By Mark Pixler

The morning I was to meet Katie Weilage, I received a call from Chris Dillon at Dillon Aero, our sister company. Katie was in town for a class at Dillon Aero and we were doing a photo shoot while she was here. Chris asked me to do an article about Katie in The Blue Press and wanted the title to be something like, “Beauty and the Beast.”

Really? I thought. At the time, I figured “the Beast” part of the title was referring to the Dillon Aero M134D Gatling Gun. I was wrong. Wrong because – unlike Chris – I had yet to find out what Katie does for a living.

Turns out “the Beast” Chris was referring to was the Mi-17 helicopter, the former Soviet workhorse for which Katie has served as a flight instructor, maintenance instructor, A&P mechanic, and flight engineer! You see, she instructs the Afghan military/police, non-rated aircrew members on the Mi-8/17. She has also instructed Mi-8/17 systems classes to the Afghan military/police in a classroom setting.

Essentially, Katie trains Afghans to be crew chiefs on the Mi-17; but how in the world does a young lady from Southwest Iowa end up in Afghanistan as a civilian “contractor?”

It started one summer when her mother took her to the Strategic Air Command Museum at Offutt Air Force Base in Bellevue, Nebraska. “I was bitten by the aviation bug,” Katie said, “I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up.” So, she did all she could to make that dream come true, including ROTC, but a motorcycle accident before she was to be commissioned led to a medical board declining her as a candidate because of a “delayed union” of a fracture she had suffered.

The “bug bite” wouldn’t go away, however, so she pursued other means to the desired end. Katie earned an associates degree in aviation maintenance, then a bachelor of science in professional aeronautics with a double minor in aviation safety and business administration, and went to work in the civilian aviation field.

From an initial job refueling aircraft at a Council Bluffs, Iowa, municipal airport, Katie relocated to Alamogordo, New Mexico, which led to a position at the Aero Club on Holloman Air Force Base, where she was introduced to the “contracting world.”

“I happened to be at the right place at the right time,” Katie explained. “Out of the blue, the program director of the Mi-17 contract in El Paso, Texas, contacted me and said, ‘We’re hiring, and would like you to interview for a position.’ I’d never worked on a helicopter in my life,” she continued, “all my experience was in general aviation fixed wing!”

Katie said a “crusty” retired first sergeant gave her the chance of a lifetime when he asked her, “Why do you want to work on helicopters?” Her answer must have struck him as being genuine