



# Flying for Compassion

How Generous GA Pilots Are Using Missions to Do Good

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eBook



# About Lightspeed Aviation

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## ***On a mission to save lives***

Lightspeed Aviation is a leading manufacturer of premium aviation headsets and helmet products, and we are proud to serve the general aviation community. Our mission is “creating products that protect and save lives.” In 2022, the company launched a new category of aviation products called “Safety Wearables”. Layering life-saving technologies on top of their award-winning audio and ANR platform, Lightspeed has ushered in a new era of aviation safety.

Lightspeed is also a passionate supporter of initiatives to encourage the next generation of pilots through its support of programs like Young Eagles, You Can Fly, and Ray Scholars. The company is proud to have participated in helping countless people experience everything from a discovery flight to getting a Pilot Certificate.

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# Pilots Changing Lives

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General aviation pilots are a diverse and amazing group. They come to flying by many paths: via military service, commercial careers, or simply a lifelong fascination with flying. When we talk to pilots, we hear amazing stories of determination, people who served, worked, studied, saved—who did whatever it took to earn the freedom of the skies. The other thing we consistently hear is a sense of gratitude, that they have been blessed to have the opportunity to fly, and they want their time in the air to be meaningful. Many of these pilots choose to repay what life has given them by flying in service to others.

Volunteer pilots in the U.S. provide thousands of free flights a year, flying patients for medical care, flying rescue animals to new homes, serving veterans, delivering relief supplies to disaster areas, helping to alleviate grief, inspire children, or illuminate environmental issues. Volunteer pilots change lives, and in the course of their service, their own lives are changed for the better. Time and again, they tell us they get back more than they give.

This eBook tells the stories of just a few of these pilots. It also profiles some of the many non-profit organizations that bring volunteer pilots together with those in need. Just as people come to flying by diverse paths, you'll see in these stories that the ability to fly can lead in many more rewarding directions. We hope they inspire you and, perhaps, help you to find a great reason to spend more time in the air.





**WALT FRICKE** FLYING FOR **VETERAN'S AIRLIFT COMMAND**

# Veteran's Airlift Command Pilots Serve Those Who Served

Service to our country can come at a high price. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than a third (1.5 million) of the nearly 3.8 million men and women who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces since September 2001 have a service-connected disability.

The Veterans Airlift Command (VAC) was founded to help repay our debt to these heroes. VAC provides free, private air transportation to our nation's combat injured veterans for medical or other compassionate purposes through a national network of volunteer aircraft owners and pilots.

VAC was founded by Walt Fricke, a decorated Army aviator who flew hundreds of missions as

a combat helicopter pilot in Vietnam. After a rocket exploded while his unit was prepping a landing zone, he spent six months in a hospital far from home, so he knows firsthand the difficulties that combat wounded face. He was flown back to the U.S. on Veteran's Day and delivered to a hospital in Fort Knox, Kentucky, 700 miles from home. His working-class family didn't have the resources to fly out right away and spend time with him, so the wounded 20-year-old was left by himself to deal with the possibility of losing his leg and anxiety so bad he couldn't eat. Fricke's story had a happy ending: eventually, his family was able to come visit him, he began to heal, his foot and leg were saved, and he went on to have successful career at General Motors.

Fast-forward almost 40 years to 2006. The U.S. was again at war overseas, this time with Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Fricke had just retired from General Motors. He says *"The hospitals were filling up with wounded from Iraq and Afghanistan, and*



*I had an airplane. I thought, 'You know, that problem that I had as a wounded kid, getting my family there and getting home on convalescent leave, I could solve that for somebody with my airplane.'"*





He talked to the Veteran's Administration and started looking for military families that needed a ride. Then a friend challenged him to take the idea national, and **VAC was born**. Today, VAC has 2,700 volunteer pilots who have flown over 20,000 passengers in support of wounded veterans.

VAC flights are 100% donated, mostly by pilots using their own planes, although some owners and businesses also donate the use of their aircraft. VAC missions often exceed 250 miles, so the organization looks for either multi-engine or high-performance single-engine aircraft that can seat at least 4 people. Volunteer pilots must have their IFR certification. Fricke guesses that 30–40%

of VAC's pilots are ex-military, but he points out that, "All the people that fly for us are serving their country. Clearly, they are patriots."

Fricke says he'll never forget the first VAC flight. There was a Marine who had been wounded in Afghanistan. He was home on convalescent leave when his unit returned to Camp LeJeune, North

*"Our pilots support veterans who, in many cases, have lifelong challenges as a result of their willingness to go and serve on our behalf. We have the freedom to fly our airplanes because of what these people have done for us over the last 100 years. Our pilots have a chance to sign a thank-you note with their airplanes to our combat veterans."*

Carolina, from the desert. Fricke says, "For these young Marines, the unit becomes their family, and seeing that family again is a huge part of the healing process." Fricke had just launched his new website when the Department of Defense called him for help. The Marine had a frequent flyer ticket, but the trip would have taken 13 hours on commercial flights, and the young man was in a wheelchair and exhausted. So, Walt put out an email to eight pilot friends, and five volunteered for the trip. The Marine was transported in comfort, and the trip took only two and a half hours. After the flight, one of the pilots posted something on a chat list, and Walt instantly had 20 more pilot volunteers. He says, "I knew then

*we had something that would capture people's hearts and they would want to do it. Sometimes I think our pilots get even more out of it than our passengers do."*

Fricke says the dedication of VAC volunteers is humbling. "Some pilots will fly a veteran across the country and fly back deadhead. One time, we had

*a Marine private in D.C. who wanted to get to San Diego to see his unit before they were shipped back overseas. A volunteer who was an ex-Marine sent his Gulfstream jet with crew to fly the Marine to the gathering, flew the crew back to Tampa, Florida, on commercial flights at his own expense, and then flew them back to San Diego a few days later to pick up the Marine and take him home."*

Volunteering can also be life-changing for VAC pilots. "It starts with volunteer flying, and then they find other ways to get involved. For example, one of our pilots told me he couldn't fly a mission because he had a business meeting that he'd been trying to book for six months. I told him, 'In 10 years, you won't be able to tell me what that

*meeting was. But if you do this flight, in 10 years, it will have changed your life.' Since then, he's not only flown hundreds of missions for us, he's also set up his own foundation and has raised over \$20 million to build homes and provide other support for combat-wounded veterans."*

Another early mission showed Fricke how VAC flights provide veterans with much more than transportation. An Army Special Forces veteran had lost his legs and gotten prosthetics at Walter Reed Hospital. He wanted to go to Minnesota to go fishing with his father, so VAC offered him a ride. With his new prosthetics, he was having difficulty getting up the steps into the King Air. He had to turn around and sit on the floor, with Fricke behind to make sure he didn't fall.

