



Saturday, May 22, 2010

First Flight For A Princess

AeroAngel was recently founded to give hope wings – to provide free air transportation to people needing to travel for a compelling need. In the last few months, arrangements were made to lease aircraft to be flown by volunteer professional pilots. All that remained to get in the air was some more funding for aircraft and fuel. But, our first flight wouldn't wait for that to happen.

Thursday afternoon, I got a call from the Missing Children Task Force that a young girl abducted from Colorado had just been located in a small mid-western town, and her parents needed to get there to bring her home. The group asked whether AeroAngel could provide the transportation. While we fortunately had an available aircraft and pilot on an hour's notice, we did not have all the money for the 2,000 mile round-trip flight. Commercial air travel was not an option into the isolated town, and a charter unaffordable. A long drive meant additional time spent in foster care for the child.

After almost two years away from home, I was not going to make this little girl wait an extra hour to see her parents. We scheduled the flight for the next morning thanks to John Post, a volunteer professional pilot, who did the flight planning and prep for the trip.

During the four-hour flight, the parents' emotions were more palpable than the sound of the Cessna's two engines. After a fuel stop and two more hours, we broke out of the clouds 600 feet above the small airfield. I accompanied the parents to meet with social services and witness the reunification, as John prepped for the return flight. After tear-filled hugs and re-introductions, we headed back to the airport with our special passenger – but not without a stop for a Happy Meal, of course.

Our young passenger was told that I was one of the pilots who would take her on first flight. Although she did not say much, she gave me a big smile when I said she was the first princess to be our passenger. You would not have known, however, that it was her first flight by the way she eagerly climbed in the back seat and put on her headset. Stepping up onto the wing to get in, I looked over to see one very happy seven-year old.

AeroAngel's first flight went flawlessly. While thunderstorms blocked other flights, both legs of our direct routes were clear and smooth. Also not the norm, we were blessed with a tailwind for part of our westbound return trip. Two stops and almost ten hours of flying later, we landed back at Centennial Airport, a few minutes after midnight. Our princess was safely back in Colorado – just in time to celebrate her eighth birthday that day.

Mark Pestal is the founder and president of AeroAngel.