

Volo Mission makes an impact with first Ladies of Long Line event

As the co-founder and CEO of Volo Mission, a vertical reference training academy, Kim Hutchings has been watching helicopter pilots learn how to long-line for over a decade. Some of them have been women, and for the past five years, Volo Mission and Erickson have partnered to offer an annual external load training scholarship to members of Whirly-Girls International, the organization for female helicopter pilots.

Last year, Hutchings decided to do even more to attract women to the vertical reference sector. She began organizing Ladies of Long Line, a two-day event designed to connect experienced female long-line pilots and operators with women who want to learn more about this type of work. Her plans came together on May 1 and 2 at the Volo Mission ranch in Campbell, Texas, and the event was such a success that she's already planning on doing it again.



Attendees had the opportunity to try their hand at long-lining on the second day of the event using Volo Mission's Robinson R44. Photo courtesy of Stacy Sheard

"I would like to see the Ladies of Long Line continue to grow, not only for women who are interested in the sector, but also for those already involved. I would like to continue to build a strong, supportive community for women in the external load, utility, and aerial firefighting sector," Hutchings said.

Long-lining has historically been a difficult field for any pilot to break into, but with experienced pilots increasingly in short supply, Hutchings believes it is in the sector's best interest to open the door to a broader pool of potential candidates. She said many women simply haven't considered long-lining as a career option, perhaps

because they haven't seen many examples of female long-line pilots.

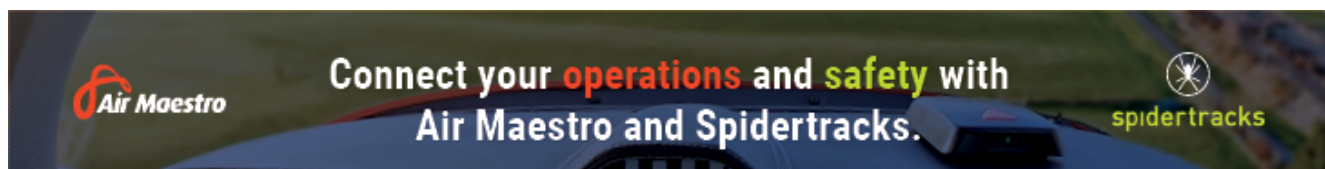


From left, Bobby Smith of 5 State Helicopters, Ammy Jorgenson of Timberline Helicopters, and Evie Lynn of Aspen Helicopters take questions from attendees during the operators panel. Timberline was a major sponsor of the event and Jorgenson also supported the flight activities on day two. Photo courtesy of Stacy Sheard

With Ladies of Long Line, Hutchings wanted to give female helicopter pilots exposure to the sector — and a chance to try their hand at long-lining — in a supportive, judgment-free environment. She said the event was designed to “educate and inform, inspire, and most importantly to empower them in knowing that they are capable of this type of work.”

On the first day of the event, around three dozen

attendees received an hour of ground instruction on long-line equipment and safety checks. That was followed by two interactive panel discussions: one with experienced female long-line pilots who are already working in the industry, and another with operators who employ long-line pilots. Live demonstrations of precision long-lining and firefighting operations rounded out the afternoon.

