

Flying Between Life and Death

– A Pilot’s Perspective

[Published in the *Atlantic Flyer* magazine, April 2009 edition]

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March 12, 2009

This year, EAA AirVenture 2009 in Oshkosh is being billed as a “salute to those who fly for life.” In a December 2008 press release, former EAA vice president Bob Warner says of this year’s spotlight, “There is an incredible story to tell of the hundreds of airplanes and thousands of dedicated people...who generously devote themselves to using their flying abilities to make the world a better place.” Warner continues, “This is a story that we want to share not only with the aviation community...but [with] the public that does not always understand the depth of aviation’s contribution to our world.” As president of a relief organization using airplanes to save lives among some of the world’s most remote and forgotten people, I couldn’t agree more!

Based in Haverhill, Massachusetts, Missionary Air Group (MAG) is a Christian relief organization that utilizes aircraft to bring “*help and hope by air*” to some of the most remote villages in Honduras, Central America. We also train pilots for other relief or missionary organizations that lack a “training department” with the experience or resources to train their own pilots for the rigors of this kind of flying. Over the last month, I have been speaking to audiences across the northeast, sharing a pilot’s perspective on how “ordinary” people are having a life-changing impact on the world by simply pitching in and sharing what they have – a trait the New England aviation community has displayed over and over again.

In places like Eastern Honduras, the absence of things we in North America take for granted – things like roads – make small GA airplanes a necessity rather than luxury. The Cessna 206s and the missionary pilots who fly them are literally the only thing standing – flying – between life and death in places like the “Moskitia” region of Honduras, so named for the indigenous Indian tribe that inhabits the area. The Moskitia is not alone. A 2008 Global Mapping International study on the present and future of missionary aviation (www.gmi.org/flightplan) estimates that one billion people “...will have no other access to basic necessities” [than by air] by the year 2030, and that “...among the poorest people, mobility is not expected to increase during that time”. This is a staggering number that carries with it not only the weight of responsibility but of urgency. MAG was formed in response to such need.



MAG President, Sean Donnelly, at Hampton Airfield (7B3) with one of the “volunteer” aircraft used for missionary pilot training. (John Ford photo)



Donnelly, over the jungle in eastern Honduras, on a training flight with full-time MAG pilot Westley Wiles. (John Ford photo)



The usual welcoming committee of children greet the C-206 in the coastal village of Bara Patuca. (John Ford photo)

This “call to action” requires airplanes and pilots specially suited to the task. The tool of choice is typically the Cessna 206 equipped with engine upgrades, STOL mod, long range tanks, cargo pod, and heavy duty landing gear. Logistical support is always a challenge as parts, not to mention 100LL AvGas, are difficult to secure in remote places devoid of any other significant GA presence. Tropical weather patterns are dynamic – even more so than in New England. The fields are typically 1200-1500 feet of grass or gravel, sometimes curved, sometimes sloped, sometimes wet, and always with animals ready to dart out of the brush. Regular airstrip evaluations and low passes before landing are a must. Added to all that is the stress of making go/no-go decisions with someone holding their dying child in your back seat.

Specialized training provides not only the skills required but the ability to deal with these stresses by building safety procedures and margins into every operation. MAG has been able to conduct such operations and has been providing such training (at little or no charge to students) due solely to the participation and generosity of volunteers and donors – many from the local aviation community. For example, our pilot in Honduras is from our church here in Haverhill, MA. He got his training in Lawrence (KLWM) in an airplane that a local aerial photography business lets us use at no charge. Several pilots have received their “bush” training because aircraft owners lent us their planes while others gave us use of their private airstrips in order to provide a variety of training challenges and scenarios. People have provided flight gear, donated computers and satellite phones so we can communicate with our pilots in the field. Still others have donated plane tickets so I could get to necessary meetings in other countries to set up the partnerships that make all these operations possible. My message to the GA community has been twofold: 1) Thank you for helping. Your help DOES matter. You ARE making a difference, and 2) Don’t stop now, there’s a lot more to do!

The international partnerships we have forged have now opened doors to extend our reach to Northern Guatemala and even to Southern Africa, both areas in critical need of medical care that can only be delivered by air. Current opportunities will require four Cessna 206 aircraft over the next 24 months and the funding to support them. Volunteer administrative and PR help and funding to expand our office operation is now needed.

Anyone up for long hours, hostile operating environments, and no pay? In fact, during one of my presentations, a gentleman asked me WHY we do all this. He pointed to the



Mother and child being returned home after receiving medical care. The 20 minute flight saved 3 days of travel by river and on foot. (John Ford photo)



A woman with pregnancy complications is airlifted to the missionary hospital in Ahuas, Honduras – saving both mother and child. (Sean Donnelly photo)



MAG Medical Director, Dr. Craig Oranmore-Brown prepares for a cross country flight during his pilot training with MAG in 2008. He is currently flying surgical teams to remote villages in Zambia, Africa. (Sean Donnelly photo)

term “missionary” and the obvious religious connotation. I explained that in the Moskito culture, everything revolves around personal relationships. You don’t have the right to tell them about the weather – let alone tell them about God – unless you earn that right by building a real relationship with them first. As a Christian organization we certainly believe that God cares about people, about their everyday needs, and about their kids. We also believe that using whatever gifts, skills, and resources we have to meet those needs is a tangible evidence of God’s care for them. The drop in the infant mortality rate in the Moskitia from over 80% to below 20% since the arrival of missionary aircraft and pilots who demonstrate compassion while asking nothing in return, is a tangible evidence of God’s care for them. That evidence provides the basis for hope. And, at the end of the day, the MOST valuable commodity anyone can deliver is HOPE!

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About the Author:

Rev. Sean Donnelly is rated as an Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) and Certified Flight Instructor (CFI, CFII, MEI) with over 3000 flight hours having instructed at flight schools in Lawrence, MA and Nashua, NH. Sean also serves as the Senior Pastor of Advent Christian Church in Haverhill, MA where he lives with his wife Deb and their two daughters.

For more information on how you can assist in bringing “Help and Hope by Air”, please contact:

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