*"This is a Green Beret with over 20 years in service, who had done nine tours in Iraq. A top-of-the-spear kind of guy, and he's struggling to get into the airplane. A commercial airline could have provided special accommodations, and I wondered if we were doing the right thing. So, I asked him, 'How does this compare with a first-class seat on a commercial flight?' He broke down and a tear ran down his cheeks. He said, 'This is a billion times better because I know you guys love me. I'm not just a number or a piece of baggage.' Right then, I knew we were doing the right thing. These people would need transportation for the rest of their lives, and we were going to provide it."*

In Fricke's mind, there's no greater privilege than flying combat-wounded veterans. *"Our pilots volunteer out of a sense of patriotism and support for veterans who, in many cases, have lifelong challenges as a result of their willingness to go and serve on our behalf. We have the freedom to fly our airplanes because of what these people have done for us over the last 100 years. Our pilots have a chance to sign a thank-you note with their airplanes to our combat veterans."*





**MARK HANSON** FLYING FOR **PALS / SKYHOPE**

# Hooked on Volunteer Flying

The volunteer pilots of PALS/SkyHope provide free flights for medical patients from all walks of life and, as Director of Operations Karen Krolikowski likes to say, they fly to help heal “the mind, body, and soul” of their passengers.

Since its founding in 2010, PALS pilots have donated over 27,000 flights, across more than 6 million miles, transporting patients for medical diagnosis or treatment, transporting family members to support a wounded veteran, delivering service dogs for patients in need, and supporting relief efforts for natural and manmade disasters.

Mark Hanson has been flying for PALS almost since he learned to fly. Flying had always been on his bucket list, but he was busy with his career, driving change in a very large company. (He jokes that large organizations are “like battleships with

*very small rudders.*”) Then, in 2008, the recession hit, and his company was managing itself, so he decided it was time to fly. He started flight lessons in 2009, completed his private license in 60 days, got his instrument rating in 30 days more, his multi-engine in 30 more, and completed his commercial license in 5 more months. By the end of the year, he had 350 hours flight time and bought an airplane. The next thing Hanson needed was an excuse to go flying whenever he could. He was referred to a local Angel Flight organization, and from there to PALS.

Hanson has flown many missions with PALS: in their 10th anniversary annual report, he’s number 3 on their list of pilots with the most miles flown. Over the years, he’s also flown volunteer missions for Turtles Fly Too (an organization that helps rescue endangered species such as Kemp turtles that haven’t migrated south in the fall), Angel

*“Everyone you fly is thankful. You really do get more than you give. When you do one of these flights, it can be very moving, and once it hooks, you’re hooked.”*



*Mark Hanson and Piper*

Flight East, and Veterans Airlift Command. He also set up a bone marrow delivery organization, working with Angel Flight Soars, during the COVID pandemic when commercial airlines and medical transport services were largely shut down. He says over 90 percent of his flying these days is for non-profit organizations, and he flew 45 missions across all his organizations last year.



Hanson's most memorable missions for PALS have been for children. He received a "Heroes Among Us" **award from the Boston Celtics** for flying a little girl named Piper. Piper started flying with him when she was only 8 months old, and already on her 7th open-heart surgery. She's now 6 years old and he flies her on semi-annual visits to Boston Children's Hospital. He says, *"It's been great seeing her grow up and see her get the best possible care."*

Another child, Brooklyn, started flying with Hanson around age 10. Brooklyn had been in a fire and had severe burns, and Hanson has flown her a number of times. He says PALS flies a lot of child burn patients to Shriners' Hospital in the Northeast. Children need frequent visits for regrafting because skin grafts don't grow as the child grows. *"She's 15 now and has turned into a very articulate young lady. I received the 2022 Endeavor award from the Air Care Alliance and Angel Flight West. Brooklyn was the lead speaker and award presenter!"* (When asked, he admitted there wasn't a dry eye in the house after her speech.)

Hanson is as generous with his professional expertise as he is with flying. In addition to flying missions, Hanson was quickly asked to take a seat on the PALS board because the organization was new and trying to grow. He served on that board for 8 years and is currently on the board of the Air Care Alliance (ACA) and the board of Above the Clouds Kids, a non-profit in Norwood, Massachusetts, that offers flights and aviation-themed experiences for medically or





*About 30 million Americans, a number equal to the population of Texas, live in medical deserts, meaning that they're 200 or more miles away from the kinds of medical care they need. We've only scratched the tip of the iceberg in getting people to needed care, having provided about 34,000 free flights in 2022. At Air Care Alliance, we know the biggest problem is making people aware that free transportation is available from member organizations such as PALS/SkyHope. We have capacity to grow the number of people served. Air Care Alliance, in collaboration with the International Fellowship of Flying Rotarians, has launched a national program to engage Rotary Club members to spread the word about the availability of no-cost services from volunteer pilot organizations."*

financially disadvantaged kids. Hanson notes that public benefit organizations are extremely safety conscious. *"Most of what I do now is try to be an advocate, to be a pilot ambassador. Go out there and spread the word, let people know that there are free flights available, and recruit pilots if I can."*

Hanson is a passionate advocate for PALS/SkyHope and organizations like it. In his role as Vice President and Board Member at Air Care Alliance, an organization that represents over 60 volunteer pilot organizations, he helps explain the need for volunteer medical transport across the USA, *"About 30 million Americans, a number equal to the population of Texas, live in medical deserts,*

*meaning that they're 200 or more miles away from the kinds of medical care they need. We've only scratched the tip of the iceberg in getting people to needed care, having provided about 34,000 free flights in 2022. At Air Care Alliance, we know the biggest problem is making people aware that free transportation is available from member organizations such as PALS/SkyHope. We have capacity to grow the number of people served. Air Care Alliance, in collaboration with the International Fellowship of Flying Rotarians, has launched a national program to engage Rotary Club members to spread the word about the availability of no-cost services from volunteer pilot organizations."*

According to Hanson, there are many reasons to be a volunteer pilot. On the practical side, it gives him a reason to fly. *"Flying alone for general aviation is often extremely irrational. Volunteering helps both me and my family rationalize the irrational."*

It is important to make it as convenient as possible for people in need to request flights and for volunteer pilots to see who needs a flight. Volunteer organizations have continuously invested in technology to enable pilots to look at the compelling reasons behind each mission, including age and medical condition. Pilots can fulfill their passion to support specific needs. Hanson focuses on flying children with all types of medical conditions and flying veterans. He says, *"Once you fly those in need, you can never complain about anything ever again. They're enduring daunting life challenges and being troopers through it all."*

He offers what is becoming a common theme among volunteer pilots: *"Find your 'why.' Why did you invest all of this time and money to develop and sustain the skills to fly? It's not to go get \$100 hamburgers. Helping others in need can easily become the why for any GA pilot as it has for me."*

# Pilots N Paws Volunteer Takes Animal Rescue to New Heights

Jennifer Iiams is a pilot, a cat-lover, and in her spare time, she flies for Pilots N Paws. Iiams was born and raised in north Idaho. She flew occasionally growing up, and as she was becoming more interested in aviation in her late teens, a local college was starting an aviation composite program.

