

**BUSINESS AS USUAL**

## Air power in photography

By [Norman Sison](#) (The Philippine Star) Updated September 21, 2009 12:00 AM



AeroEye founder Jojo Mariano (left) and top RC precision flying pilot Mark Alcantara  
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MANILA, Philippines - When you hear a remote-controlled miniature helicopter buzzing several dozen feet in the air like a dragonfly on steroids, you better smile, wave and show your good side because you might be on candid camera.

Not that Manila-based aerial photography company, AeroEye Asia, is into spying. It operates a squadron of remote-controlled helicopters — or RC helis in RC community jargon — that takes the photography business to greater heights.

AeroEye took off from a simple business idea: affordable aerial photography. Who says you always need real aircraft in aerial photography? It was just a matter of having a different view. If Harry Potter's broomstick were available, why not?

Jojo Mariano, the company's founder and CEO, stumbled onto the idea in 2005, six years after struggling to get his IT business off the ground. A photography enthusiast, Mariano did audio visual presentations and multi-

media productions to make ends meet. But the sideline was also highly competitive.

One day, his professors at Asian Institute of Management gave him an idea. "Heeding the advice of my guru at AIM — find a complementary service that will make your competitors your business partners — I sent out a survey to several of our existing IT clients," says Mariano.

Included in the survey was this question: "Aside from the menu of services that we offer, is there anything that you would want us to add?" Eight out of 10 respondents said "affordable aerial photography services". Mariano decided to chart a new business course, follow his passion for photography, and take to the air.

Mariano first tried using a large tethered helium balloon. Under it was a custom-made camera mount attachment holding a Canon 300D with an inexpensive wireless video downlink bought from Quiapo, Manila, connected to a pair of video glasses and a remote trigger. To keep the balloon in place for a shot, the person holding the tether moved into position.

After six months, clients started inquiring if Mariano did aerial video as well. That's when he decided to get into the RC helicopter hobby.

Mariano's crash course into the RC world was like actually going to flying school. He also had to figure out how to customize remote-controlled choppers to hold camera equipment and keep camera shake to a minimum to take steady shots, including video.

AeroEye operates an air force of two unleaded gasoline-powered helicopters and one nitro-powered chopper, which is flown for high altitude shots of up to 9,000 feet. One RC heli kit alone has a price tag of P60,000. The cost soars to P150,000 when you buy additional parts. Yes, it's a serious toy.

Like in a real helicopter, it takes two people to do aerial shoots. One guy flies the chopper, the other works the camera. His pilot and business partner is Mark Alcantara, one of Asia's RC precision flying top guns.

Mariano's ace in the photography business is that he can get shots that a ground-based camera cannot – and, of course, it's more affordable. "Hiring a real helicopter is very expensive, around P35,000 per hour to P200,000 for one whole day. This involves paying for the pilot's fee plus waiting time."

Mariano charges P45,000 for half a day's shoot and P65,000 for a full day. That's it.

You have to find a photographer willing to brave heights. There's also the bureaucratic hassle of securing a Civil Aviation Authority permit to fly. "Plus, there is the stress and time pressure to conduct the shoot since you are paying the helicopter on an hourly basis."

There are things that you can do with RC helis that you can't with full-size helicopters. "Real helicopters are not allowed to fly below 500 feet unless they are about to land," says Mariano. "Another concern is that not all helicopters have open canopies. So it is a struggle to take aerial photos through scratch-filled windows."

"You are not under pressure to shoot because we don't charge on a per hourly basis, but more of expected output on a per day basis. This simply means we can take our time getting the right shots," Mariano says.

A look at Mariano's photo album reveals that aerial photography has more uses than taking the usual breath-taking vistas – power plants, ships, Mount Pinatubo's crater, Mount Pulag's chilly summit, and even grand weddings. AeroEye has also flown for a local television series and for commercials. The idea is to give clients a different view of things.

Mariano dreams of making it big with larger UAVs carrying Hollywood-quality cameras for the international big screen. Who knows, his choppers might spy on the Abu Sayyaf or pack a machine pistol and fly missions for the military someday – Tom Clancy-style.

As it is, AeroEye is a model in finding business opportunities, innovation and following your passion. There is nowhere to go but up.

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