

Chapter 9: The Quiet Blessings of Aviation

*The air up there in the clouds is very pure and fine,
bracing and delicious. And why shouldn't it be? --
it is the same the angels breathe.*

— Mark Twain, '[Roughing It](#),' Chapter XXII, 1886.

The call arrived on a Tuesday evening while I was finishing up supper. It was from the Miracle Flights for Children headquarters outside of Las Vegas, Nevada. An 18 month old baby with brain cancer and her mother required air transport from her home in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to Roswell Cancer Institute in Buffalo. The Miracle Flight dispatcher asked if I would be available to pick mother and daughter up within 48 hours, bring them to Buffalo, then return them home about three days later.

My involvement as a volunteer pilot with Miracle Flights had begun several years earlier when my firm was engaged by them to secure grants. Like many of our clients, I developed a personal interest in their mission and offered my airplane and piloting services to transport sick children to and from their homes to treatment facilities around the nation. I also signed on to speak on their behalf before various organizations as my time permitted.

Miracle Flights for Kids was founded in the early 1980's by Ann McGee. She formed a network of several hundred volunteer pilots who, together, have transported over hundreds of sick children to medical facilities throughout the United States. They also coordinate free flights for kids on corporate flights and commercial airlines.

It was a cold, moonless night in February. I checked the weather for the one hour and twenty minute flight to Harrisburg. It looked like it was going to be a fairly smooth ride. My wife, Jo, suggested that I bring several blankets along because of Two Zero Yankee's limited cabin heat.

I had a particularly good feeling about this flight. There would be no business development, no profits, nor any other tangible benefit other than the feeling of doing something worthwhile for a very little person in need. I took an extra couple of minutes with the preflight just to ensure everything was right before beginning this flight.

Aboard and the engine running, I called for my departure taxi clearance.

Buffalo Clearance, Centurian Four Seven Two Zero Yankee, IFR Harrisburg, ready to copy.

Lifeguard Four Seven Two Zero Yankee, you are cleared to Harrisburg, fly runway heading, radar vectors as filed, climb six thousand feet, expect ten thousand in one zero minutes, squawk four three one one.

I read back the clearance and called Ground Control for permission to taxi. Following engine runup, I called the tower for clearance to depart.

Lifting through the dark skies and wispy layers of clouds, I began to think about my waiting passengers. A baby with brain cancer. What a lousy break, I thought. I wondered about her prognosis. Would this flight make any real difference in her outcome? Oh well, my job was to fly, not wonder. But still, I wondered.

It was a particularly quiet night on the radio. I did not hear any other transmissions. The whirring sound of the engine and the wind passing by the fuselage were the only perceptible sounds. I inserted a music disc in the CD player.

Before long, I could see the twinkling lights of the City of Pittsburgh 10,000 feet below, ahead and to my right from about 100 miles out. The high stratus clouds I encountered over Buffalo had vanished exposing the galaxy of stars high above. An unforecast tailwind gave me a ground speed of nearly 220 knots. This would put me into Harrisburg 15 minutes early.

I picked up the meandering course of the Susquehanna River moving southward out of the hills of northwest Pennsylvania. The strobe lights on the cooling towers of the nuclear power plant at Three Mile Island came into view as I was cleared to begin the descent into the Harrisburg Airport. My thoughts again turned to the baby.

Harrisburg Tower, Lifeguard Four Seven Two Zero Yankee four thousand with Golf.

Lifeguard Four Seven Two Zero Yankee, you are cleared for landing, runway one eight.

I maneuvered for a straight in approach to runway one eight and looked up the radio frequency for the FBO (fixed base operator) serving the Harrisburg Airport. I gave those folks a call to alert them of my arrival. They quickly responded.

Two Zero Yankee, your passengers are waiting.

Roger, Harrisburg. Advise them that I'm five minutes out.

I taxied up to the FBO with a feeling of anxiety. I really wasn't sure what form the return mission would take. Would there be tubes or wires? Would medication be administered intravenously? I did not know what to expect.

As I exited the airplane, a ramp service agent greeted me and escorted me immediately into the small terminal. There I saw a man and a woman standing beside him holding a baby. The man smiled and extended his hand. The woman looked scared. She had tears in her eyes, staring at the baby she was carrying.

