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R44 Raven II Reaches South Pole

Torrance, CA—British pilots Quentin Smith and Steve Brooks have set another milestone for the R44 Raven II helicopter, landing at the South Pole on January 18, 2005, less than three years after their record-setting R44 landing at the North Pole in June of 2002.

40-year-old Smith and 44-year-old Brooks began their latest helicopter expedition flying from Buenos Aires on December 29, 2004, reaching the world's southernmost city - Ushuaia, Argentina - a week later. Next, the team flew past Cape Horn and Drake Passage toward the Argentina Antarctica base in Jubany. Smith described that portion of the flight as "480 miles of the most treacherous weather in the world." Although the South Pole has an elevation of 9,300 feet, the pilots often found themselves flying at density altitudes of 14,000 feet - the R44's maximum operating altitude.

After several days of weather delays, Smith and Brooks flew their R44 Raven to within five nautical miles of the South Pole on January 17th and waited for weather conditions to improve. The pair built igloos and spent the night in sub-zero weather and fog. Discussing the challenge of flying in Antarctica, Smith said, "Everything is white, lifeless, and too harsh for life. Flying is dependent on having good contrast in the texture of the snow; weather is critical."

Weather conditions were much better the following morning, when Smith and Brooks obtained permission to land at the South Pole. With the temperature at -25°C, they made a small igloo around the R44's engine compartment and used an avgas cooking stove to warm the engine to +2°C. "The engine started the first time with no difficulty," reported Smith. They touched down at the pole on January 18, 2005 in bright, cold sunshine and -26°C (approximately -15°F).

Smith and Brooks are well known in the world of record-setting adventures. Smith, a world champion free-style helicopter pilot, flew with Jennifer Murray around the world in 1999 and flew the chase helicopter for her solo flight in 2000. Brooks was one of two British explorers who laid claim in 2002 to being the first to drive across the treacherous Bering Strait from the North American continent to Siberia, and Smith provided helicopter support on that expedition. In June 2002, the pair were the first to land an R44 helicopter at the North Pole.

Smith and Brooks attempted to reach the South Pole once before - to become the first helicopter to land at both Poles - but had to cut the expedition short when they were forced to ditch their helicopter in icy Antarctic waters. That time, they launched a liferaft, and thanks to Brooks' satellite telephone, were rescued by the Chilean Navy. This time, they made it.

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