

Semper Fly

Marine Corps veteran Brandi Rector is taking OU Aviation to new heights with helicopter program.

BY TAMI ALTHOFF

BRANDI RECTOR NEVER imagined she'd be where she is today. With no aviation background in her family history, owning helicopters and running a flight school never crossed her mind.

A former U.S. Marine Corps sergeant, Rector was a mechanic and door gunner serving in deployments around the world before leaving the military in 2014.

"When I got out, Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation hired me right away to work on the new CH53K maintenance program," she says. "I had difficulty adjusting to civilian life; it was a slow pace, and I only lasted about six months. I missed flying."

Rector decided to go to college,

earning her bachelor's degree in aeronautics while learning to fly helicopters and working full-time as a helicopter mechanic.

After some ups and downs—including losing her father to cancer and briefly experiencing homeless—Rector began the process of becoming an FBI agent. At the same time her boyfriend, Mike Sanford, was in the hiring process for the CIA.

They were both in the final stages of beginning their new careers when an opportunity arose to buy Skyhunter Outfitters, which defends crops, wildlife and livestock by controlling invasive feral hogs.

"It came down to, 'Do I go to my final interview with the FBI or take

over this company?'" she says. "We decided to take a leap of faith and give Skyhunter a try."


Rector is now CEO of both Skyhunter Outfitters and Semper Fly Helicopters, a helicopter flight school that recently contracted with the University of Oklahoma School of Aviation.

"A contact at the Oklahoma Department of Aerospace and Aeronautics suggested that I should start a helicopter flight education program. Mike and I reached out to our network and started doing everything we could to learn what we needed to put it together," she says. Once she and Mike felt ready, they used their network to reach OU School of Aviation Director Eric Wydra.

After a few meetings, a lot of planning and going through the bid process, OU chose Semper Fly to run its burgeoning helicopter program. The first cohort of students will start this fall.

"We are the only female Marine veteran-owned helicopter flight school in the country, and OU is the only SEC school with a rotor program," she says. "It's a pretty big deal."

After a long road that took many turns, Rector knows she is finally where she's meant to be. She's excited about the new opportunities ahead and hopes to see Oklahoma's rotor community grow.

"OU does such a great job of providing a job pipeline into commercial airlines, but helicopter flight schools haven't traditionally done that," she says. "I want to give students every opportunity to build turbine flight hours, be introduced to different career paths, and get the needed experience that sets them up for success within the helicopter community." 



ERIKAH BROWN

Semper Fly pilots land at OU's Fly-In event.

Semper Fly CEO
Brandi Rector



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