



# Eyes in the Sky

*By Brad Lang, Registered Forester,  
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“**W**hat do you do for the Commission?” This is a question I often get from the public, which can turn a brief introduction between two people into a ten to fifteen minute conversation discussing the various duties conducted by the field staff of the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC). Going through college, I decided to be a forester by profession. After watching “Top Gun” in the movie theater at age 10, I knew I wanted to be a pilot by hobby. Never did it cross my mind to be a pilot for a forestry agency. But there are some gentlemen currently employed by the AFC that did just that.

The primary duties of the AFC pilots include flying their areas to perform reconnaissance of wildfires and insects such as southern pine beetle, provide aerial monitoring of forestry activities such as harvesting operations to detect possible water quality issues, and provide eyes in the sky for our firefighters to assist with the suppression of wildfires by guiding them to the fires. They also provide information about the wildfires and assist our law enforcement team in capturing arsonists.

Forestry pilots are well skilled in their profession. They must be instrument rated, have a current Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Class 2 medical certification with a commercial license, a minimum of 1,000 flight hours, and perform a satisfactory check ride in each type of aircraft to be flown. The Forestry Commission owns three Cessna 182s, one federal excess 185 tail wheel, and two Cessna 206s. All of these provide needed speed, room, and proper load rating required for the job.

Aviation is nothing new to forestry across the globe. It plays a major role in the US Forest Service and other state forestry agencies in several ways. As with our pilots, aviation is used to scout fires, monitor forestry activities from the air, transport cargo, and conduct educational studies. Planes are famously known for providing suppression measures on fires by dropping fire retardant and water.

Flying is not a job for everyone. When the AFC performs recon missions for southern pine beetles, one or two “spotters” ride along to scout the forests for beetle activity while the pilot navigates the predetermined flight lines across the flight area.

These spotters are difficult to recruit because the job is not an easy one. Some people may find it hard to ride carnival rides . . . well, flying at a minimum of 1,000 feet AGL (above ground level) in the middle of July with temperatures “cooking” you around 95 to 100 degrees, the last thing you want to do is find a beetle spot!

When a spot is detected, the pilot then performs several tight spiraling circles to gather needed data. This data includes a pinpoint location determined by establishing a latitude and longitude using GPS (Global Positioning System), determining the size of the spot in acres, and counting the number of trees infested by beetles. After collection, this data is turned in to create a map that is sent to the county field staff for ground verification. Once verified as an active spot, the landowner receives a letter of notification and contact information to receive assistance from the AFC in controlling the infestation. It is very demanding work on the individuals involved, and let’s just say, some get their stomach turned inside out – literally. Speaking as a pilot myself, this is not a comforting experience. It just adds another constraint to the demanding career of being a forestry pilot – but also to the laughter after it is all over.

In case you have always wondered why you must have a burn permit for any fire over a quarter acre, this is the main reason. When our pilots fly wildfire reconnaissance and locate a fire, they first check to see if it is permitted, then look for anyone on the tract, or if firebreaks are installed. If no permit is issued for

the area, the pilot calls in the fire and county ground personnel check it out. Permits are free to obtain and help us determine where fires are supposed to be.

The Alabama Forestry Commission began using aircraft in the 1970s while still manning fire towers. In the early 1990s, fire towers were decommissioned and the use of aircraft to spot fires went into full swing. As historical landmarks, fire towers still exist today and are used to house AFC and volunteer fire department (VFD) radio systems.

When storms and hurricanes blow in, aircraft operations are vital to the forestry community to survey and evaluate the extent of the damage caused by the storm. This method really helps speed up the recovery effort to salvage all timber possible. As a firefighter in Tuscaloosa and Walker counties, the aviation program delivers an effort too valuable on which to place a price tag. Not only do our pilots find fires in their early stage of development, but they also help navigate us closer to the fire, while keeping us updated on its status to keep us safe. Today, more and more roads are constructed and the pilots can give us real-time data and information pertaining to such ground references to aid in suppression. AFC pilots are equipped with GPS units and cameras with built-in GPS receivers that provide us with valuable “bird’s eye view” photos of the action

that we can then use in debriefing and apply in training. Another valuable asset they provide is next-day reconnaissance of a fire to ensure it is suppressed. Control lines, especially around wildfires of large size, are difficult to maintain. Checking from the



Photo by Brad Fite

*Retired AFC pilot Ralph Montgomery with full-time pilots Jack Wingate, Jim Woods (now retired), Phil Montgomery, and Charles Squires.*

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air gives the firefighters a break and the reassurance that the fire is “cold” (controlled), or aids in re-evaluating suppression efforts.

### “Top Guns” of the AFC

Currently, the Alabama Forestry Commission has three full-time pilots: Charles Squires in the Southwest Region, Jack Wingate in the Northeast Region, and Phil Montgomery in the North Region.

At the time this article was being written, Jim Woods in the Northwest Region retired (April 1, 2010). The agency also contracts with four aviation services: Walt Williams of Vaiden Flying Services and Kenny Hicks of Kenny Hicks Flying Services – both based in Centreville, Buck Williams in the Southeast Region, and B&G Flying Services in Clanton.

