

VOLUNTEERS IN THE AIR

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2006 Public Benefit Flying Awards

A lot of the focus in aviation is on the business and commercial aspect of flying. But each year, NAA focuses on a different part of aviation – those taking to the skies to help others.

NAA recently announced the winners of this year's Public Benefit Flying (PBF) Awards, a series of awards designed to recognize the contributions of individuals, groups and organizations engaged in humanitarian aviation. The awards, given in five different categories, were created in 2003 in a partnership between NAA, a non-profit aviation association, and the Air Care Alliance (ACA), a nationwide league of humanitarian flying organizations.

Distinguished Volunteer Pilot

Ted Ruscitti won this award, for his tireless work as a volunteer pilot and especially for his efforts to help victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The Pennsylvania resident has been a member of the Volunteer Pilots Association since September 11, 2001. Ruscitti has not limited himself to simply flying for the VPA, often volunteering for any organization that can use his services. He owns a consulting business which takes him all over the country. He will broadcast his travel plans via the ACA to see if he can make any stops along the way to transport a patient or help in any way he can with his Cheyenne.

A passage from the nomination packet from VPA president Kevin Sell tells one of the many stories that typify why Ruscitti was selected for the award:

“When Ted flew Mark M. and his wife Lillian from Pittsburgh to their home in New Jersey after post-liver transplant complications, he further proved his compassionate nature. Although Mark was stabilized, he wasn't well. Knowing that upon arriving in New Jersey

Ted's greatest work was done in the aftermath of Katrina which hit states on the Gulf of Mexico in August of last year. He started out by spending two days on the phone trying to see how he could best spend his time and energy and where he and his aircraft could do the most good before taking off on a 750-mile trip to the Gulf region. He found that doctors and medical supplies were two of the greatest needs, so he found some willing volunteers and donors at his church before leaving for Mississippi. He even arranged for a television station to interview the doctors flying with him so that the message would be spread that more doctors were needed desperately in the South.

He initially flew the doctors to Biloxi, Mississippi, and planned on spending several days flying personnel and supplies around the region. Several days turned into weeks of volunteer work in the region. For the next two weeks, Ruscitti flew daily mission between Texas and Mississippi with stops in between to pick up or deliver evacuees, supplies medicine, doctors or other workers. He helped deliver so many supplies to Biloxi that it became a dispensary for other aid stations in the area.

Ruscitti even purchased airline tickets for several evacuees when he couldn't fly them somewhere himself. The dedicated pilot spent many nights sleeping in his plane.

Ruscitti continued his volunteer work before Hurricane Rita last year, flying a



Wings of Hope's patients know that life saving health care is just a short flight away

Lillian would need to call a relative for ground transport and help with Mark; Ted had pre-arranged and paid for a chauffeured limousine to meet them on the ramp at plane side. It turned out that it was Mark's last flight, as he passed away one week later. Because of his thoughtfulness, Ted ensured that Mark's last flight was as comfortable as possible.”



Jubel Caldwell recipient of the Distinguished Volunteer Award

doctor and a load of medicine to Mobile, Alabama, before the storm made landfall.

Distinguished Volunteer

Jubel Caldwell won for his service with Mercy MedFlight (MMF). He is the director of maintenance for the nationwide charitable air ambulance operation that has been doing work since 1996.

Caldwell read about the organization in the newspaper in 1997, about a year after it was founded. He began volunteering almost immediately, taking care of the Cessna 421C mobile intensive care unit. Over the next five years, he did all the maintenance on the aircraft, including installing three different engines on the twin engine aircraft. He always provided his time and skill for free.

MMF decided to upgrade to a Cessna Citation I in 2002, Caldwell volunteered to assist with the process. He helped locate the airframe and eventually attended a two-

week maintenance program on the Citation.

Because of Caldwell's services, MMF has had an accident-free safety record. MMF pilots have flown over 491,500 nautical miles and 2,300 flight hours in two different aircraft under Caldwell's watch.

Outstanding Achievement in Advancement of Public Benefit Flying

This award was given to a large group of people and organizations who served the nation during a time of need.