Hi, my name is Bob Miller," I said. "I'm with Miracle Flights. The woman didn't look up.

"Forgive my wife," said the man. "She has never flown before and she is worried about our daughter." The woman then looked up and said, "The only reason I'm doing this is for her!"

"Don't worry," I said. "Everything will be fine. I promise you." Her gaze turned to the

baby. My eyes followed hers. The baby was sleeping soundly in a heavy blanket wrap.

"Let's mount up," I suggested. I had Mom and the baby sit in the far rear seat. With the middle seat removed, this gave her plenty of room to stretch for the one and a half hour flight back up to Buffalo.

By now, a cold wind was blowing across the ramp. The aircraft cabin was still warm from the inbound trip. I took off my coat as I generally do when flying, and gave Harrisburg ground control a call.

Harrisburg Ground, Lifeguard Four Seven Two Zero Yankee, IFR, Buffalo, ready to copy.

Lifeguard Four Seven Two Zero Yankee is cleared to Buffalo, runway heading, vectors direct. Climb to four thousand, expect nine thousand in one zero minutes, squawk four, three, two, one.

Harrisburg Ground also issued my clearance to taxi. I did a careful runup at the end of the runway, then called the tower for the takeoff clearance.

Clearance received, I turned around one more time to be sure that mom and baby were secured in their seat and motioned that we would now begin the takeoff roll. Mom still looked apprehensive. I gave her my best reassuring smile; she smiled sheepishly in return. I guess this is what flight attendant are for, I thought to myself.

I wondered if Two Zero Yankee recognized the precious cargo it was carrying this evening as I advanced the throttle to a full thirty three inches of manifold pressure. The big three bladed propeller bit firmly into onrushing wind. A quick rearward glance confirmed what I suspected. Mom's eyes were tightly closed, either trying to block out her present circumstance or deep in prayer. She later confirmed that it was the latter. I don't think she opened her eyes again until she was safely on the ground again in Buffalo!

With this Miracle Flight mission complete, I went home and had one of the best night's sleep I had in a long time.

One of the most demanding lifeguard flights I ever had involved a 53 year old man needing to get to Pittsburgh for a lung transplant. Ed had waited nearly eighteen months for his turn on the lung transplant list. I was aware of his situation for about the last three of those months. The key here was to get Ed to Pittsburgh within a three hour window once suitable lungs became available.

The phone rang at 3:35am, three days before to Christmas. Jo answered the phone. The caller was Ed's wife. "Is Bob there? The lungs in. We've got to go now."

Jo reached over and shook me. "Bob, it's Ed's wife. His lungs are in!" Still groggy from a deep sleep, I jumped out of bed, threw on a shirt and pants, and called Prior Aviation to have Two Zero Yankee fueled and ready to go in 30 minutes. The clock was running. We would have two and a half hours remaining by the time we all could meet at the airport.

Joining us on this flight would be my good friend, Ken Condrell, also a pilot. Ken was Ed's next door neighbor and was the one who connected Ed and his wife with me.

What I hadn't expected on this night was a potential aircraft weight and balance problem.

Two Zero Yankee is an SUV (sport utility vehicle) among airplanes. They say it will carry anything you can fit in it. We put this reputation to the test on this night. Ed's wife confessed her weight to be 280 pounds. Ed was 250 pounds. Ken was 190 pounds, and I, at that time, was 220 pounds. With full fuel, that would put us 14 pounds over the maximum allowable gross takeoff weight. Ed was also wearing a portable oxygen bottle and mask that added another 20 pounds to his weight.

Fortunately, the ground crew had not begun fueling Two Zero Yankee. As luck would have it, there was enough remaining fuel from my last trip to make it safely to Pittsburgh's Allegheny County Airport. With four heavy people aboard and 70 gallons of fuel, Two Zero Yankee was still sitting very low in water. I could almost feel the landing gear creaking as we lumbered along to the active runway.

By now, a full hour passed since Ed's wife called my home. He had only two hours remaining before he had to be on the operating room table, and at least one of those would be required for the flight. Any air traffic delays would cut dangerously into the remaining time.