What a wealth of valuable flight experience . . . many of these pilots have logged over 10,000 hours and achieved multiple ratings throughout their careers. I had the privilege of sitting down with them recently at Mr. Wood’s retirement gathering, listening to their “hanger talk,” a term pilots use when they sit around and tell stories of various aspects of flying. These guys definitely have some tales to tell. “We have come a long way from the way it used to be,” said Jack Wingate. “I had a large loud speaker mounted on the aircraft with a siren. If I saw a break-over [in the fire] or needed to tell the ranger [on the ground] something, I



*It was a reunion of sorts for some pilots who attended the retirement luncheon for Ray Jones. Pictured left to right are Phil Montgomery, Jim Spradley, Jim Mosley, Ed Long, Walter Williams, Walt Dixon, Roy Dickey, Ralph Montgomery, Ray Jones, George Simpson, Langston Rowe, Betty Norris, Jim Bass, Brian Cooper, Jack Wingate, and Danny Mayfield. All are current or former AFC pilots except for Long, who is with Montgomery Aviation.*

*AFC Pilot Reunion - photo thought to have been taken in 1992, courtesy of Jim Woods.*

would ‘buzz’ him with the siren on and he would shut off the tractor. Then I could talk to him over the loudspeaker. We have come a long way with our technology over the years, but our job has not really changed.” Wingate goes on to state, “We are the eyes for the people on the ground. Our job is to help them accomplish the mission.” Today’s FAA would love that!

Southwest Pilot Charles Squires recalled a special flight of his own. He talked about a day that he and Southwest Regional Forester Gary Cole flew fire reconnaissance in north Mobile County, when they actually observed someone starting fires. “We really worked the radio to the Citronelle Police Department to intercept them. There were times the pickup was doing over 100 mph; they [the suspects] knew we were on to them.” Squires went on to say they attended the court hearing when the judge told the men that if they didn’t plead guilty, he had a jury ready

to hear the case, and that he just couldn’t wait to hear “the story about the airplane chasing down the truck.”

These are just a couple stories from the “hanger talk” and trust me, there are more where these came from. It just goes to show how important these pilots are and how valuable their services are to the citizens of the state, landowners, and firefighters. Budgets are getting tighter every year and pilots have not been replaced. As a state agency responsible for protecting Alabama’s natural resources, our pilots are a key essential to providing an effective protection blanket for our customers.

Stanley Anderson, the AFC’s Wildland Urban Interface Coordinator (South), is also a private pilot by hobby. “Over the years



*This aerial photo was taken by AFC Forester Brad Lang, flying with AFC pilot Jim Woods in Shelby County on a wildfire investigation.*

the AFC pilots have established a highly reliable fire operations relationship that is greatly respected by wildland firefighters, VFDs, resource managers, and forest landowners. This valuable service cannot be economically replaced by other means. Our experienced pilots offer real-time feedback to ground units about fire behavior; they often recommend alternative courses of action based on the terrain and values at risk. These services are even more critical in the wildland urban interface where homes and businesses are at risk,” according to Anderson. He went on to say, “Our pilots can see a broader landscape and possess a keener situational awareness from their perspective. They can advise the Incident Commander of the need for more resources and alert units to developments that can’t be seen from the ground. Safety is of paramount importance. I know of many firefighters and law enforcement officers who can provide personal testimonials as to how AFC pilots have saved the day.”

Anderson also related a time he was on a fire in Cherokee County when Northeast pilot Jack Wingate provided valuable feedback to a 20-man volunteer firefighter hand crew that had no idea the fire was advancing uphill towards their position. “Without that pilot’s professionalism and vigilance, the outcome might have been tragic for this hand crew,” he stated.

Phil Montgomery of the North Region is a second-generation forestry pilot, starting as a seasonal pilot in 1986 and taking over his Dad’s duties as a full-time pilot in 1994. Montgomery stated, “Since then I have seen a lot of fires, tornado damage, beetle damage, and helped in search and rescue. Our duties over the years have included guiding water drops from helicopters, directing VFDs to protect structures, and having our ground crews

attack fires saving structures, houses, livestock, and high-value timber.” Phil once assisted Flight Service Station (FSS), an air traffic facility that provides information and services to aircraft pilots, in recovering a downed aircraft. His skills, experience, and training helped him locate the downed aircraft and guide emergency personnel into the wooded area to retrieve the injured parties.

There is no “Top Gun” trophy or plaque on the wall for the best pilot when it comes to these guys, but in my opinion they rank among the very best of all forestry pilots. They work further behind (or above) the scenes than the rest of us as wildland firefighters, but they do not go unnoticed. I am fortunate to share the same view as they do and work with them on a regular basis. It always gives me a good feeling to hear those piston engines roaring over a fire I am fighting, knowing I am about to get valuable information from the “Eyes in the Sky.”



Photo by Brad Fite

*“Wash Down” – When AFC aircraft pilot Jim Woods taxied down the runway of Tuscaloosa Regional Airport toward the hangar for the final time, family and friends gathered to watch as a fire truck sprayed a cascade of water over his plane. This ceremony is often performed for retiring pilots on their last flight. Woods retired in April of this year with 16 years of dedicated service.*

