

Kelli and Donald Morton co-own Bell's Ag Service in Des Arc.

Photo by Carlee Buckner



Sentinels of the Sky

Ag pilots are a special breed

by Ken Moore

You often see them dipping and diving barely above the landscape throughout the Delta during the growing season. If you're not paying attention, one will appear before your vehicle, just a few feet above the highway as it traverses from one field to the next – flying low, then pointing the nose of the plane straight up and banking hard left or right for another pass as it applies fertilizer or treats a crop with important weed-control products. These familiar yellow planes are common sights from Little Rock to West Memphis and Blytheville to Lake Village.

They're sentinels of the sky, caretakers of the land they're employed to protect. The local lexicon identifies them as "cropdusters." They're not reckless barnstormers. These highly skilled and professional agricultural aviators, like Vernon Caviness of Bell's Ag Service in Des Arc, take their jobs seriously and are a pivotal part of their farmer customers' success during fall harvest.

"I was raised on a farm across the road from an airstrip and grew up watching the planes fly. I've known since I was 5 years old this is what I wanted to be," Caviness said, standing in the hangar at Bell's Ag Service before making another run to treat a field.

"Why do I do it? I guess I was just called to it," he said. "I've always wanted to fly ag planes. You get to see your work from the sky, the finished product. You're a part of the farming community and have the satisfaction of knowing you're helping the farmer, doing your part to feed and clothe the world."

These aviators possess a different skill set than commercial jet pilots who fly much higher. Anyone who lives in or drives through row-crop country has seen them fertilizing and treating fields in the late spring and early summer. As they make a pass over a field, they're often no more than 10 to 15 feet above the ground while traveling 150 miles per hour. Trees, power lines and other obstacles line the fields, and there's no room for distraction. Caviness has flown ag planes for 19 years and knows firsthand the hazards of his occupation.

"It's a dangerous profession, no question," the 46-year-old said. "The least little distraction can mess up your day. I try to go in with a clear head and focus on what I'm doing. I familiarize myself in advance with the field I'll be flying over and play out in my head where I'm going and the surroundings. If you stay calm and focus, you should have no problems.

"Some people have a knack for flying. They were born to do this," he explained. "They're naturals. To watch some ag pilots fly is like watching a ballet, the way they maneuver over a field. You just have to have a natural feel for the airplane."

Kelli and Donald Morton are co-owners of Bell's Ag Service. Kelli's father Bobby was involved in several enterprises in the late 1970s and, in 1980, established the flight service on the outskirts of Des Arc. He tapped his then 18-year-old daughter as president of the company.

"I was a senior in high school at the time," she recalled. "Initially, I didn't do much with the business and went away to college for a couple of years. But I decided I wanted to help my dad with the service and came back. Thirty-seven years later, I'm still here."

Ag aviation is a competitive industry with private flight services scattered across the Delta servicing the fertilizer/pesticide needs of row-crop farmers. It's not uncommon to see more than one plane treating fields within a mile or two of each other during the busy time of year. Bell's Ag Service has about 60 customers today within a 20-mile radius of Des Arc.

In the early years, they had as many as nine planes, and more pilots were needed to service their territory. With new technology and planes with larger capacity, they've downsized to just two planes called "air tractors."

Caviness says they're equipped with hydraulic gates that feature automatic loading and carry a larger payload of fertilizer and chemicals. As a result, the Mortons presently employ only two pilots, Caviness and David Freppon. Caviness has been with them for eight years, while this is Freppon's first year to fly for them.



Though the busy season only lasts from late April through early July, depending on weather and rainfall, the days are long. Morton says it can take a toll on her pilots.

“They’re a different breed,” she said, describing the type of person required to pursue this vocation. “It takes a lot of discipline and focus, because they put their heart into treating these fields as if they were their own. They also have to have stamina, because they fly these planes

daylight to dark for six to eight weeks.”

Morton says a typical day, when the winds are benign, begins as early as 5 a.m. and may not end until after 8 p.m. Caviness and Freppon may stop and reload up to three times per hour.

“Yeah, we may make 50 to 70 takeoffs and landings each day, easy. I’m like a racehorse,” Caviness said describing his approach to the job.

“All I know is to run fast, so I can finish the job on

Ag pilot Vernon Caviness treats a rice field, just one of 60 farms serviced by the Mortons. From sunup to sundown, these pilots may make 50-70 takeoffs and landings.

Photo by Keith Sutton



time. There are long days during a short window of time, but you have to stay focused and pay attention to what you're doing."

Statistics bear out this is one of the most dangerous occupations. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, from 1991-2001, 141 persons died in agriculture-related plane crashes. All who died were males with an average of age of 44. Fully half of the fatalities occurred in the

states of Arkansas, California, Louisiana and Texas. The report summarized that ag pilots are at "increased risk" for fatal injury compared with pilots in all other industries.

"Fearless is a good word to describe ag pilots," said Kelli Morton. "They have to know their craft and not be afraid to get into the cockpit knowing they'll be flying over and around trees and power lines just a few feet off the ground."

Kelli Morton reviews a checklist with pilot David Freppon before he takes off on another run. Photo by Carlee Buckner



Ag pilots not only have to deal with competition from neighboring flight services but farmers who are purchasing ground or spray rigs that allow them to treat their fields with herbicides or pesticides themselves. Kelli Morton says this is eating into some of their business.

“With the new technology, this has eliminated at least one application per field,” she said. “Over time that affects our revenue and has led us to contract to treat farms in other states.”

Donald Morton, Kelli’s husband and business partner, also grows rice and soybeans south of Des Arc and brings his knowledge of farming to the service.

“GPS technology was introduced about 20 years ago and that has revolutionized this industry,” he said. “Before then, pilots had to have flaggers on the ground in the fields, showing them where to fly and apply fertilizer or chemicals. Now, we can plug that

information into the cockpit computer and it makes pilots much more efficient. We can cover more acres in a much shorter period of time.”

Another challenge is weather. Spring floods during planting season are becoming a regular occurrence, especially the past six years. In late April and early May, crop farmers in much of northeast Arkansas and just south of I-40 saw much of their acreage inundated with floodwaters from the Black, White and other rivers. Because of the mild, dry winter, most of the rice crop had been planted early, and up to 10 percent of the crop was lost. This impacted not just the farmer but flight services, too.

“It’s a disaster. No question,” Kelli agreed. “It affects the farmers and the people of Des Arc. It affects us as a crop-dusting service. But you have to be prepared for these types of events. If you don’t, then you’d be out of business.”

While it's the farmers and ranchers on the ground who grow and produce our food and fiber, ag pilots and businesses like Bell's Ag Service will always play an integral role in the farmer's ability to feed the world.

"Technology and automation are always changing and affecting the way farmers grow crops, and to a

degree, eliminating the human factor," Caviness said. "But there will always be a need for cropdusters. We'll always be an important part of the equation in helping our farmers feed a growing world population. At the end of the day, that's what drives me. I love to fly these planes and hope to be doing this 20 to 30 years from now."

Technology has changed the way ag pilots treat a field. Vernon Caviness now uses GPS and onboard systems to improve the accuracy and time it takes to fertilize and treat crops.

Photo by Keith Sutton