She had decided to enroll when the funding for the local program fell through. An older sister was living in Kentucky, so she decided to move there just to experience living in a new place. At the same time, her interest in aviation was growing. ***"I decided that either I was going to school to study aviation***

*or I needed a way to get my foot in the door of the industry."*

Iiams looked at some college programs but wasn't sure where to specialize, so she got a job with a contract airline as a ground employee. ***"The work was throwing bags and moving airplanes. But that was the first time I became immersed into aviation, and it lit up my world. I had flown a couple times a year growing up, but you only see the airplanes through the window. To be out on the tarmac, to actually walk up and put my hand on the fuselage was eye-opening."*** She worked her way up in a couple of contract aviation companies, then



Pilots N Paws® is a non-profit organization that connects volunteers involved in rescuing, sheltering, and adopting animals, with volunteer pilots and plane owners willing to assist with animal transportation. According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), many animals in shelters are at risk of euthanasia simply due to shelter overcrowding and a lack of resources, and situations such as natural disasters or economic hardships such as the Covid pandemic can worsen the situation by leaving more animals homeless. Pilots N Paws helps adoptable pets find homes by transporting the animals to areas where adoptable animals are in high demand. They provide an online environment in which volunteers can come together and coordinate rescue flights, overnight foster care or shelter, ground transportation, and other related activities needed to relocate animals safely.



landed a job for United Airlines in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and while there, she enrolled at Oklahoma State University. Concurrently, after being awarded an EAA scholarship liams was finally able to get her long-awaited pilot's license. She says, *"That scholarship, finally being able to fly, it completely changed my life in so many ways."* In 2022 she completed her bachelor's degree at OSU in aviation management and operations. She then relocated to Seattle, Washington with United, and in early 2022 she was hired by Boeing at their Everett, Washington, facility.

*"On one flight you might get a cute, cuddly dog that's perfectly happy and on another you might get one that's scared of flying and stressed. For me, that keeps it interesting. You're always testing your skills..."*

liams first learned of Pilots N Paws during her time in Tulsa. She knew people who were volunteering, but you needed your own airplane. Then she joined a flying club and found out that they allowed Pilots N Paws flights with their planes. *"I had my license and suddenly I was in a club where I could do these flights, and I thought, 'I want to do this!' As someone who*

*loves animals it was a no-brainer. Not only that, but I needed to get in a lot of cross-country hours for my instrument rating. I realized I could fly those cross-country hours looking at the landscape or I could become a volunteer, grab a buddy to be my safety pilot [for the instrument training], and fly a mission. All of a sudden, you're not only building hours toward your next rating, you're also doing a good deed."*

liams says that volunteering with Pilots N Paws is easy. All you need is a plane, yours or one you can use, and a pilot's license. You sign up on the website, and you can start flying animals. Pilots N Paws has some mission coordinators, but mostly volunteers connect and coordinate directly with other volunteers via the organization's website. Each pilot typically flies one leg of what is often a four-leg mission. People can also volunteer to provide ground transportation or be an overnight host for an animal in transit.

liams says no two missions are alike. *"Sometimes it's easy and sometimes it can be challenging. Different animals have different natures. On one flight you might get a cute, cuddly dog that's perfectly happy and on another you might get one that's scared of flying and stressed. For me, that keeps it interesting. You're always testing your skills and what you're comfortable with."*





One of liams' most memorable missions was helping transport nine kittens from Texas to Chicago. She signed up for the leg from Tulsa to Topeka, Kansas. She's a cat-lover, and most missions are for dogs, so this was a special one for her. *"These were very young kittens, and a vet had certified them healthy enough to fly. Unfortunately, one took a turn for the worse and died during its stay overnight in Tulsa. But we flew the eight kittens up to Topeka the next day, and at one point during the mission my co-pilot flew for a while, so I took one of the kittens and held it. My co-pilot took a photo that's one of my favorites to this day, with that tiny kitten perched in my hand and looking like it's the captain of the craft, just confident about everything."*

Like many volunteer pilots, she sees donating flights as a win-win. *"At the end of the day, you're flying a mission that's not for you, it's for these animals, for the other rescue volunteers, and for the future adopter. You're helping them while building your flying skills. And it's a service not only to the animal rescue community but to the aviation community because you have the chance to expose others to aviation. Just like Young Eagle flights, you can invite people to come on a mission with you."*

Best of all, liams says volunteering is fun: *"Working with the animals is fun. The people you meet are fun. People love you for being a pilot who would do this, and you feel so much better at the end of the day. It's just such a special opportunity."*

*"Working with the animals is fun. The people you meet are fun. People love you for being a pilot who would do this, and you feel so much better at the end of the day. It's just such a special opportunity."*



# Pilots Help Launch Next Generation into Aviation Careers



According to the FAA, there were an estimated 757,000 commercial and private pilot certificates in the U.S. held in 2022, and almost 500,000 people supporting aviation as navigators, mechanics, engineers, etc. These numbers have grown over the last decade, but as these people retire, where will future generations of pilots and other aviation professionals come from? Who will help transport passengers and cargo, fly rescue and relief missions, donate flights for good causes, or just share the joy of flying?

Well, inspiring and launching that next generation is the mission of STEM Flights, a national non-profit that aims to inspire America's youth to pursue STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and aviation careers through unique flight experiences.

Carly Walker is the Director of Development at [STEM Flights](https://www.stemflights.org). The organization was founded in 2018 by her dad, Brigadier General Dave Brubaker, a retired F-16 fighter pilot. After his retirement, he shared his love of flying by giving rides to family, friends, and anyone who expressed an interest. At the same time, he visited school classrooms, attended events, and participated in aviation associations to promote flying. It was then that he was also hearing from contacts in the Air Force about how difficult it was becoming



*"If we can get a young student and give them their first aviation experience, we can really inspire them to pursue this as a career. When you get a kid who's never flown before and get them up above their town, up above their problems, they see the world is bigger than they ever thought it could be. If they go into any STEM career as a result of that experience, then we've succeeded."*

to recruit new people as pilots and for other aviation-related jobs. When he heard that a friend's daughter was taking flying lessons after having flown with him, he decided it was time to set up a formal organization to inspire young people through flight.

Walker explains, *"I think that youth aviation education is an important element of public benefit flying because we are really focused on getting that next generation into aviation. And not only will these young people be entering industry, they will also be our next generation of Angel Flight pilots, our next disaster relief pilots, our next Pilots N Paws pilots. It's important for us to look down the line and see the next generation coming up. My dad's vision is that, if we can get a young student and give them their first aviation experience, we can really inspire them to pursue this as a career."*

Walker, a student pilot herself, says that pilots all over the country volunteer their time, planes, and resources to provide flight experiences for middle and high school students. *"Some of them are career pilots, some are general aviation, but all are*

*passionate about this mission."* To prepare them for flying with young people, STEM Flights pilots go through vetting, training, and background checks. Training includes how to take a student through the pre-flight check and how to discuss STEM topics with the kids. They receive a list of specific maneuvers they can do in the air with their passengers, and they are encouraged to share their own journey and how flying has changed and improved their lives.