Here are just some of the many groups that donated their time, energy, money and aircraft to the relief efforts:

- Angel Flight Central
- Angel Flight East
- Angel Flight of Georgia
- Angel Flight MidAtlantic

- Angel Flight Northeast
- Angel Flight of Oklahoma
- Angel Flight South Central
- Angel Flight Southeast
- Angel Flight West
- Arizona Pilots Association
- Cair Flight
- Civil Air Patrol
- Corporate Angel Network
- Flights for Life
- Houston Ground Angels
- LifeLine Pilots
- LightHawk
- Mercy Medical Airlift
- Volunteer Mercy Pilots
- Volunteer Pilots Association

Bill Worden, Vice President of the Emergency Volunteer Air Corps (EVAC), tells why such a large group should be recognized in his nomination:

"Within days [of Hurricane Katrina] hundreds of volunteers working through public benefit flying groups or pilots associations, or even flying on their own created a relief effort parallel put into place by relief organizations and governmental agencies. Having received no word of what they could or should do from the agencies, they quickly established appropriate contact with local churches and groups in the affected areas, often by flying in and meeting with those in need. We may never know the names of all the groups and all the volunteers who pitched in. We do know that a great many did. . . EVAC believes that by honoring those individuals and groups who actually flew in support of the hurricane victims, or who worked long hours to make that support possible, NAA would be indicating the value that should be placed on a spirit of self-sacrifice and dedication that characterizes the work of the best of all our aviation volunteers."

EVAC estimates that more than 3,000 missions were flown after Katrina. With a lack of direction from the federal and state gov-



Photo Courtesy of Holcom

Thomas H. Holcom and passengers

ernments, these groups and pilots worked on their own or in tandem to get help where it was needed most in the crucial days after the disaster.

Public Benefit Flying Team Award

Two awards in this category were given out this year.

First, Thomas H. Holcom was honored for his ability to bring people together in support of public benefit flying. Holcom played a major role in the formation of Angel Flight America, linking many PBF groups in a national network. He also helped foster the merger of AirLifeLine and Angel Flight Central, helping two large groups to work together rather than duplicating efforts.

As co-chair of Angel Flight Central's "Spreading Our Wings" campaign, he helped bring in more than \$3 million dollars to support the organization. Holcom's company, Pioneer Services Foundation, is also one of Angel Flight's greatest champions and donors.

Angel Flight enlists the help of more than 7,000 volunteer pilots and the ability to

coordinate 20,000 missions each year, due in part to the work Holcom has done to bring PBF organizations together.

Second, the award was given to Remote Area Medical and Wings of Hope which began a partnership in 1995 to pool their aviation and health care expertise to help people in remotes parts of the United States and the world.

Often using just small bush aircraft, the two groups have gone to the Appalachian region of the United States, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras and Belize to offer their help. The groups also fly to South America and are the only outside groups to offer help to isolated tribes on the continent.

The groups typically set up a base of operations in an area where they believe they are most needed. Together, they have set up 149 bases in 40 countries and the U.S.

Champion of Public Benefit Flying

Once again, two awards were given in this category.

First, Continental Airlines was honored for

its work with LightHawk, providing free travel for volunteer pilots and staff working in Mexico and Central America since 1994.

LightHawk – a 2005 PBF award recipient — is a nonprofit, volunteer-pilot based organization that flies environmental missions in the Western Hemisphere. Because of all the travel required for the work accomplished by LightHawk, it would be difficult for the group to buy airline tickets or fly to remote destinations on its own all the time.

LightHawk Executive Director, Rick Durden, emphasizes how crucial Continental has been to LightHawk's operations in his nomination:

"In fact, it is not uncommon in any given year for all of a volunteer pilot's flight missions to be dependent on a Continental Airlines voucher that will get him or her to the appropriate destination so he or she may begin the flying to be undertaken. LightHawk pilots also often need to travel on short notice or have to accommodate those needs."

The other winners are the air traffic controllers of America for their support of humanitarian flights over the years.

Controllers often give priority to humanitarian flights on takeoff and in the air, making it easier to complete their missions and to complete them quickly. It is estimated that controllers all over the country support PBF groups hundreds of times a day and thousands of times a year by doing what they can to get them off the ground and to their destinations as quickly as possible.

Controllers often help charitable flights by moving them to the front of a queue for takeoff. They might also get a direct vector to their destination that will save valuable time, rather than having to fly slower routes with normal air traffic.