

Flying Under the Roo

New Zealand helicopter pilot Jason Laing earned his wings in the Southern Alps. That was good experience for someone who went on to rescue people off the treacherous slopes of Mt Everest.

Jason Laing is a study in resolve. Leaving school at 14, he never wanted to be inside a classroom again.

But, after working in a variety of jobs, he decided to pursue a long-held fascination for flying, applying to Canterbury Aviation Academy.

The college said that with help for his dyslexia, they believed they could get him through.

They did, and now Jason – with 6,500 helicopter hours – has been honoured three times over the last two years for his extraordinary rescue and recovery helicopter work in Nepal.

“I’ve always been comfortable flying in mountains. I flew in Fiordland and the Southern Alps for about 15 years, before three seasons in Kashmir, mainly heli-skiing work at 15,000 ft.

“It was a short hop to Nepal, to work the climbing seasons there, starting in 2012, ferrying climbers and gear between the Himalayas and Kathmandu.”

Then on 18 April 2014 came the Everest avalanche at 20,000 ft, that killed 16 Sherpas. Other helicopter pilots said they did not have the skills to fly in and pick up survivors and bodies.

But in his Squirrel, Jason made 16 rescue and recovery missions, the air so



The Nepal Mountaineering Association recognised Jason’s rescue and recovery work with its Kumar Khadra Bickram Adventurous Award. The Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI) made Jason the 2015 recipient of its Diploma for Outstanding Airmanship, and Helicopter Association International (HAI), made him its 2016 Pilot of the Year.

thin and power so marginal, that only one person could be lifted out at a time.

A year later, the devastating 7.8 Nepalese earthquake triggered a series of avalanches including one on Mt Everest that killed 22 people.

Jason was one of three pilots who recovered 140 survivors from Camp One, at 20,000 ft, and Camp Two,

a thousand feet higher.

“You always go and have a reccie,” he says, of the decision to make those hazardous missions. “You can always say ‘no’.

“Usually, you’re told something can’t be done because of the weather. But you go and have a look, and sometimes the weather clears a little. It’s an hour’s

Photo courtesy of Jason Laing.



f of the World

flight between Kathmandu and the climbing area, and the weather can improve before you arrive, and you can do something. But sometimes you can't."

That commitment to attempting a rescue, however, in no way overrides other considerations.

"In the Himalayas you're often flying close to the machine's limit of 23,000 ft. Go or no-go decisions are based first and foremost on how high we would have to go to attempt a rescue.

"Also, the company I fly for in Nepal has a big ground staff, there are a lot of mouths to feed. The decisions I make on the sharp end ultimately affect the company, and all those people, and the aircraft, so I don't want to push it too much."

Jason also won't fly a mission if his crewman, Chhiring Bhote, isn't happy.

"We decide jointly on the feasibility of a mission. Chhiring is a 23-year old Sherpa, who's been trained in Switzerland in long line rescue work. I can put him down on really steep terrain at about 22,000 ft, without oxygen.

"So he's got to be happy about where we're going and what he's going to have to do.

"After the 2014 ice avalanche, I dropped him into a crevasse at over 20,500 ft to get a mountaineer who'd been hanging onto his climbing ropes all night, without oxygen. I lowered Chhiring down on a 200 ft long line to get the guy. It was an extremely difficult job, probably the hardest long line job I've ever done."

But Jason is no save-at-all-costs gung-ho hero.

"I've had situations where I know there are climbers in real trouble, but the weather is just too hazardous to attempt a rescue.

"You have to be tuned in all the time to what's happening right now, what's about to happen, and what could happen."

"The best time for a mission is during a two to four-hour window around the middle of the day. Earlier than that, the sinking cold air of the katabatic winds pushes you downwards.

"Then during the afternoons, the anabatic winds drag in clouds and moisture. This is known as the 'Dragon's Breath' in the Himalayas and that's not much good either.

"On top of that, the area between Camp One and Two on Everest is a big white bowl known as the Western Cwm (pronounced 'coom'), and it can be warmer there than at Base Camp.

"Because the machine loses performance in the heat, and at altitude, it can be impossible to pick someone up from Camp Two.

"Sometimes, we'll stay overnight and try again in the morning. But we can be too late.

"The pressure to fly the rescue mission can be enormous – particularly from fellow climbers – and it can be a very

hard decision to make, but in the end, I won't put Chhiring, or the aircraft, in peril."

His success in flying in mountainous terrain is partially due to the fact that Jason sticks to his safety limits. Always.

"I don't use transient limitations to hold a hover. My transients are outside the safety envelope and I don't rely on them. Instead, I'll do a hover 300 ft away from the area, with a good escape route, and that's when I do the first power check.

"Then I'll move over the subject and do another power check, then I know 100 per cent that I can do the job without that extra risk. Only then will we put the long line on."

Jason also provides himself with an extra safety net by utilising ground effect where he can.

"In our flight manuals, it shows that at a certain altitude at a certain temperature, you can hover out of ground effect. That takes more performance than to hover in ground effect. So I'll use out-of-ground effect performance figures to give me a safety buffer."

In Nepal, engineers take care of the preflight and postflight checks, and sometimes, on a multi-day mission, one will fly with Jason as a second crewman.

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Jason's 'office' the Himalayas, with Everest in the background, far left.



Jason flying at the Western Cwm at 20,000 ft on the way to Camp Two.

"The engineers check over the machine after every mission," says Jason. "And I trust them completely, we work together as a team, this is very, very important."

But the attribute Jason says is indispensable to safe mountain flying is observational skills.

"You have to have vigilant situational awareness," he says. "At altitude there's oxygen management; fuel management is more critical, and the weather can close in, not just in front of you, but also underneath you. And you're constantly analysing your air densities, and weight and balance."

"You have to be tuned in all the time to what's happening right now, what's about to happen, and what could happen."

"In Nepal, that applies to the ground operation as well. You land at Everest Base Camp, you've got two or three Sherpas pulling open doors and hauling stuff out. I cannot take off my oxygen and get out of the helicopter, so I have to keep a really close eye on them. There are a million things that can go wrong. You have to check and double check: 'how heavy was the gear they put in?', 'did he close the doors properly?', 'did he put the seat belt in?', 'has anyone checked for loose items?'

"There are a lot of hidden traps in Nepal. Hitting wires is one of them – they don't exactly string them from power pole to power pole but from tree to tree and from any structures. You always have to have your eyes open."

Jason also practises something he was taught while working in Antarctica: 'take five'.

"Step back, count to five and really think about what you're about to do. Pause to reassess your decision. That's saved me many, many times in Nepal."

To learn more about the sort of flying Jason does, email info@caa.govt.nz to get a free copy of the GAP booklets, *Helicopter Performance* and *Mountain Flying*. ■

Jason says he has never forgotten these 'golden quotes' from the pilots who have mentored him through the years.

"You must be in tune with your machine."

Simon Spencer-Bower, with whom Jason trained in 1998, and who was the recipient of the Helicopter Association International award for Flight Instructor of the Year, in 2015.

"Line all your ducks up in a row before you commit to a task: right speed, right power, right descent."

Neil Scott, who was Jason's commercial flight examiner.

"There's a lot of air out there. Use it. There's no need to get too close to anything, unless you're landing."

Louisa Patterson, who trained Jason in Hughes 500s and Fiordland operations.

"With the way the weather is in Fiordland, it's all about making the right decisions and making them quickly."

Sir Richard Hayes. Jason flew for him for 10 years, and gained his search and rescue skills with him. Jason says he carried those skills on to his work in the Himalayas.