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ARCHIVES

Nobutada Yamauchi: From Japan to the skies of Kaua'i

By Jon Letman - Special to The Garden Island

Posted: Monday, May 24, 2004 - 05:45:13 am HST

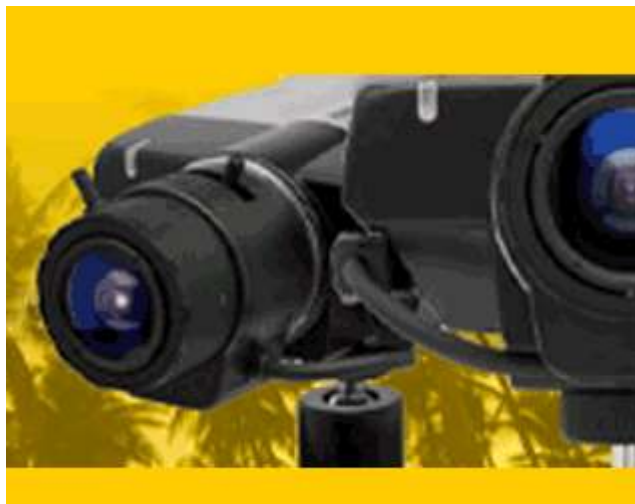
Q: What do forest fires, waterfalls, pakalolo and lost hikers all have in common?

A: They are all on the search list for A-1 Inter-Island helicopter pilot Nobutada Yamauchi. As an Inter-Island pilot, Yamauchi provides air transport and support for the Kaua'i Fire Department, Kaua'i Police Department, the County of Kauai, the Department of Land and Natural Resources and island visitors. Flying a sleek MD500, Yamauchi soars across the island to help put out wild fires, locate missing persons, reach idyllic scenic spots and aid in the D.L.N.R.'s search for illegal pakalolo patches in the backwoods of Kaua'i.



Jon Letman / Special To The Garden Island
Helicopter pilot Nobutada Yamauchi at the controls of a helicopter at Burns Field in Hanapepe.

Hovering a thousand feet above Kaua'i, Yamauchi and his passengers are afforded incredible views of not only the Na Pali coast and Waimea canyon, but also calving whales, skinny dipping hippies and the occasional shark. "Lots of sharks between Ni'ihau and Lehua," remarks Yamauchi, a native of Saitama prefecture, just outside of Tokyo.



Yamauchi first came to America in 1990 and soon after began to pursue his dream of becoming a helicopter pilot. "When I was 8 or 9 years old, I used to



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watch the A-Team on TV. I thought, if that dopey guy can fly, so can I," says Yamauchi, recollecting his unexpected inspiration. Yamauchi enrolled in flight school in Corona, California, obtained a commercial helicopter license and then went on to instruct. In the mid-90s Yamauchi taught and flew in San Jose and then moved to Kaua'i in 1998, first working for South Seas Helicopter.

After earning an Airline Transport Pilot license, Yamauchi became qualified to fly scheduled flights on airplanes up to 12,500 pounds and in 2000 began flying part-time for Pacific Wings, a small commuter airline that connects O'ahu and the Neighbor Islands. During this period Yamauchi balanced his flying time between A-Star helicopters and Cessna 402s until 9/11 when he was laid off from Pacific Wings as they cut back part-time employees.

Today Yamauchi flies for Hanapepe-based A-1 Inter-Island Helicopters out of Burns Field near Salt Pond. Yamauchi says he enjoys flying MD500s (the "Ferrari of helicopters") which have an average speed of 140 m.p.h., fly with the doors off and have no middle back seat, ensuring all four passengers sit beside a window.

Yamauchi, who has logged almost 10,000 hours flight time and circles Kaua'i well over 1,000 times each year, has flown the skies of California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah, but never in Japan. When he started studying to be a pilot in 1991 flight instruction in Japan has become more affordable while American flight lessons have risen as insurance and fuel costs increase.

What are the greatest challenges of flying above Kaua'i day after day?

"When the trades are blowing, the weather is usually fairly predictable," observes Yamauchi. "But tropical weather can change quickly and high winds can be a challenge. Heavy flights with big passengers can also make a helicopter respond more sluggishly."

The best part of flying, Yamauchi says, is simply the feeling of freedom and watching the joy of his passengers.

"One of my best moments flying," says Yamauchi, "was taking an elderly grandfather, a local man, to see the Na Pali coast. He was born and raised on Kaua'i, had never even been off-island, not even to O'ahu, and had never see the Na Pali. Someone had given him a gift certificate for a flight and when he saw the Na Pali, tears ran down his face. 'I didn't know my island was this beautiful,' the old man cried. That was such a pleasure to see," Yamauchi recalls with a smile.

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