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From the cockpit I can see the sun setting as the plane starts descending into Dangriga, a small town on the coast of Belize. I am responding to a call about a boat that capsized with a young mother and her infant son onboard. Reportedly, the infant was under water for 20 minutes.

The biggest goal is to get the patient onboard and airborne before dark. I can go to the lighted international airport outside of Belize City after dark, but I would prefer to go to the smaller, unlit airstrip located inside Belize City. This would make the trip from the airport to the hospital for the young boy and his mother five minutes instead of 25.

I start my landing sequence with all of this in my mind. Before the flare, I tell the flight medic that if we can get airborne in 10 minutes, we can make the unlit airstrip inside Belize City before dark. Luckily, the ambulance with the baby is at the Dangriga airstrip and, as the flight medic assesses the baby, I start to help the mother onboard. She is maybe 17 years old with damp clothes and a dazed look. I can only imagine that the fresh memory of being thrown from a boat into the Caribbean Sea is overtaking her thought process. She mentions to me that this is the first time that she has ever been in an airplane. Usually, I take a few minutes to ensure first-time flyers that there is nothing to worry about – but I don't have time for that this evening. I quickly usher her to the copilot's seat and strap her in. Looking over, I see that the baby is secure in his plastic carrier and the medic is taking her seat as well. We're set to take off.

As I am performing my pre-start checklist, the medic tells me that the baby is responding to our care. The mother looks up at me and asks: "He's getting better?"

For the first time in my life, I freeze before starting up the engine. I have had many flights like this before, where every minute means the difference between life and death. I am very accustomed to performing my checklist safely and quickly, but never in my life have I heard a question asked with so much care and hope.

I have done hundreds of flights with patients who are minutes from death

– and never froze. I've disassembled and reassembled an aircraft engine, installed it on an airplane and flown it without hesitation. In high school, with my basketball team down by one point – and me on the free throw line with seconds left to play – I didn't freeze. But with the sun setting quickly and the engine start checklist waiting, the care and love that this young teenager had for her son froze me. After I don't know how long, I mumble something along the lines of 'yeah, he's getting better', while restarting my checklist. The engine fires up, and we take off toward Belize City. A few days later, I step into the children's ward of the hospital in Belize City to check on the two patients. The mother has already been cleared, and I find her diligently adjusting the clothes of her baby in a hospital bed. She excitedly tells me that her son was removed from the breathing machine today and is expected to make a full recovery. This time, her voice is not only filled with the same care and hope that stunned me a few days before, but it has another element: pure, unfiltered joy. If I was frozen before, the joy on her face literally melts my heart. ▲

AUTHOR TJ STEWART



TJ Stewart is the field director for Wings of Hope in Nicaragua. He spends his days flying medical evacuation flights for people who need emergency medical care. Many would not survive if they had to make the several hours' drive over bumpy terrain or equally long boat ride down the Rio Coco River.