Meanwhile, the STEM Flights internal team works with schools and specific educators to identify kids who have an interest and would benefit from a STEM flight. Typically, the educational contact will identify a handful of students, then the students can **apply online** for a flight, choosing from a variety of types of mission types such as general aviation, engineering, climate and weather, or recon. Once a student is selected for a mission, the pilot coordinates with the student's guardian. The students study the STEM subjects on the website before they go on the flight. Walker says, *"The pilots are giving their time, so we*





takes them through the pre-flight check. During the flight, they do some aerial maneuvers, and Walker says that most pilots give the student a little stick time. After they land back at the airport, they do a flight debrief and the student gets some pictures from the day and a certificate of completion.

After the initial flight, students can participate in STEM Flight Following™, a program to guide them to STEM careers, with enrichment opportunities such as study, career resources, and scholarship information. Many of the STEM Flight Following

information and opportunities are provided through partnership with other organizations, including AOPA and NASA.

STEM Flights is already seeing results. One student who flew with General Brubaker early on is now flying C-130s in the Air National Guard, and some other past STEM Flights students are now commercial pilots. One pilot assisted a STEM Flights student to get an internship at a local airport. Walker says the volunteer pilots also hear feedback from student's families. One Michigan

pilot heard back from a parent of a student who flew with him last summer.

*"Before he went to the flight experience, my son was struggling in school. He was a typical grumpy teenager. Then, overnight, his attitude changed. He started studying, he was motivated. He said, 'I'm going to be a pilot!' He's like a different kid." Walker says, "We impacted this kid in a really positive way. And I know that in the next 5 years, we will have some pretty amazing stories. Aviation isn't taught in schools as a career opportunity, so we need to highlight all the roles that are in this industry, for both boys and girls. As [Laura Sabino](#), the author of *Jet Boss*, said, 'If I can take up that 6th-grade girl, I can change her mind [about an aviation career].'"*

STEM Flights is always looking for volunteer pilots, and most any pilot with a VFR license and a plane can do it. Pilots are asked to donate 4 flights a year, and many pilots fly more. Flights are all in the daytime, and pilots only take students up if weather is sunny and beautiful. Walker says, *"If you're flying on a Saturday and you need a mission, there's no greater mission than inspiring a student in your own community. When you get a kid who's never flown before and get them up above their town, up above their problems, they see the world is bigger than they ever thought it could be. If they go into any STEM career as a result of that experience, then we've succeeded."*



# Pilots Provide View from the Air to Help Life on the Ground

You've seen them on the news: environmental reports from the air, flying over a flood area, an oil spill, or other environmental disasters. What the news reports don't mention is that often those flights are provided by volunteer pilots who fly reporters, researchers, conservation organizers, and government officials in an effort to see and understand what's happening in our natural world.

That's the mission of [SouthWings](#), a volunteer pilot organization that provides partners with a unique perspective to better understand and solve pressing environmental issues in the Southeast U.S.

In many cases, the scope of environmental changes can only be fully comprehended from above. As SouthWings volunteer pilot Rankin Whittington points out, *"While drones are used in environmental monitoring, their reach is very limited. My airplane provides the observation and photography platform that is required for large, sometimes massive areas of environmental interest."* Meredith Dowling, executive director of SouthWings and an environmental scientist and public policy specialist, agrees that the aerial perspective is critical. That's why hundreds of partners rely on SouthWings, including conservation organizations, educational institutions, media organizations, and government and business decision-makers.

Dowling says that SouthWings volunteer pilots come from various backgrounds, including military service and commercial aviation. *"They just need a valid pilot's license, an aircraft—either rotor or fixed wing—and at least 750 hours PIC."* She says SouthWings pilots appreciate that there's no emergency with a SouthWings flight. *"The*



*landscape has to be visible, so it's all VFR flying. Low stage, low pressure."*

Most SouthWings flights are for researcher partners, such as Dr. Alex Kolker, a hydrogeomorphologist ("he literally studies Mississippi mud") and professor at Tulane University. SouthWings has provided flights for his research and for some of his graduate students. SouthWings has also flown journalists with every major national news organization and many international ones. Dowling says, *"We're not the experts, but we're the experts in who the experts are. So, we can help pair journalists and decision-makers with knowledgeable folks who can really speak to the issues. For example, we flew a group of bank executives who were thinking about funding a particularly controversial form of coal mining called*





*mountain-top removal. It's generally not visible from the ground, but any pilot who has flown over these sites can tell you about the devastation. So, we were able to be part of their education process."*

SouthWings pilots are a diverse bunch. Jon Engle, of Charleston, South Carolina, is a former Air Force fighter and reconnaissance pilot. After retirement, he became a SouthWings volunteer, flying his World War II-era observation airplane. He says, *"What I enjoy is the meaningfulness of each flight. One of my first missions involved flying a research scientist along the beach front where a restoration project had built a 'groin' (a series of rocks similar to a jetty) to reduce beach erosion. We flew over the site each*

*month to photograph it with a digital camera that recorded precise GPS information, taking hundreds of images from different angles and altitudes. Concurrently, a research vessel recorded underwater radar imagery offshore. All the data was loaded into a special computer program by graduate students from the College of Charleston to create a 3-D image that could be manipulated and measured, and which showed the effects of the 'groin' along the beach, both above the waterline and underwater. It was a fascinating combination of photography, oceanography, geology, and advanced computer science, and my little 1942 airplane and I got to be a major part of it."*

*"Among volunteer pilot organizations, we're unique in our focus on the environment and the natural world. If you're passionate about protecting land and water for your children and grandchildren, this is a way to do it."*

Volunteer pilot Les Abend, of Flagler Beach, Florida, is a retired American Airlines pilot. He and his Piper Arrow are fairly new to SouthWings, but one of his favorite missions so far was flying a respected New Orleans chef over his Gulf food supply. *"After dining at his restaurant, my wife and I gained a greater appreciation of the delicate balance between a healthy seafood meal and the effects of environmental intrusion."*

Rankin Whittington, a lifelong pilot, thinks that growing up on a farm in Virginia and attending a Quaker college sensitized him to environmental issues. When he retired from a career in social services, he and his planes (a restored 1978 Cessna 182Q and a 1999 Super Decathlon) went to work for SouthWings. One of his most memorable missions was flying over a mountaintop-removal strip mine near Beckley, West Virginia. His passengers were a reporter for National Public Radio, a photographer for Bloomberg News, and the head of Coal River Mountain Watch, an organization that promotes accountability for the companies operating



mountaintop removal mines. He was happy when his flight resulted in some excellent press coverage of the environmental issues involved.