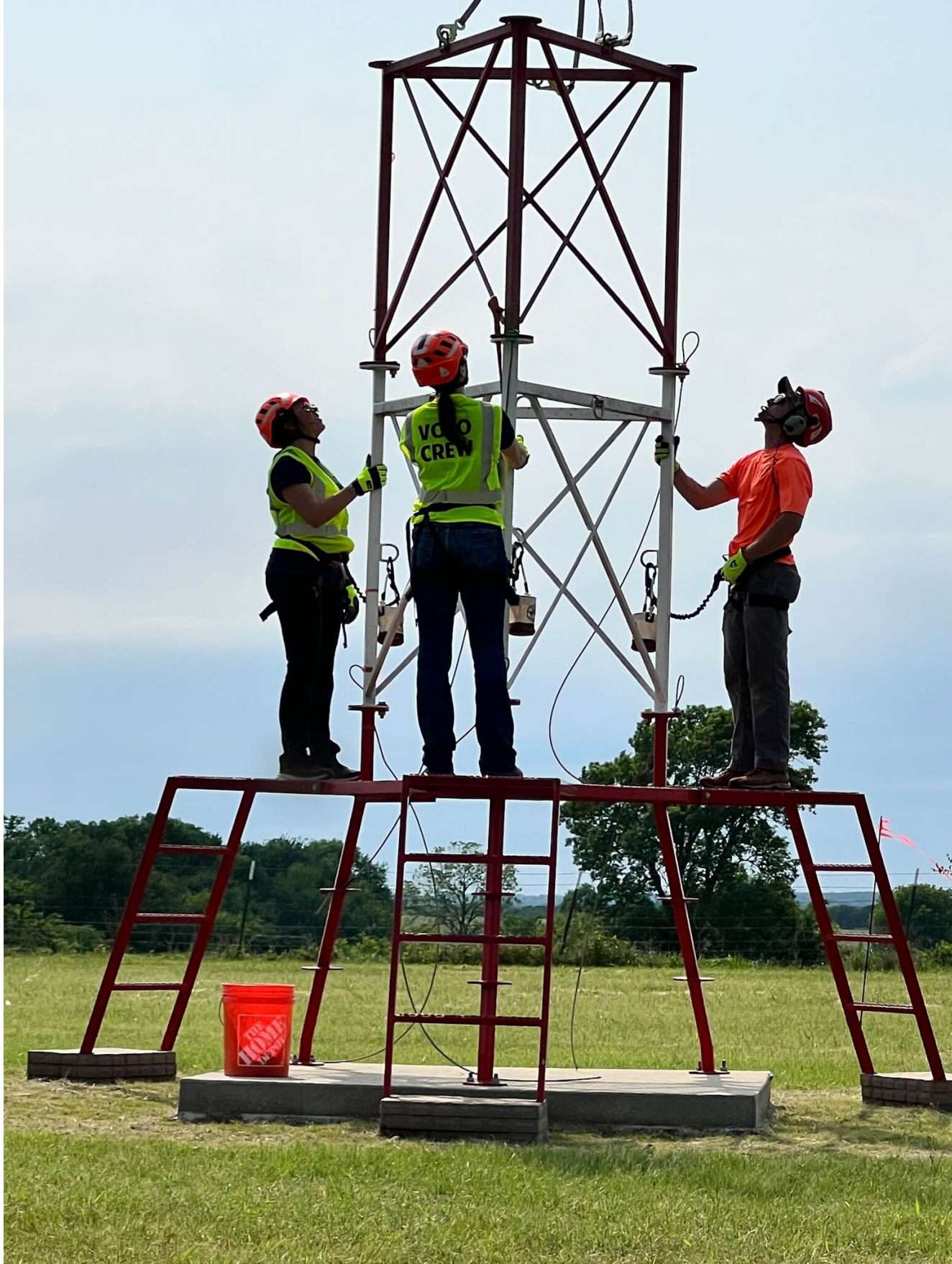


From left, the author moderating a panel of long-line pilots including Annie Paya, Sami Challburg, Lisa Zumkeller, and Leigh Coates. Photo courtesy of Stacy Sheard

On the second day, 18 of the attendees had the opportunity to try vertical reference and long-lining for the first time using Volo Mission's Robinson R44. For the training, they were broken into small groups of three or

four, giving them the experience of camaraderie that is a highlight of Volo Mission's courses.

Attendees gave Ladies of Long Line rave reviews. One of them, Rebecca Pattengale, told *Vertical*: "In my eight years of flying professionally I have never felt so seen, at home, and encouraged with fellow aviators as I have the last two days. It was amazing getting to try a totally intimidating new skill in such a safe environment."



Long-line demonstrations on day one included tower construction, a recent addition to Volo Mission's regular courses. Photo courtesy of Stacy Sheard

Jessica Cummings described the event as "an unforgettable experience from start to finish. It was inspiring to hear the panelist's stories and learn about

their journeys. The sense of camaraderie and support among the participants made the event even more rewarding."

Industry sponsors helped cover the cost of flight time and otherwise contributed to the success of the event. They included Heli Austria, Timberline Helicopters, Helimax Aviation, Helius, Duke Energy Corporation, Wilson Construction Company, Aspen Helicopters, PJ Helicopters and Hawkeye Helicopter.



Ground instruction on the first day of the event ensured that attendees were well informed on external load equipment, technology, and procedures. Photo courtesy of Kim Hutchings

"The sponsorship of the event . . . and other operators that didn't attend the event but that sent out their pilots, that to me was also special," Hutchings said. "It shows that this industry is open and receptive and supportive of

women."