We lifted off at 4:30am. ATC gave us every break, including a direct routing clearance to Pittsburgh. Buffalo had low ceilings that evening with freezing temperatures down to the surface. This made icing a distinct possibility.

This was one of the very few times I felt a sense of real urgency to depart regardless of the weather conditions. If Ed missed his date with the transplant surgeon he might have to wait another 18 months for new lungs. The problem was, however, Ed didn't have another 18 months. His own lungs had deteriorated to the point where most of their useful function was gone. He had to get there.

On the other hand, however, I knew if I exercised poor judgement regarding the weather we could all face an untimely end. Lots of pilots and passengers have died trying to get someplace.

"Think, Bob," is what I kept repeating over and over in my head. We had to punch through about 3,000 feet of icy clouds to get clear air above. Normally, carrying only me this would be an easy task for Two Zero Yankee. Tonight, however, we were at maximum allowable takeoff weight. How would this effect climb performance? I had to think.

I turned around and looked at Ed and his wife. I could tell they were scared, not about the flight, but about the possibility of not making it in time. What I later learned is that lungs are among the most fragile of all transplantable organs. They have a very short life span outside of the body. Ed's promised lungs had been harvested from a young woman who was killed in a car wreck just hours earlier in Wisconsin. A transplant team carrying the lungs boarded a private jet that departed Madison, Wisconsin the same time we departed Buffalo. If things went as planned, both Ed and his new lungs would reach the operating table in Pittsburgh at the same time.

I gave departure control a call while waiting for my take off clearance and asked if they had any icing reports in the climb out. They indicated that a check hauling Baron had reported negative ice on his climb out moments earlier. He also reported broken tops at 2,300 feet.

That was all I needed to know. Negative ice, broken skies. Two Zero Yankee, fully loaded, could easily handle this. With Ed and his wife safely strapped in and Ken in the co-pilot's

seat, I asked, "Is everybody ready?" Ed was the first to display a thumbs up gesture with his hand.

Two Zero Yankee lifted off into the late night skies like an angle on a divine mission. We climbed into clear skies above the overcast and broken ceiling hovering over Buffalo. The firmament of stars shown brightly overhead almost as if they were confirming my decision to depart on this mission tonight.

I had a few minutes to finally relax as we climbed steadily to our cruise altitude. In the grand scheme of things, how many people really get a chance to make a life changing difference in somebody else's life, I wondered? All of my flying has either a business or personal purpose. Tonight, however, somebody's life depended upon this particular flight.

My thoughts were interrupted by a radio call from Cleveland Center telling me to contact Pittsburgh Approach.

Pitt Approach, Lifeguard Two Zero Yankee, level 9,000, Victor. Request no delays, please.

Lifeguard Two Zero Yankee, descend and maintain 6,000, report the airport when in sight.

Ten minutes later I caught a glimpse of the airport beacon.

Pitt Approach, Lifeguard Two Zero Yankee has the airport.

Roger, Two Zero Yankee, you are cleared for the visual, runway two eight.

The tone of the air traffic controller's voice was casual, as if he works dozens of lifeguard flights every day. But I could also sense an air of concern or compassion. I had every confidence that he would do whatever necessary to expedite our arrival.

I radioed the Allegheny County Airport FBO announcing that we would be on the ground in 10 minutes. They replied, advising that a taxi was waiting to transport Ed and his wife to the hospital.

The cab pulled up under our left wing as we taxied in to the terminal building. I gave the taxi driver nod, signaling to him that the rest was in his hands. I had gotten Ed to Pittsburgh with one hour left before he had to be in the operating room. Unfortunately, the cabbie's return glance did not inspire confidence. He appeared to be irritated for having been called out so early in the morning. How strange, I thought. Why would the hospital dispatch an ordinary taxi to pick up an urgent transplant patient from the airport?

As it turned out, my concerns were real. The cabbie did, in fact, lose his way to the hospital, consuming an extra precious 30 minutes finding his way! But Ed's guardian angel did not depart him. Ed arrived just in time to complete a very successful transplant.

The real joy of this mission came about one year later when Ed's extended family gathered at Christmas time to celebrate his restored health. My friend Ken and I were singled out and recognized for our role one year earlier in getting Ed to Pittsburgh in time for his new lungs.