Dowling says that many SouthWings pilots enjoy both the diversity of their missions and the diversity of people they get to work with, “people they would never have crossed paths with otherwise.” But most of all, they value the chance to make a difference for humanity and the planet. *“In the context of GA, it’s a way to give back while doing something you really love. Among volunteer pilot organizations, we’re unique in our focus on the environment and the natural world. If you’re passionate about protecting land and water for your children and grandchildren, this is a way to do it.”*





## ERIC HYMES FLYING FOR HOPE ON SHORT FINAL

# Bringing Quick Disaster Relief to Stricken Communities

When a natural disaster strikes a community, help can't come too soon, to fill the needs, large and small. There are big organizations such as FEMA, the National Guard, and the American Red Cross to help meet the big needs such as medical care and rebuilding.

The mission of pilots for Hope on Short Final is to meet the smaller yet vitally important needs of disaster victims, bringing relief supplies as soon as small planes can land on an airstrip.

Eric Hymes, volunteer pilot and one of the founders of Hope on Short Final (HoSF) describes himself as *"a 23-year veteran of corporate America in the medical device industry and a serial entrepreneur."* He likes to joke that he's a second-generation pilot:

his son got him into flying. Hymes started taking his son to airshows when he was 5 years old, because they both loved to "nerd out" over aviation. His son went on to become a pilot, attending the aviation program at Middle Tennessee State University. In 2019, he came home with his private pilot's license and said, "Dad, you need to do this!"

Before long, Hymes was out doing a discovery flight in a Diamond DA40 at his local airport in North Georgia, and the rest was history. He got his pilot's license in September 2021. He loved flying, but then, *"I ran out of places to go for a \$100 hamburger. I was trying to decide what was next, and I started looking around on social media."* He ran across a call for pilots to fly aid into central Kentucky in the aftermath of an EF-4 tornado, the ninth longest ever recorded. There were photos of the destruction, and Hymes says, *"I'd never seen anything like it. It was devastating, and I felt the calling to help. So, talking with my pilot nerd friends, I wondered whether we could do a fundraiser and fly supplies in there."* The group set up a GoFundMe page to raise money



for relief supplies and raised \$8,000 in a couple of weeks. Next, he put out a call for pilots to deliver the supplies to Kentucky and was overwhelmed with offers from pilots wanting to donate flights.

With pilots and money for supplies, the next challenge was how to get the supplies delivered on the ground. Hymes looked up contact information for the manager of Madisonville Regional Airport, in the heart of the tornado-devastated area. Emily Herron, the manager, jumped into action, getting volunteers out to clear debris from the runway and helping to coordinate distribution of the relief supplies to local police, fire, and other municipal services for delivery to families in need. A third-generation pilot—she flies a plane that her grandfather purchased in 1949—she became

*There's no lack of opportunity [to help] and it's so much more meaningful than showing up to the airport to practice maneuvers. There's nothing like flying for a purpose."*

an advocate for her community, helping Hymes' group to understand that needs after a disaster are ongoing. So, Hymes and friends took up the cause. **Hope on Short Final** registered as a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation in March 2022, and Herron is now a member of its volunteer board.

*"We learned there cannot be too much of a response to a weather event. There are multiple organizations involved in disaster relief, and all are needed. Our mission is to provide emergency relief supplies to a community affected by natural weather disasters within hours, as soon as the runway is clear and weather permits. It's something our volunteer pilots are well-positioned to do. Our focus is on supplies for kids: diapers, wipes, warm*

*clothing such as kid's jackets, shelf-stable food, and anything else that's lightweight."*

Hymes says HoSF won't be short of pilots willing to pitch in. *"General aviation is one of the stranger experiences I've ever had. You hop in an aircraft, go to a new place, and your brothers and sisters are there to greet you. They want to help."* He strongly suggests that volunteers have instrument ratings. Despite the name, short take-off and landing skills aren't required: pilots won't be asked to land on grass strips or very short runways.

What's needed most right now are funds to buy relief supplies, so Hymes and fellow volunteers are working hard on the ground. Their goal for 2023 is to raise around \$100,000. Each mission costs about \$2,500 for relief supplies. Pilots donate their flights and time, and HoSF is staffed by volunteers, so almost all funds can go directly to relief. Hymes is tapping other pilots to engage in fundraising, and he's pounding the pavement (or tarmac) for grants and corporate sponsors. His team is even

planning to give a TED Talk later in 2023 about their experience and what's needed in the wake of a natural disaster. They are determined to be ready when the next disaster strikes: *"Our next relief mission is 100% on people taking action to support our organization."*

Hymes has high hopes for his fledgling organization, and he has advice for others who want to make a difference: *"If you want to help, you have to take a step. Even though it might seem a little uncomfortable, just go do it. There's no shortage of opportunity. You don't even have to be a pilot to engage; you could help with fundraising or coordination or transport on the ground."* But there's a special incentive for pilots: *"It's so much more meaningful than showing up to the airport to practice maneuvers. There's nothing like flying for a purpose."* And, he notes, his relief missions have had extra meaning: *"It was amazing for me to share a cockpit with my son, with someone who said at 5 years old he would be a pilot, and he is."*





**JIM HESSEMAN** FLYING FOR **WHITE FEATHER FLIGHTS, ACA, AND MANY MORE!**

# Pilot Shares the Satisfaction of Helping Others



## Interested in becoming a volunteer pilot?

Visit the Air Care Alliance website to learn about the opportunities available to you.

**[www.aircarealliance.org](http://www.aircarealliance.org)**

For many volunteer pilots, flying for compassion is an avocation. For a few, such as Jim Hesseman, promoting volunteer aviation has also become his mission. For the last twenty years, Hesseman has brought his piloting skills, his professional skills, and his compassion to the aid of hundreds of passengers and to multiple volunteer aviation organizations.

When he's not aloft flying medical patients or supplies, adoptable animals, or grieving families in memory of a loved one, he's working to promote volunteer piloting and to help connect pilots and the people who need them.

Hesseman took an aviation course when he was an undergraduate at Miami University in Ohio, and he got his pilot's license in 1972. He says getting a license was a lot cheaper then, but as a new college grad, flying was not in his budget. He got busy with a 30+ year career with furniture manufacturer Steelcase, and he didn't fly again for a number of

years. Finally, work brought him to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where Steelcase is headquartered, and he got back into flying, first with an equity position in a flying club that owned a Cessna 172, then a Grumman Tiger. Since 2012, he's had a 1979 Beech Bonanza. About twenty years ago, he began flying as a volunteer pilot. He says, *"At some point, you come to the realization that it's time to start giving back with the tools that you have, and for some of us, that's airplanes."*

When he first got back into flying, Hesseman wasn't aware of the option of "public benefit flying," the Air

