback is closer to Mars than to the lush, green pastures of the Galt Ranch in spring. But a cow is a cow is a cow, whatever side of the world it lives on, and the challenges of mustering cattle in Australia and gathering them in Montana are essentially the same. When you are using a helicopter to move animals, you are negotiating the boundaries of earth and sky; every rock, gully, and tree

becomes critical to what you do in the air. I decided in 2008 that few, if any, low-level flight operations are more exhilarating or dynamic, and flying with Galt only reaffirms this opinion.

Helicopters have become a vital part of the cattle business in Australia, where large stations can run to the millions of acres — far too much land to manage effectively without aerial support. But they are still relatively uncommon on cattle ranches in North America, probably because most properties are too small to justify the expense.

The Galt Ranch is an exception. Spanning more than 100,000 acres between the Big Belt and Little Belt mountains near White Sulphur Springs, Mont., the Galt Ranch is one of the few North American ranches that has effectively integrated helicopters into its daily operations. Owner Bill Galt has been flying airplanes since he was a senior in high school, and helicopters since 1995; he acquired his first Bell JetRanger for ranch work around 2000. Today, Galt uses his current L4 for a long list of productivity-enhancing and revenue-generating tasks: gathering cattle, checking on infrastructure, lighting and fighting fires, spraying hay fields, and long-lining out trophy elk shot by hunters who flock to the ranch in the fall. He also supports the local community with search-and-rescue missions and emergency medical evacuations, and various other flights, such as charity golf ball drops.



ABOVE, both: Wimberley and Bill Galt met while Wimberley was working as an instructor at the Bell Helicopter Training Academy. Now, Wimberley is also training Galt's teenaged son, Jack — a talented pilot himself.





Bill Galt times his recurrent flight training to coincide with two of the busiest (and most festive) times at the ranch: branding and shipping. Here, cattle are moved through corrals at shipping time in the fall.







Fascinating as all of this is, however, Galt has not invited me to his ranch to write about what he does with his aircraft, which some television viewers may already be familiar with through the 2010 Animal Planet series *Last American Cowboy*. More important to him — and to me — is how he does it.

Helicopters used in cattle operations do not have

a particularly good safety record, in part because of the inherent danger of the work, but also because of the cavalier attitude that many pilots and ranchers bring to it (there is a reason why renegade pilots are called “cowboys”). Galt, by contrast, has taken a strikingly professional approach to flying: not only has he actually achieved Federal Aviation Administration certification as a Part 135 air taxi operator, he has committed to a recurrent training program that puts many commercial helicopter

operators to shame. During the week I spend in Montana, I’ll come to see parallels between the way Galt manages his ranch and the way he manages his cockpit — valuing competence over cockiness, as most truly skillful cattlemen do.

As it turns out, being a cowboy pilot is not such a bad thing.







Cattle aren't the only animals that are abundant on the Galt Ranch — numerous types of wildlife also thrive in its forests and pastures. The ranch's elk herds are a particular draw for hunters, who flock to the ranch in the fall.



Gathering cattle is Bill Galt's primary helicopter mission. Working cattle from the air requires more than just flying skills — it also demands a cowboy's intuition for how to move cattle without overstressing them. "If they're doing the right thing, just leave them alone," Galt observes.





## PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

The Galt Ranch is part of the legacy of Wellington Rankin, a Harvard- and Oxford-educated lawyer who by 1960 had acquired around one million acres of Montana ranchland. Although he sold some of this before his death in 1966, he left around 600,000 acres to his widow, Louise Rankin, who had been a practicing lawyer herself. Louise Rankin remarried Jack Galt, a ranch manager and cattle buyer who had eight children from a previous marriage, including Bill. Bill began working on the Rankin ranches in his early teens; today, he owns and manages the property formerly known as the Birch Creek Ranch, while his siblings have other farmland and ranchland holdings in the area.

The Galt Ranch is not the biggest ranch in Montana, but it's big enough. It takes hours just to survey it from the air, and by the end of my visit, I'll still have only the haziest idea of its far-reaching boundaries. On my first day on the ranch, retired Bell Helicopter flight instructor Lon Wimberley, who now runs his own business, Helicopter Safety Training, takes me up in Galt's LongRanger for a tour of the area near ranch headquarters, just west of White Sulphur Springs. The aircraft is equipped with dual controls, and Wimberley allows me to fly as he points out various landmarks and the pastures where we'll be gathering and branding.

