

# Sky high

AN ARMY HELICOPTER FLIGHT THREE DECADES AGO LED LANCE CONLEY TO DREAM OF BECOMING A PILOT AND ULTIMATELY ESTABLISH ONE OF THE KIMBERLEY'S LARGEST AVIATION COMPANIES.

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER



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THE SOUND of Lance Conley's Air Tractor splits the calm of the clear Kimberley morning. The yellow plane roars out of its hangar, swings onto a dirt airstrip and is gone in a flash. Minutes later, the crop duster is swooping just metres from the ground, its spray boom pumping herbicide over a weedy paddock. With each pass, Lance lifts the nose of the plane, dips the tip of the right wing and wheels back overhead in a long smooth arc to start another run. To the uninformed it looks as if he might be training for an upcoming airshow, but for Lance, a crop duster pilot with 20 years experience, it's just another day at the office.

A few hours later, back at Lone Eagle Aviation's Kununurra hangar, Lance clearly remembers the moment when, as a young boy, he knew he would become a pilot. He was living on his grandfather's Dooloogarah Station in Queensland's Carnarvon Ranges with his mother and four younger siblings, having moved from Charleville a few years earlier. The army had been performing training exercises on the isolated property for weeks. "It was my 10th birthday and the army boys decided to take me for a fly in a helicopter," Lance says with a grin. "Ever since that day, right or wrong, I was going to be a helicopter pilot when I grew up." Soon after his 16th birthday Lance headed for Maroochydore and started his training.

Two years later Lance was off to the Kimberley after landing a job with local legend Kerry Slingsby, which had him mustering cattle in Bell 47s across the Kimberley and the Northern Territory. "It was a massive adventure for me, and I was keen as mustard," he says. That first job led to a short stint flying helicopters in Papua New Guinea and mustering in Queensland, before a return to the Kimberley to take up the chief pilot role with Kununurra aviation company Heliwork. After three years with Heliwork, Lance had the opportunity to purchase the company's agricultural spraying asset – a single spray-equipped Bell 47 helicopter. It was the beginning of Lone Eagle Aviation.

Today Lone Eagle is one of the Kimberley's largest aviation companies with a fleet of 19 aircraft. The company's fixed-wing fleet includes an Air Tractor AT-602, Cessna 188 AGwagon and a six-seat Beechcraft Bonanza. The helicopter fleet numbers 16 and includes Robinson R22s, R44s and an R66, a Bell LongRanger and one Eurocopter AS350 Squirrel. The company works across Western Australia and the Northern Territory, specialising in aerial application, mustering, charter work, survey, scenic flights, heli-



fishing safaris, water bombing and search-and-rescue. "Just about anything you can think of, we'll be doing it," Lance says.

Although mustering and charter work form the core of Lone Eagle's operations, Lance says the tourism side of the company is highly rewarding. "To see the reaction of people when they come up here and fly over some of these areas; they're always flabbergasted," he says. "I've been flying up here for nearly 30 years and I never get sick of it, you see something new every day."

Lance says the company's success would not have been possible without the support of his young family. Lance and wife Margret – a born and bred Kimberley girl – have six children: Liesa, 16, Hannah, 14, Joseph, 8, Phillip, 6, Nikita, 3, and Sarah, 1. Although it is a constant effort juggling such a big family with a multimillion dollar outback business, Lance and Margret say there's no better place to raise a family. As for the children, Phillip is the most keen on flying. "He wants to be the boss, he reckons," Lance says, smiling. "He's very keen, but he's still only six."

Lone Eagle has invested heavily in its team of more than 20



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pilots, engineers and support staff, a team Lance says is key to the business' success. He says it takes at least two to three years to train a mustering pilot to a high standard. "The first thing I look for in a pilot is attitude; they really have to have a passion for the work and want to do it," he says, pointing out that much of the work involves long hours in hot, isolated locations.

Discipline and composure under pressure are also key traits. Senior pilot John Walsh, 29, has plenty of both. John, who

grew up on his family's 27,000-hectare Moorna Station, near Wentworth in south-west New South Wales, says stock experience is the most important first step for a mustering pilot. "When you're in a helicopter you have to be very careful because you can run an animal until it drops," John says. "So you need to be aware of that fine line between getting the animal into the yards as quickly and efficiently as possible, and also not rushing them." All of Lone Eagle's mustering pilots have previous stock-work experience.

John says that offering such a great range of services means he and his colleagues gain a range of skills, from precise survey flying to large-scale search-and-rescue and charter work. "The hardest thing about the job is that you see things that you try to explain to people but you can never do it justice," he says. "Sunrises and sunsets, and the things that happen during the day, you try to explain it to someone later on and you just can't."

Lance says it's that kind of enthusiasm and passion that sets Lone Eagle Aviation apart. Despite the live-export industry's recent woes, he believes there will always be a northern cattle industry and demand for aerial mustering. And the region's tourism, mining and other industrial developments are positive signs for the rapidly expanding family company.

"There is a lot happening up here and I think there always will be," Lance says. "The helicopter is a proven mode of transport up here, and in some areas it's still the only way you can get in. As they say, time is money and helicopters just save so much time when it comes to travelling in the north."