Care Alliance (ACA) term for volunteer piloting. But he had a pilot friend who was paraplegic who ran an organization called **Dreams and Wings**, a non-profit that provides volunteer flights to inspire and empower kids with special needs and challenges. Hesseman and his wife supported the group's events in Grand Rapids and around Michigan for years. One year, there was a Dreams and Wings event, hosted at the University of Michigan Cancer Center in Ann Arbor, that gave flights for kids affected by cancer. A couple approached a pilot who had given a flight to their little girl the year before, which she had loved. During the year, they had lost their daughter to cancer, and they asked if the pilot would give them a ride to remember that happy day with her. Hesseman says, "At the end of the day, the pilot took them up, and during the flight, the mother pulled out a big white feather with the girl's name on it and asked if they could release it during the flight. Of course, the pilot said 'Sure.'" During the next year's Dreams and Wings event, 4 or 5 more families showed up asking if they could also have memorial flights. At that point, Hesseman and his friends recognized a need. The next year they organized a separate White Feather

Flights event, and 30 families showed up to decorate feathers, remember their loved ones, and release white feathers from the air. Hesseman was also on the board of a cancer and grief support group called **Gilda's Club** in Grand Rapids, so that group decided to organize a **White Feather Flights** event in Grand Rapids. A few years ago, they created the White Feather Flights website to help **[grief support organizations and pilots around the country coordinate flights for grieving families.](#)**

One of Hesseman's most memorable missions was at the first White Feather Flights event in Grand Rapids, held in the hangar of Steelcase's aviation division. *"The pilots were excited, as were the families who showed up to decorate their white feathers. Our mission statement is 'Celebrate a life with flight,' and this was a celebration. We had games and food and a lovely video about their family members who had passed. And there was a young boy there who had*



*lost his mother a few months earlier. I took him and his father up in my airplane. As we prepared to take off, the father looked at me and said he was a bit nervous. I asked him if he'd ever flown in a small plane before, and he said 'No, I've never flown!' I told him not to worry, that we'd have fun, and once we got up there, he just loved it. He and his son were enjoying the flight and having a memorable experience. Later, as we were closing up shop, I saw this boy sitting in the lobby of the facility. I asked how he was doing, and he looked up at me and said 'This has been the best day of my life.' So right then, I knew this was something that we needed to keep doing."*

*If you have the compassion to help people, then you should ask yourself 'What tools or skills do I have?' If you know that you want to help and you have access to an airplane, then it's a perfect combination. It's fun to help other people with an airplane."*



While setting up the White Feather Flights, Hesseman turned to Air Care Alliance for information on how to set up a volunteer pilots organization (VPO). ***“That was the first time I worked with the good people at ACA, and they were very helpful. So, I started to do more work with them.”*** He joined the board in 2015 and is currently serving ACA as its president, working to make more organizations in need aware that there are volunteer flights available to them, to bring VPO leadership together to share ideas and best practices, and to advocate for VPOs to regulators and industry leaders.

Hesseman has flown for a number of different volunteer pilot organizations over the years: including several medical transportation volunteer organizations and [Pilots N Paws](#). Since moving to the Phoenix area two years ago, he’s flown for [Flights for Life](#), a group that transports human blood products, and the [Navajo Christmas Airlift](#), and he’s beginning to fly for [Angel Flight West](#). He says, ***“They’re all different, and they’re all very rewarding in their own respect.”***

Asked what pilots need to get into public benefits flying, Hesseman says, ***“First, they need the compassion to help others. If you have the compassion, then you should ask yourself ‘What tools or skills do I have?’ If you want to help and you have access to an airplane, then it’s a perfect combination.***

***It’s fun doing things for other people with an airplane.”*** He says a lot of volunteers are older pilots who now have both the time and money available to donate flights. ***“Rather than just writing a check, a lot of pilots would rather go out and donate their time to help people doing something that they really love.”*** But he also wants to let new pilots know about the possibilities and rewards of public benefit flying. ***“The sooner younger pilots know, the more they can look ahead to helping others someday. Even if the demands of family, work, time, and money don’t allow it today, they can be thinking ahead to the time when they can fly more and start giving back. They’ll know when it’s the right time.”*** He adds, ***“It amazes me how many good people there are out there, men and women, pilots who are doing something every day to help people with their airplanes.”***



STEVE ZIMMERMANN AND BILL DIEDRICH FLYING FOR ANGEL FLIGHT WEST

# Angel Flight West Gives Pilots a Chance to Give Back

The mission of Angel Flight West (AFW), and its pilots is to deliver health and hope. The organization brings together pilots willing to donate flights with people who have healthcare or other compelling human needs.

According to Cheri Cimmarrusti, Associate Executive Director, Angel Flight West was started in 1983 by a group of pilots in Santa Monica who were “looking to replace the \$100 hamburger as a reason to fly.” (Not that there’s anything wrong with \$100 hamburgers.) She says chemotherapy treatment for cancer was becoming more common, and it wasn’t available everywhere. Patients often didn’t have the financial, physical, or emotional reserves to deal with repeated commercial flights, so the pilots began offering to fly patients to locations with

treatment centers. The group flew its first 15 missions in 1984. In 2022, Angel Flight West flew about 5,000 missions, and in 2023, they expect to hit a milestone of 100,000 missions flown.

The organization was started with an all-volunteer staff. Today, a full-time staff of 12 handles fund-raising, develops relationships with medical centers, and runs the website and call center through which patients and other people needing transport can connect with pilots, volunteer drivers (called Earth Angels), and others who can help get them where they need to go.

Cheri Cimmarrusti, Angel Flight West’s Associate Executive Director, emphasizes how critical volunteer pilots are to these patients’ lives: *“There are many passengers who literally would not be able to access the care that they need if it weren’t for Angel Flight.”* But she also says volunteer pilots provide more than transportation. *“For most people that fly, this is their*



*first chance to be in a small plane, and sometimes in an airplane, period. It can be a little daunting, but we actually get feedback from customers who find the experience spiritual in a way. It’s quiet. They’re above the clouds, they can enjoy the beauty. For moms of sick kids, their children may fall asleep, and there’s nothing pulling at them. They can relax and enjoy the beauty. It’s a moment of peace.”*



## VOLUNTEER SAYS AFW MISSIONS ARE A CHANCE TO GIVE BACK

Unlike most of his passengers, AFW volunteer pilot Steve Zimmermann was “raised in planes.” His dad was a college engineering professor, and his mom was a classical cellist but flying was their passion. The family lived in a house trailer west of Boston, and they didn’t own a car, but they owned a Piper Cub. When Steve was a baby, his dad rigged up a sling for him in the back of the Cub. He started taking the control at age 7, soloed at 16, and actually got his first commercial and CFI ratings in gliders



before getting his commercial and instrument ratings in airplanes. Zimmermann owned a glider flight school in Boulder, Colorado, for years before going back to grad school. After grad school, he spent his career as a systems and software engineer in the medical device industry, always owning a plane and flying while working and raising a family. When he retired, he bought his first planes with more than 2 seats, first a Bonanza A36, then a twin-engine Diamond DA62.