It's stunningly beautiful property — rolling green grassland that climbs upward into pine forest and mountains still capped with snow. Unfortunately, I don't have much time to enjoy the scenery. Around 10 minutes into the flight, as I'm guiding the helicopter down Birch Creek, Wimberley cuts the throttle on me, and I enter an autorotation before I quite realize what's happening (at least there's a lot of open pasture beneath me). Wimberley allows me to select a forced landing area and get to within a couple hundred feet of the ground before he restores my power and we return to cruise flight. Perhaps 60 seconds later, as he continues to narrate the sights beneath us, he cuts the throttle again.

Pilots who have flown with Wimberley know that this is not unusual. Wimberley is a master of the forced landing, and one of his missions in life is to train other pilots to become the same — honing their in-flight reactions and situational awareness by subjecting them to power failures as regularly and realistically as he can. Bill Galt first encountered Wimberley's unique brand of stress inoculation at the Bell Helicopter Training Academy, where the two became friends despite Wimberley's habit of rolling off the throttle at the most inconvenient times. Eventually, Galt started bringing Wimberley to the ranch to conduct his recurrent training, and Wimberley now visits twice a year: in the spring during branding season, and in the fall during the annual sale and shipping of yearling cattle ("shipping" for short). On each occasion, over the course of about a week, Wimberley will conduct a series of rigorous recurrent training flights — including touchdown autorotations at the White Sulphur Springs airport — in between normal ranch activities.

The arrangement is win-win. When Wimberley isn't in the helicopter, he's putting in quality time on horseback or in the corrals, helping with the business of branding and shipping — a rare treat for someone who spends most of his time



TOP: Ranch foreman Tyson Hill conducts a pre-flight inspection with Lon Wimberley's supervision.

MIDDLE: Although there are still plenty of horses on the Galt Ranch, all-terrain vehicles and other machines have become a fact of modern ranch life.

ABOVE: Tyson Hill has been a certificated pilot for four years, although he's still gaining practice in the operational flying done on the ranch — his job as foreman tends to keep him busy on the ground.










For the Galt Ranch's large-scale cattle operations, efficiency is key. Although the helicopter isn't cheap, it has become one of the ranch's essential tools.





Sometimes cattle are cooperative. Sometimes they aren't. The key challenge in gathering cattle low-level is to maintain situational awareness at all times — because a troublesome cow in the chin bubble can easily distract from a hazardous tree near the tail rotor.

in the cockpit. “This is the highlight of my year,” Wimberley tells me. “I enjoy coming out here and fitting in with the crew and being part of what they do.” Meanwhile, Galt gains the benefit of realistic training on his home turf and, just as significantly, at his altitude: elevations on the ranch start at 5,000 feet mean sea level and go up from there. Compared to practicing touchdown autorotations at lower-elevation sites like the Bell Training Academy, performing them at altitude is “a whole different ball of wax,” Galt says.

In a sign of his supreme trust in Wimberley, Galt sends me out for an hour of touchdown autorotation training myself. Although I’m initially anxious about damaging Galt’s beautiful L4, Wimberley soon has me too busy to worry about it; I return with a huge grin on my face, and a new level of confidence in myself and the aircraft. That confidence is the reason why Galt invests in training with Wimberley as often as he does — rather than annually, as is the industry norm, or less frequently, as many private owners get away with.

“I think there’s a whole bunch of pilots out there who think that once they get their license that’s all they need. That’s not me,” Galt says. Speaking with him after my own flight, I learn that he isn’t nearly as rusty on touchdown autos as I am; training more regularly means that he tests Wimberley’s recovery skills less.

“Yesterday, my first auto, if that had been a real one, I don’t think I would have bent anything,” Galt says. “That’s a good feeling.”

### THE COWBOY WAY

In recent years, Galt has enhanced his recurrent training by also recruiting the services of Tim Pfahler of Superior Performance Aviation (*see p.64, Vertical, June-July, 2012*). Pfahler is a friend of Wimberley’s who regularly partners

with him on training offerings; he’s also a Montana native who is very much at home on the ranch. Whereas Wimberley’s expertise is in emergency procedures training, Pfahler’s specialty is operational training, and he works with Galt on vertical reference techniques and mountain flying. The latter is particularly important to Galt’s operations — there’s really no part of the ranch that doesn’t qualify as mountainous, and even when flying over relatively open pastures, Galt must pay close attention to wind flows and power management.

