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Man on a Mission

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Wildwood pilot flies storied plane to Tanzania

By CAROL ENRIGHT

At 8:07 on a chilly April morning, Wings of Hope pilot and Wildwood resident Don Hoerstkamp taxied down a Spirit of St. Louis Airport runway in a 1974 Cessna 206 to begin the first leg of a 75-hour flight spanning 10,000 miles – including one 2,200-mile, 17-hour stretch over the frigid North Atlantic. A month later he touched down on a rugged runway in Tanzania.

The trip was the culmination of months of preparation, which included equipping the plane with a 160-gallon ferry tank – strapped in right behind the pilot – to provide enough fuel for the plane to make the trans-Atlantic flight. (It is no surprise that talk of Charles Lindbergh and his historic flight filled the Wings of Hope hangar that morning.) If any of this made Hoerstkamp nervous, it certainly didn't show.

Hoerstkamp is an experienced aviator and a longtime volunteer for Wings of Hope. For years, he has flown in the U.S. for the Chesterfield-based aviation charity – transporting sick and disabled patients to centers of advanced medical care – using the nonprofit's twin-engine, specially outfitted air ambulances. But this was easy work compared to what he faced in April when he was headed on a risky flight to deliver the 158th Wings of Hope airplane to its humanitarian operation in Tanzania, the east African country that is home to the Maasai, a poor, tribal people that Wings of Hope has been helping for more than 20 years.

Surprisingly, Hoerstkamp said he did not find it difficult to stay awake, even during the 17-hour trip from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Santa Maria, Azores, Portugal. He tried using an over-the-ear device designed to alert him when his head dropped.

"But every time, I looked down at a navigation device or fuel selector, it would go off, so I stopped wearing it," he said.

Before he left Chesterfield, Hoerstkamp asked why, at 67, he would volunteer for such a dangerous journey, he simply said: "It needs to get done, and I think I can get it done."

Wings of Hope provides desperately needed medical care to 30,000 Maasai each year, primarily via flying medical clinics. And the base had been without a plane for nearly four months. Hoerstkamp knew that every day the base remained without a plane, people would die.

Plane with a past

Every pilot knows the Cessna 206 is a workhorse. Nowhere is this reputation for toughness more on the line than when a 206 is flying humanitarian missions for Wings of Hope.

This particular 206 came to Wings of Hope as a donation from the Rotary Club in 1993 when it was nearly 20 years old.



Shortly thereafter, it was sent to Guatemala. "Our primary mission was to help people get reestablished in their villages after the civil war," said Daniel Creech, who was the first field director for Wings of Hope in Guatemala.

Wings of Hope also used the plane in Belize. It was on a return flight from San Pedro, Belize, on March 9, 1998, that the 206 faced an emergency. While over the water, one of its three propeller blades broke off.

"To say there was extreme vibration doesn't do it justice," Creech said. "It was literally tearing the engine right out of the mounts."

Creech shut off the engine and made an emergency landing about 30 miles off the coast of Ambergris Caye, the largest island in Belize. Fortunately, some local fishermen saw him splash down and, within 10 minutes, pulled Creech out of the shallow waters.

Wings of Hope flew a crew down to Belize. With help from local villagers, they were able to retrieve the plane from the bottom of the Caribbean.

"In Belize, we were always there for the community," Creech said. "So if Wings of Hope needed anything, the community was there for us."

The plane was shipped to St. Louis, where it was refurbished and returned to Guatemala. A couple of years later, it was transferred to another Wings of Hope base in the South American country of Guyana. By 2008, the 206 was back in St. Louis, where it was used in the U.S.-based Medical Relief and Air Transport Program transporting disabled and chronically ill patients to specialized medical care.

Then, the plane's engine was transferred to another plane heading to South America. So the 206 took a vacation from the field until 2013 when refurbishing work began for Hoerstkamp's journey to Africa.

Man on a mission

On May 22, more than a month after he took off from Chesterfield and after many stops and starts due to weather, engine trou-

nation that shares a border with Somalia) illustrates.

"I had to wait on the ramp in stifling heat for nearly an hour for the fuelers to show up. Then, the fuel had to be bought in increments of 200 liters, because it had to be purchased by the barrel; take one liter out of a barrel and you had to pay for the whole thing. The cost per barrel was about \$1,100. We bought two barrels. The fuel was then hand-pumped, taking 15-20 minutes per barrel to transfer."

Even though Hoerstkamp was only in the air for a little over three days total, the flight that began on April 16 took over five weeks as a result of a series of starts and stops due to weather, engine troubles, and delays with paperwork and permits.

Hoerstkamp had to reroute his flight more than once to comply with air traffic control restrictions and to avoid hostile airspace (e.g., he couldn't fly over Libya). But he said the most demanding aspect of the journey was flying without autopilot.

"Because there was no autopilot, the aircraft required constant inputs to maintain heading and altitude," he said. "Also, because of language differences – although they spoke English – it was often difficult to understand what the (air traffic) controllers were saying."

He said the best part of the flight was his layover in Malta, a beautiful country in the Mediterranean Sea, and the worst was the night he spent in Djibouti.

"Djibouti is not for the timid," he said.

Hoerstkamp said everyone he encountered on the trip received him with open arms.

"Virtually without exception, everyone, regardless of the country, was friendly and helpful," he said. "Here's just one example: While waiting on the ramp in Djibouti, a Danish flight crew came over and gave me several packages of Danish biscuits for the trip to Nairobi."

Of course, the biggest reception he received was when he touched down in Tanzania.

A seasoned flight instructor, Hoerstkamp planned to remain at the base in Tanzania for a few weeks teaching the local pilots how to better land on short, rugged bush-country airstrips.

It's a dedication Clements sees in all Wings of Hope pilots. Like Hoerstkamp, these volunteers must be not only adept at navigating the unpredictable nature of aviation in remote areas, they must be "jacks of all trades" to support the charity's work providing health care, education and sustainable food and water to the world's poor.

"They're not pilots," said Clements. "They're humanitarians who happen to be pilots, who happen to be good mechanics, who happen to know how to raise chickens and fish and pigs, who happen to know how to grow crops, who happen to know how to find fresh water by drilling a hole or collecting it from the sky. They also happen to know how to be extremely kind to the people they help."

bles, and delays with paperwork and permits, Hoerstkamp touched down in the northern Tanzanian city of Arusha.

"Everyone was happy to see the airplane – and me, because I brought it," he joked.

To say the locals were joyous at his arrival is an understatement.

"The mission receives an average of one emergency call every two days. Without this aircraft, it is nearly certain that unnecessary deaths occurred," Hoerstkamp said. "During that same time, the mission also would have delivered about 20,000 vaccinations, as well as prenatal and curative care."

In Tanzania, the plane will fly weekly medical clinics and emergency medical evacuations. It will also be used to deliver humanitarian assistance to the tribal people on an ongoing basis.

But nothing is easy in the remote regions served by Wings of Hope.

In fact, Wings of Hope President Doug Clements sums up fieldwork with this phrase: "The easy things are very difficult, and the difficult things are virtually impossible."

For Hoerstkamp, just getting to Tanzania bore witness to that phrase as his experience refueling in Djibouti (the tiny East African