Each Miracle Flight mission I performed presented different challenges. I recall one particular flight involving the transport of a 15 year cerebral palsy patient from Syracuse to JFK Airport in New York City. The mission plan called for me to pick up the wheelchair bound patient and his mother, along with their baggage and get them to New York in time for critical

medical treatment.

I invited Bob Felter, a close friend and pilot who resided in the Syracuse suburb community of Auburn to come along for the ride. I note only wanted to spend some time with Bob, I also welcomed having a second pilot aboard to help manage things as we entered New York's busy airspace.

The flight that day gave every appearance of being routine. The weather was warm, clear and sunny. I departed Buffalo at about 10am and flew direct to the Syracuse Airport where I was to meet my two passengers and my co-pilot, Bob. As I rolled up to Syracuse's general aviation terminal, I spotted several people standing together on the ramp. Beside them was a stack of luggage and equipment. I wondered if these were my passengers?

Exiting the aircraft, I introduced myself to the group and confirmed that they were, in fact, part of my passengers' party. They also confirmed that the nearby stack of luggage and equipment would be going along on the flight. Hmmm . . . I thought. There would be no way to get both the people and the luggage and equipment onboard Two Zero Yankee. Something or someone would have to remain behind.

It was evident that both mother and son would have to come along. I did not want to cancel out on my invitation to Bob to travel along to NYC, so we all focused our attention on the luggage and equipment. Here was where my several camping trips to Oshkosh helped out. I had learned how to pack Two Zero Yankee as tightly as my wife could pack a suitcase. We used every available inch of cabin and luggage compartment. As with most Cessna 210 hauling assignments, it was the weight of people and baggage that was the limiting factor. We could carry about 1,000 pounds of people and baggage. Instead, it was volume of space required to accommodate our payload.

We solved the space problem by agreeing to leave several non-essential suitcases behind for later UPS shipment. Still in all, we were packed very tightly . . . but well within the weight and balance requirements of the airplane.

I picked up my clearance and taxied to Syracuse's Runway 28 and was granted an immediate take off clearance by the tower controller. Given the delicate nature of my patient's condition and the urgency to get him to New York without delay, I had filed as a lifeguard flight. This would assure us expeditious handling by ATC along our route to New York. I was surprised, however, just how expeditious this was.

Flying into the New York City Class B airspace is always a convoluted affair. With five busy airports, LaGuardia, Westchester, JFK, Newark, and Teterboro, all located within about 30 miles of each other, one could recognize the demands of New York City's Terminal Radar Control (TRACON) facilities. Predetermined lanes of arriving and departing traffic forms a patchwork quilt that often necessitates last minute re-routes and ATC initiated amendments to previously approved flight plans. I had experienced these re-routes on numerous previous flights into the New York Class B airspace.

On this particular flight, however, we cleared from Syracuse direct to JFK. There were no published arrival routes to follow, no amendments to my flight plan. We were told to proceed direct to the JFK Airport, then land. This direct routing took about 30 minutes off our planned

trip time.

Cruising at 9,000 feet, we crossed the Hudson River near Kingston, NY. We could see the famed New York skyline emerging above the horizon. Absent, of course, were the twin towers of the World Trade Center. So sad, I thought. Our radio transmissions begin to increase as we passed from one ATC sector to the next.

Lifeguard Four Seven Two Zero Yankee, descend and maintain seven thousand, contact New York Approach Control on 128.3.

Roger, leaving nine for seven, approach on two eight point three, Two Zero Yankee.

It was apparent that ATC was going to uphold their commitment for a direct routing to the airport, so I closed up my navigation charts and simply waited for the next ATC vector and altitude assignment.

Lifeguard Four Seven Two Zero Yankee, airport is at twelve o'clock, eighteen miles, call the field.

I replied, thanking them quickly for the expeditious service, and begin to self-brief the visual approach procedure into JFK's Runway 31 Left. Simple enough, I thought for one of the busiest airports in the world. Approach handed me off to the JFK tower controller who issued an immediate landing clearance, suggesting that I land long on this 14,500 foot long runway to shorten our taxi to the general aviation terminal on the northwest corner of the airport. We landed about two-thirds of the way down the runway and exited on a high speed turn off to the parallel taxiway. It was here that all began to feel like a mosquito in a corral of horses. I maneuvered us midst a gonga line Boeing 747s, 777s, and assorted other heavy transports including a British Airways Concorde.

