

Flying Cats



In 2006 Dahlgrens decided the best way to get their machines to a remote logging destination was to fly them over with a Berger Marc VI tower yarder.

Dahlgren Logging takes their equipment to the skies — a unique solution to remote logging

By Barbara Coyner



Want to have some fun? Log on to YouTube.com and type in “flying cats.” There you can watch Dahlgren Logging’s amazing video.

The Forks, Wash. logging contractors showed their ingenuity recently when faced with the dilemma: what do you do when you have two million board feet of timber to log on a remote flat, across a deep ravine, and there’s no road into it? If you’re Dahlgrens,

you hitch your Cats to your powerful Berger Marc VI tower yarder and “fly” them in. Not the usual logging job, of course, but the solution worked just fine, according to Chad Dahlgren.

New Use for the Biggest Yarders in the World

“The Marc VI is the reason we could do what we did,” says Chad, a third generation logger in the company founded by his grandparents, Joel and Ingrid Dahlgren. “We didn’t have to adjust anything, just tighten up the brakes. The Marc VI is the biggest mobile yarder ever built. They only built two of them and we have both of them. They hold almost 5,000 feet of skyline and on

this job, we went out about 4,000 feet.”

The 7.3 million board foot timber sale, for Merrill and Ring’s Pysht Tree Farm, presented Dahlgrens with a problem right off the bat. “There was a big flat right across the draw, and there were no roads in,” Chad recalls, noting that he and his dad, Pete, walked back into the site and saw plenty of timber, but zero access for the heavy equipment. “My dad remembered that they used to yard out logs that were about the same size as the Cats, so he thought it could work.”



They flew over the Cats in order of size — first the D6, then the D5, and finally the 517 grapple Cat. Handling the Heavy Load

Dangling a brand new 43,000-pound 517 Cat from a cable, over a steep ravine, is the stuff ulcers are made of. By comparison, the usual log that is cable

yarded weighs somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 pounds, making the high-wire Cat trick the ultimate test. Driven to succeed, Dahlgren crews fashioned a metal “halo” that rode on a 36-inch bull block. The rigging consisted of nine guy lines lashed to a tail tree, eleven guy lines on the yarder, with four Cats on the back with guy lines. “We had a big stump for our tail tree, and it was the only sound old-growth fir stump back there,” Chad remembers of the stump, which measured about 42 feet around at chest height. “It was like the stump was put there just for us.”



A large old growth stump was used as the tail tree. It measured approximately 42 feet around.

Using 13/4-inch cables for the skyline, 11/4-inch cables for skidding, and 7/8 inch for haulback, the company relied on its usual cable sizes for the Cat lift-off. As for the Cats

themselves, they were attached at four points, fastened to the hard bar on the front, and shackled to quick knobs welded onto the back.

Environmentally Sound and Saving Dollars

While Dahlgrens worked on access angles, Cam Field, Merrill and Ring's forester and quality control man, faced his own challenges on the timber sale. He had to address sensitive environmental issues involving two fish-bearing streams. Because he's worked with Dahlgrens in the past, however, he knew they were up to the task of dealing with the steep and unstable slopes flanking the streams. "I knew Pete could do it. I'd kn

own him long enough that if he came up with a plan, I knew it would work."

The plan Dahlgrens devised was no split-second brainstorm. Pete and Chad walked the area with a GPS unit, scouted for stumps, and checked out landing site possibilities. The trick was to use the tower yarder effectively and not tear up the trees as they were yarded across the massive divide. After a series of meetings, Merrill and Ring representatives hammered out the unique experiment with Dahlgrens.

For Field, the thoughtful planning and waiting paid off in substantial savings for Merrill and Ring. The estimate for helicopter logging was \$315 per thousand board feet. Dahlgren's estimate: \$245 to \$250 per thousand board feet using the "flying Cats." A savings of \$60 to \$65 per thousand board feet was significant, so the unusual Cat project got the go-ahead nod.

Holding Their Breath

In late spring of '06, with John Dahlgren at the controls of the Marc VI, the first Cat, a D6 weighing 36,000 pounds, took flight. For onlookers, the sight was nothing short of amazing. "See you later — hopefully," Chad commented on the video as the first Cat pushed off, floating unceremoniously into the air. The whole thing looked effortless, like a ski lift with a skier on board. When the Cat landed, everyone let out a yell and breathed a little easier. At 300,000 pounds of pure muscle, the mighty Berger Marc VI clearly had the pull and lift to get the job done. The company has relied on the machine as its centerpiece since buying it new in 1980, so there was no shortage of confidence.



The Berger tower yarder has a solid reputation for working ecologically sensitive areas. It was used in the high profile restoration work at Mt. St. Helens.

On the maiden voyage, the Cats flew in order of size. With the D6 safely delivered, the D5 grapple Cat came next, and finally the brand new 517 grapple Cat, tipping the scales at 43,000 pounds. "We were pretty nervous, but once we saw that the first one made it, we knew it was going to work," says Chad. From late spring of 2006 to January of '07, Dahlgrens logged the tree farm, taking out mostly fir averaging two feet in diameter, with some amount

of hemlock coming out, as well. Thanks to the Marc VI, impacts to the trees and the ground were minimized. Clearly, the company's equipment purchases gave the advantage.

"In the past, when we were able to log the big wood, these yarders would hang the skyline out farther and yard a bigger turn faster," says Cheri Dahlgren of her company's initial decision to buy the Marc VI. "We purchased the first Marc VI in 1980. We were so impressed with the

performance of this yarder that we purchased the second in 1984.” Since buying the Berger tower yarders, Dahlgrens have tested them with high profile restoration work at Mt. St. Helens, so they have gained a solid reputation for working around ecologically sensitive areas. Field, too, is pleased with the job the Marc VI has done. Out of the 160-acre unit, 80 acres were accessed by the airborne Cats, which created a total win-win situation for both the loggers and the tree farm owners. Field reserves his highest praise for the Dahlgren team, noting that at 78, founder Joel Dahlgren still gets out to do a full day’s work. Sons Pete and John came on board when their dad started out with a truck fleet and have since built up a stellar logging reputation.

Chad Dahlgren steps in as a third generation, while Cheri, Pete’s wife, and JoMarie, Pete and John’s sister, keep the office scene running smoothly. Usually the company keeps a crew of about 40 on board for its jobs.

Will They Fly Again?

With the Pysht Tree Farm sale completed and the Cats safely flown out of the area, the question remains for Dahlgrens: will they do the “flying Cats” routine again? Chad Dahlgren and Cam Field answer a resounding “yes,” and Chad has even hit the road to promote the company’s new technique.

Given the savings over helicopter logging, the Berger Marc VI might very well offer a strong logging alternative for hard-to-access areas. For Field, the powerful Berger represents a savings to his company in terms of both finance and environmental impacts. Not a bad business card for Dahlgrens and their now famous “flying Cats.”

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