Zimmermann has been flying for AFW for about 6 years. He knew of the organization, and it turned out that the pilot who sold him his current hangar was an AFW command pilot. He suggested that Zimmermann consider signing up with AFW, now that he had a large enough plane, and he did. Zimmermann flies out of Erie Municipal Airport, west of Denver, so he flies a lot of patients to Children’s Hospital in Denver, and he says he was surprised at first by how vital his passengers were. *“These kids have been dealt a tough hand. But they’re invariably upbeat, and they love flying in the little airplane. They can’t imagine how different it is flying in a small plane from Billings, Montana, to Denver versus driving until they do it.”*

Zimmermann also flies a lot of patients from Durango, on the west side of the state, to Denver,



and he does a lot of multi-leg flights that start in Montana or Wyoming and end in Denver. He has sometimes even flown to Billings and back in a day. He averages about a flight a month, as weather and his time permit. (In the early days of the Covid pandemic, he also flew supplies into small rural hospitals.) There are half a dozen patients he’s flown more than once, and one of his first passengers is still making the trip after 5 or 6 years. He gets to know some his passengers a bit, some not as much. *“Small planes are physically much easier for passengers to deal with than commercial airlines, and that’s a benefit I can provide. Beyond that, some*

*“Like all of us who fly for Angel Flight, I love to fly, and I love helping people. Volunteering lets me do both at the same time. Honestly, it’s a win-win.”*

*people want to talk. Some are just happy to be getting where they need to go without driving. It's all good."*

But there are missions that stand out in his memory: *"There was a 5-year-old who had started undergoing cancer treatment at age 2 or 3. He survived the cancer, and then decided he wanted to pursue a medical career. I had the chance to fly him to Mont Vista, in southern Colorado, so he could spend a day shadowing a doctor in the small regional hospital there. You know, this five-year-old boy just lit up with the idea that he was going to fly in an airplane and spend a whole day in a hospital doing what his heroes do. That was pretty cool."*

Zimmermann heartily recommends Angel Flight to other pilots. "It's a chance to give back and it's a great thing to do with your airplane. Lots of airplanes don't get much use. It's good for the plane and the pilot to fly regularly, and this gives you a really great excuse to go flying." If you're interested in volunteering, Zimmermann says having your instrument rating will allow you to fly and complete

more missions. You need to have or have access to a plane with at least 4 seats, since a patient often needs to have a companion or medical caregiver with them. And in the Rockies, where he lives, "[mountain flying](#) experience is a must." He also recommends flying a few missions first as a mission assistant to another pilot, so you can learn the ropes.

Zimmermann says that Angel Flight missions can also be an opportunity to see new places. For example, on one 3-leg mission to southern California, his wife went along, and, after the AFW drop-off, they enjoyed a California vacation. But the bottom line for him is the chance to give back. *"Like all of us who fly for Angel Flight, I love to fly, and I love helping people. Volunteering lets me do both at the same time. Sometimes it's hard to watch what the kids I fly are going through, but at least I feel like I can do some good for them. And the patients themselves are so upbeat and so grateful for the help that it's really rewarding. Honestly, it's a win-win."*

## AFW VOLUNTEER PILOT TREASURES THE HUMAN CONNECTION

Bill Diedrich is one of AFW's flying angels. He got his student pilot's license in 1980 and flew with that for 30 years as the demands of his family and his farm in the San Joaquin Valley took him in other directions. In 2017, he finally got back into pilot training, earned his pilot certification in June 2018, then bought a plane and earned his instrument certificate. He wanted a way to serve people while gaining experience and time in his plane, and AFW seemed the perfect solution.

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic shut down AFW missions for much of 2020, but Diedrich has made up for lost time, flying 101 missions in 2021/2022. He continues to average a flight per week, and he says, *"It's all that I was looking for. I've met some amazing people, I've improved my proficiency as a pilot, and I've gotten to help people. If I'm flying someone south, I look for an opportunity to fly someone else north. Or I'll wait and fly the*







*passenger home. If I have an internet connection at the airport, I can work while I'm waiting."*

Diedrich says most GA pilots have what it takes to do AFW flights. You need your own plane or access to a plane. Flights are into regular GA airports, so back country flying skills aren't needed. The pilot doesn't need special medical training because medical patients must be ambulatory and they need a medical release from their physician, saying that they are medically stable and able to fly in an unpressurized airplane. There's no requirement to have an instrument rating, but Diedrich says that having it allows the pilot to complete more missions without interruption. He also notes that passengers sign a waiver of liability to fly with an Angel Flight pilot.

Diedrich says that every mission starts with his calendar. *"My wife is incredibly supportive of me doing this. She gives up some of her time with me, so I check with her first. I also give a lot of time working with water policy in California, so I schedule missions around that, too."* Missions are posted with about a week's notice, so pilots can find flights that fit their schedules. Diedrich uses the AFW app, and looks for

flights that are interesting, people he's flown before, or flights to a new place. He says it's easy: *"A half dozen clicks, and you're signed up. You get a mission itinerary for the passenger, contact that person, and arrange the flight."* Diedrich flies out of Fresno, and about 90% of his missions are to Oakland/Palo Alto or to southern California—to City of Hope Cancer Center and San Gabriel Oncology Center—and occasionally to San Diego. Most missions are 400–500 miles, although he has flown as far as Klamath and Eugene, Oregon. If he's headed to north Idaho to visit relatives, he'll also check if there's a mission he can fly on the trip.

Diedrich treasures the human connection he finds through Angel Flight missions, the people he's met and helped. One of his most memorable flights: *"I was picking up in El Monte. I had had two passengers who were in clinical trials at the City of Hope, and I knew they would be at El Monte airport at the same time, so I was able to introduce them. To watch them embrace and chat about what they were going through was so amazing. All of us who suffer pain or distress in our lives, when you share that with another, it's a profound human bond. Both are doing well by the way. I'm flying one of them tomorrow."*

*"Angel Flight is everything I was looking for. I've met some amazing people, I've improved my proficiency as a pilot, and I've gotten to help people. The gratitude these passengers have is a blessing that I would not miss."*

*I won't be able to fly forever, but while I can, I'll do as much of this work as I can.*

For other pilots considering Angel Flight, Diedrich's number one piece of advice is to just sign up! *"You can fly one mission or as many as you're comfortable with. There is a sign-up process, but it's minimal. It's also a great idea to fly a mission or two with another AF pilot as their assistant, to learn the ropes and how it happens."*

Diedrich continues to value the flight experience he gets from Angel Flight missions. *"In the last year, I have 229 hours in my plane. Pilots know that's a lot of time and a lot of experience. That's special."* But what's most special for him is the people. *"The gratitude these passengers have is a blessing that I would not miss. I won't be able to fly forever, but while I can, I'll do as much of this work as I can. There are just a lot of real human moments that I wouldn't want to miss out on."*





# Flying as an Act of Faith

The pilots of Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) dedicate years of their lives to “bring help, hope, and healing to the ends of the earth.” Founded just after World War II, this non-denominational Christian humanitarian aid organization works to meet the physical, economic, and spiritual needs of people who are cut off from the outside world, “with little or no access to health care, education, supplies, and the hope of the gospel.”