The lady tower controlled issued progressive taxi instructions to our parking site. Along the way, we were met by a gray van with a "Follow Me" sign affixed to its rear bumper. We were escorted to our parking space and were immediately greeted by two New York Port Authority representatives asking if needed any assistance. They were already aware of our mission having been informed of our "lifeguard" status by ATC and had a van standing by to transport them to the hospital.

Having accomplished our mission, Bob and I took a brief break in the general aviation terminal before heading back to Syracuse and then on to Buffalo.

Getting out of JFK was a bit more challenging than getting in. Without our patient and our "lifeguard" status, we were reduced to simple ordinary airplane status and had to stand in line with the rest of the common folk. Like many large airports, JFK employs a Standard Instrument Departure (SID) procedure for all departing aircraft. This is designed to reduce radio communication traffic and expedite the flow of departing aircraft into the enroute system.

I called Clearance Delivery and received our clearance up to Syracuse via the Kennedy Nine Departure, vectors to the Sparta VOR, then direct to Syracuse. The Kennedy Nine Departure procedure required an immediate left turn upon lift off so as to remain within 4.5 miles of the airport while turning southward. This was understandable recognizing that Runway 31 Left and Right points directly toward mid-town Manhattan!

With the engine running and our taxi clearance in hand, Bob and I made our way to Runway

31 Left, which was the runway we had landed on an hour earlier. We again positioned ourselves in line among JFK's growing line of international departures. Unlike merging onto a busy highway in an automobile, the natural tendency for all pilots is to "give way" to other moving aircraft. Everybody assumes that the "other guy" has the right of way. This process is reinforced by the ground controller whose job it is to expedite the ground movement of all aircraft on the airport surface.

We cleared on to the active runway and advised to hold as a heavy jet released brakes and began his take off roll. Almost immediately we were cleared for takeoff. Concerned about wake turbulence from the departing aircraft, I deliberately advanced the throttle slowly to allow for greater spacing between our aircraft. I knew, of course, that I could exercise my prerogative as a pilot in command to delay taking off for better separation but this would slow down a whole lot of airplanes and people. It was also apparent that we could lift off far short of the rotation point of the heavy departing jet so as to avoid his wake altogether. That we did and we climbed to our cruising altitude without a bump.

Not all of my Miracle Flight participation involves the transport of a patients. Occasionally I've been asked to share my volunteer pilot experiences with groups of potential supporters. On one memorable occasion shortly after the September 11 attack, I flew over to Amherst, Massachusetts to speak before the University of Massachusetts campus security staff.

It was a beautiful fall day. The leaves of the Adirondack and Berkshire forests were in maximum color. I deliberately selected a low altitude to capture the essence of God's splendor. Just like that fateful day 30 days earlier when the twin towers were struck, it was a CAVU day, aviation term meaning that the ceiling and visibility was unlimited.

I was met at the Amherst Airport by a representative from the University's foundation office. She explained that the entire campus security staff, a group of about 75 armed law enforcement officers were meeting to select their annual charity to support through payroll deduction. My job was to persuade them to consider Miracle Flights. As you will soon see, this was to be a very easy mission.

The group was already assembled when I arrived in their large meeting room. The foundation representative gave me a brief introduction and I took it from there. I simply explained the role of Miracle Flights and how they brought people, primarily children, requiring medical attention free of charge to various specialized treatment centers around the United States.

I did not consider this to be one of my more impassioned presentations, but before I completed my 45 minute talk, I could see the emotional response of the audience. It was strange to observe uniformed police officers shedding signs of tears as I related the compassionate nature of Miracle Flight's mission. During the question and answer portion at the end of my presentation, one police officer equated my own involvement with the heroism of the September 11 rescue workers.

None of us who fly for Miracle Flights would ever place ourselves in the same category as those police and fireman who lost their lives on that tragic day in New York City. I tactfully denied the comparison saying that Miracle pilots, like most other pilots, feel an obligation to

simply pay back for the special privilege we enjoy to fly freely as we chose.