Pfahler has a structured mountain-flying curriculum that he uses for new students, but his training here is very much tailored to Galt’s particular needs and interests. I have the chance to ride along on a couple of their training sessions, including one in which they revisit sites where Galt has lately encountered uncomfortable or unexpected conditions. One of these sites is surprising: off the ranch, it’s a large open meadow ringed by limestone cliffs, where Galt was recently called to perform an emergency medical evacuation. The size of a few soccer fields — and appearing almost as well groomed — the meadow is not a landing zone that would raise alarm bells for most pilots. But Galt says that he flew into serious turbulence here, and now, on a relatively calm day with Pfahler in the left seat, he wants to understand why.

Pfahler guides Galt through a careful, deliberate reconnaissance of the area — starting around the rim of the cliffs, and gradually working down to the meadow. The results are surprising. Even with very little wind, there is significant downflow over the cliffs, and it’s not hard to imagine how this could be amplified into severe downdrafts and turbulence on a gusty day. Galt is pleased to have gained some insight into why this seemingly ideal landing zone presented



him with such trouble, and notes, once again, the value of training in his particular operating environment. "The benefit of not just these guys' experience, but the added benefit of training in this terrain . . . it's priceless," he says.

In the book *The Cowboy Way*, journalist David McCumber — who spent a year working for Bill Galt as a ranch hand — describes Galt as having "a finely tuned bullshit detector. He was not a mean person, but he wouldn't hesitate to puncture false pride, to show that somebody couldn't do what he said he could." That doesn't appear to have changed in the 15 years since the book was published, and while it may not make Galt an easy person to work for, it makes him a better pilot, because he turns that same unsparing detector upon himself. When Galt is confident in a maneuver — touchdown autorotations, for example — he'll say so, but he'll also speak up when he's not comfortable; when he doesn't feel he can land somewhere safely, or sling the load that a hunter asks him to. At this stage in his life and career, Galt knows that the stakes are too high to waste time trying to impress others, or trying to fool himself.

"I realize that the flying we do here is, from an insurance standpoint, the worst mission you could have," he tells me, knowing all too well that when you're down low to the ground moving cattle, there's a lot that can go wrong, and not much time or space in which to make things right. Training and sound decision-making are the pilot's last lines of defense against costly accidents, and worse.

Galt may be particularly alert to the risks inherent in flying because he's now involved with the training of the ranch's next generation of pilots: his nephew, ranch foreman Tyson Hill, and his own son, 13-year-old Jack Galt. Hill began taking flying lessons in 2002, and has now been a certificated pilot for four years, although he's still gaining practice in the operational flying done on the ranch. Jack Galt, meanwhile, has been riding in aircraft with his father

since he was two weeks old — first in airplanes, then in helicopters — and has been training in the LongRanger since he has been tall enough to reach the pedals. When Wimberley and Pfahler are at the ranch, Hill and Jack Galt also get the benefit of their instruction, and I tag along for training flights with both of them. Not surprisingly, both are natural pilots, with the same serious, humble approach to receiving instruction as their uncle and father.

"It scares me to death that they're going to fly, so I figured they'd better learn how to do it right," Bill Galt says, explaining his investment in their training. Indeed, it's hard to think of a better way to learn how to fly helicopters than from such vastly experienced instructors over such beautiful and challenging terrain. Thinking back on my own, more typical training progression, I'm almost jealous of the teen-aged Jack — but not quite; he's a genuinely deserving kid who, more than any employee on the ranch, is subject to his father's uncompromising standards and high expectations. He's still a few legal years away from his first solo, and Bill looks forward to that day with some trepidation: "I think any father isn't going to like the day when his son flutters off on his first flight," he says. But it seems certain that Jack will be as well prepared for that day as any student pilot can be. Like his father, Jack aspires to be a true cowboy pilot — and he has the upbringing to appreciate the responsibilities that brings.



*Elan Head is an FAA Gold Seal flight instructor with helicopter and instrument helicopter ratings. She holds commercial helicopter licenses in the U.S., Canada and Australia, and is also an award-winning journalist who has written for a diverse array of magazines and newspapers since the late-1990s. She can be reached at [elan@mhmpub.com](mailto:elan@mhmpub.com).*



For Bill Galt, conducting training at the ranch is an unbeatable experience. "What a neat thing to do, to fly around in our backyard in our machine," he says.