Motivated by their love of Christ, MAF aviators commit themselves for years at a time, to raise

funding for their missions, to live—and sometimes raise their families—overseas, and to the rewards and risks of flying to help people in some of the most remote places on the planet.

Chad Irwin’s personal story illustrates what it means to be an MAF pilot. As a boy, he was passionate about aviation and about his Christian faith. By high school, he was planning to join the Air Force, but over the summer between his junior and senior year, he went on a mission trip to an orphanage in Belize. That experience made him question whether God had a higher purpose for him. *“I could have been the typical little boy who wants to fly airplanes, but I also had that passion for God and for people.”* He wondered whether he should give up his aviation dream, but six months later, his high school counselor told him about the aviation training program at Moody Bible Institute, whose FAA certified program trains pilots and aviation mechanics for missionary work in remote areas. (Students earn a commercial pilot license and a Bachelor of Science degree in mission aviation technology.)



Chad spent two years at Moody’s Chicago campus taking Bible classes, then spent three years in the aviation program. Because mission aviation often requires flying in remote parts of the world, pilots earn their commercial pilot certificate, instrument rating, plus high performance, tailwheel, and complex endorsements, and they get maintenance training that culminates in airframe and powerplant certification. While at Moody, he met and married his wife, Andy, who had been heavily involved in missions as well and wanted to become a missionary. Irwin graduated in 1997 and went to work as a flight



instructor at Moody for two years to pay off his school bills, then the couple joined MAF in 1999. After working with friends, family, churches, and other sponsors to get funding for their mission, the pair left the U.S. in 2000 to spend a year at language school in Costa Rica, then spent 15 years in Ecuador, raising a family and serving 5 tribal groups in the eastern jungle province of Pastaza. The family was based in the town of Shell, named after the Shell Oil company, which built a base there in the 1930s. MAF took over the town as a base of operations in 1949. The airstrip there is the jumping-off point for all of Ecuador's eastern jungle, and the MAF group in Shell operates into almost 200 jungle airstrips serving 2 provinces. For eight years, he served as MAF's Chief of

Operations in Ecuador, training other pilots with the team's Cessna 206 and, the last two years, with the base's new Kodiak, while continuing to fly and serve the Indigenous communities in that area.

Irwin says about a third of his missions were church-related: flying missionaries and supplies in and out of remote villages or transporting church-related groups and teachers. Another third were for community development projects, including clean water systems, community building projects, and satellite internet systems. The last third were strictly medical, transporting doctors, and supplies and running an air ambulance service on contract to the Ecuadoran Ministry of Health.

Irwin says his most memorable missions show the transformative power of MAF's work. In Ecuador, he served alongside several people translating the Bible into the Indigenous Shuar language, work that can take up to 20 years. There was a local Shuar man named Umberto who had been paralyzed in a tree-felling accident and became Christian after the medical flight that saved him. Irwin's team would pick up and bring the man to meet with the translators to help them, and Irwin will never forget his joy and

the celebration when they flew the first Bibles into a village. Another memorable mission was when his team was grounded by weather while transporting a group of Cuban doctors to the dedication ceremony for the Kodiak. They had to divert to Tihueno, a local Guarani community, and a lady from the local church gave of the little food she had to make them a simple meal. Then, she began to speak to the doctors about her faith. ***"She presented the gospel to them in a way that I never could have."***

Today, Irwin is Mission Aviation Fellowship's Director of Operations and Chief Pilot. He oversees all flight training at the organization's flight training headquarters in Nampa, Idaho. He says while some MAF pilots choose MAF as a second career after commercial aviation, back-country flying, or the armed services, most MAF pilots come out of degree programs, such as the one at Moody Bible Institute, which graduates about 50% of the world's missionary pilots. To be an MAF pilot, candidates need to be Christian, they need at least 400 hours of flight time with commercial and instrument ratings, at least 12 credit hours of college-level Bible study, and MAF prefers that they are also qualified AMP mechanics.

***"I don't believe there's any more fulfilling work that you can do with an airplane. We overcome physical, spiritual, even political barriers to reach these people."***



In addition to a passionate faith, he says, they should have *“a passion to reach isolated people, interest in living elsewhere in the world and flying to some of the most interesting airstrips you can imagine. . . on the side of a mountain, between trees in the jungle, on the side of a river.”* Pilots also need to be fit for physically demanding work such as loading hundreds of pounds of cargo in tropical heat.

Irwin emphasizes that flying for MAF is a career path. Each term of service is four years, and MAF asks people who join to consider signing up for at least two 4-year terms. For he and his family, the MAF path has been a blessing. He and his wife loved raising their family in Ecuador, and their kids still consider it home. The work has satisfied both his passions, to fly and to serve. He says, *“If you’re a believer and a pilot, I don’t believe there’s any more fulfilling work that you can do with an airplane. We overcome physical, spiritual, even political barriers to reach these people. You are intricately a part of the lives of the people that you’re serving. It is a privilege to bring help, hope, and healing for the isolated.”*



# Find Your “Why to Fly”

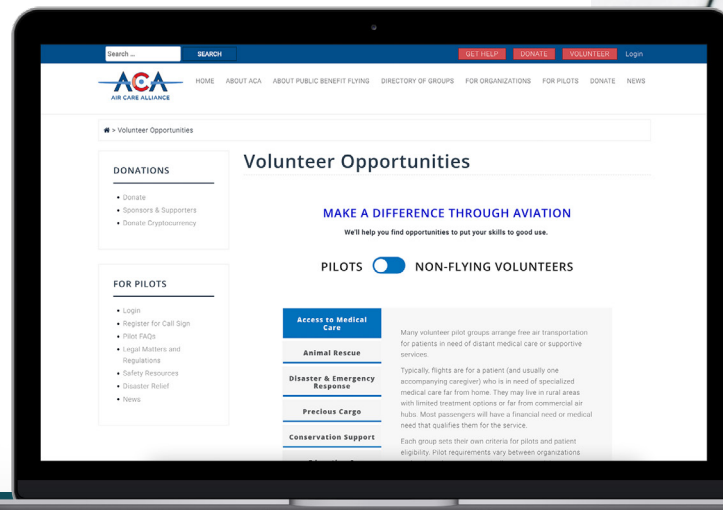
You wanted to fly for a reason, and volunteering gives you a reason to fly. What could be better?  
If you're interested in becoming a volunteer pilot, visit the Air Care Alliance (ACA) website.

Visit [aircarealliance.org](http://aircarealliance.org) to find:

- **A simple tool to connect you with the right volunteer pilot organization (VPOs)**
- **A directory of VPOs in the U.S.**
- **Answers to frequently asked questions about volunteer flying**

*“It’s fun to help other people  
with an airplane!”*

— Jim Hesseman, ACA President



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