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15 Years Flying U.S. Medical Missions

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Wings of Hope: 15 Years Flying U.S. Medical Missions

By Carol Enright

The aviation charity has flown hundreds of patients to lifesaving medical care since launching its U.S.-based medical air transport program in 2003.

On May 25, 1965, Wings of Hope sent its first plane into the field. It was an auspicious occasion at Lambert Airport, attended by a cadre of religious and civic leaders, and culminating in the Cessna 206 taking off en route to its destination as a humanitarian plane in Kenya.

Over the next five decades, the aviation nonprofit based at Spirit of St. Louis Airport in Chesterfield would send upwards of 175 planes to serve poor communities in places like Tanzania, Belize and Nicaragua. But it wouldn't be until Aug. 8, 2003, that a Wings of Hope plane would fly a medical air transport mission in the United States.

This year marks the 15th anniversary of that very first U.S. flight — and the launch of the Wings of Hope Medical Relief & Air Transport, or MAT, Program.

Did you know?
The first airplane Wings of Hope sent overseas was delivered to a nun flying humanitarian missions in Kenya. The organization considers Sister Michael Therese Ryan the original Flying Nun.

Destined for Ecuador

"The very first MAT flight was almost by accident in terms of its timing," Larry Lemke, one of two Wings of Hope pilots on that first U.S. flight, recalls. "We heard about a young man in the Lake of the Ozarks who had been run over by a boat and taken to a local hospital in Columbia (Mo.). His original healing was a real problem, and he needed to come to St. Louis. He could not be transported, except by airplane, so we flew over there and picked him up."

Lemke and fellow pilot, Jay Rickmeyer, flew the young man in a Cessna 206 that happened to be available. But that wasn't what the organization had intended for the newly rebuilt plane.

"It was scheduled to go to Ecuador," Rickmeyer remembers, "but before any plane leaves, we fly it around for 20 hours to make sure everything's fine. We were just finishing up that flight test when we got a call from the hospital in Columbia, Missouri."

The hospital specified that the young man had to be transported on a stretcher. The 206 had been outfitted to hold a stretcher as a medical air transport plane, so it was perfect for the job. It was also an ideal plane for training pilots before

Jay Rickmeyer and Larry Lemke in front of the Cessna 206 they used to make the very first Wings of Hope MAT flight.

Elizabeth has made great progress since Wings of Hope started flying her to St. Louis Shriners Hospital.

Wings of Hope pilots prepare to fly these two home after their appointments with specialists in St. Louis.

sending them out to one of the organization's international field sites.

"We had a number of sites in the field, but we didn't have an airplane here to train a pilot who was going to Guatemala or wherever," Lemke, who was on the Wings of Hope Board at the time, explains.

The board had been discussing using the 206 as a training plane, when the emergency flight to Columbia made clear an even higher purpose.

"We said, 'My goodness, we've got an airplane that we could use for a medical air transport program,'" Lemke recalls.

Once word got out that there was a nonprofit in town flying medical air transport cases for free, the calls rolled in.

MAT Program Today

Today, the MAT Program is a far cry from the serendipitous conditions that precipitated that first flight. With four MAT planes, some 20 volunteer pilots, and a dedicated team of nurses and patient flight advocates, it is a well-oiled machine. In 2017, the organization flew over 200 individuals to specialized medical care at places like the Mayo Clinic, Shriners Hospitals in St. Louis and Chicago, St. Louis Children's Hospital, MD Anderson and Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

"The impact of what we do with the medical air transport program on the community we serve is just unbelievable," Lemke says. "We carry some of the kids multiple times — and by multiple times, I really mean multiple times."

Children born with clubfoot, for example, can require a dozen or more visits to specialists for castings and, in some cases, surgery.

"Once we take someone on their first Wings of Hope flight, we consider them part of our Wings

Hope Is Where The Heart Is Gala
Wings of Hope's annual dinner and auction gala supporting the U.S.-based MAT Program.
Saturday, Feb. 10, 5:30-9 p.m.
The Chase Park Plaza
212 N. Kingshighway, St. Louis
For more information and tickets, visit wingsofhope.ngo/gala or call 636-537-1302.

of Hope family," Wings of Hope President and CEO Bret Heinrich says. "From that point on, we make a commitment to flying them to care until they no longer need our assistance."

"The parents and the families of these kids are so gratified about what we do — and the fact that it is free," adds Lemke.

Rickmeyer tells the story of a little girl born with severe clubfoot. When Wings of Hope started flying her, she was "scooting along on her belly, because she couldn't walk."

"The last time we took her, she was running around the hangar. She loved to see the airplanes. And we had to say, 'Time to go, come on, climb in!' — and off she went with us. Those are the memorable ones."

Both Lemke and Rickmeyer talk about the rewards of volunteering.

"I think the good Lord called me to do what I can in terms of service for others, and this is a way to give back," Lemke says.

"You really get the feeling that life is good, and we have made a little bit of improvement for somebody else," Rickmeyer says.