

Flying Doctors of America

By John Bradford

Pilots soar to great heights everyday, and the Flying Doctors of America, a dedicated group of doctors/pilots who volunteer their time and services to those less fortunate, soar to an even greater height in the heavens. "It is by far the most rewarding thing I do every year," comments Dr. Ed Atwell, who has a full-time surgical practice. He speaks for most everyone involved in the program.

The Flying Doctors of America was established 16 years ago by Allan Gathercoal with only \$700 and a lot of ambition. Their mission is to administer free medical aid to the poor who live in some of the most unspeakable and unimaginable conditions possible. As the group continues to thrive in the

21st century, they have flown more than 100 missions and have provided care to approximately 85,000 children, women and men—the kind of statistics that make the members proud. "We call it the 'Mother Teresa Principle,'" Atwell says. "We help those who are not in a position to help themselves."

There is an unmistakable energy in Dr. Atwell's voice, an energy that resonates with compassion and kindness as he speaks of the organization of which he is a proud member. Flying since he was 16, Dr. Atwell is an active pilot who has earned Commercial, Multi-engine and CFII ratings. He participates in several local aerobatic contests and currently flies a Cirrus SR22. "I only have enough time to do this [Flying Doctors] twice

a year if I'm lucky," he admits. "It's the best thing I do every year. I wish I could make more time for it."

"Obviously we can't do major surgery because these places don't have the resources," Dr. Atwell says, pausing in despair as he considers the limits of the program, "but we can administer medicine, do check-ups, and even do minor surgery if the conditions are right." However, it is hard work. Atwell adds, "Even though it's challenging, you can't help but be touched. The people are so appreciative of anything you can give them." Atwell also says that one of the hardest things about the program is how short term each visit is. "You develop relationships with the people—you care about them and then you have



to leave." He again reflects, "That's the hardest thing. But it's better than nothing."

After working hard to earn the requisite number of years to earn his medical degree in 1983, Dr. Atwell wanted to have a little fun as well. Luckily for those he has helped in third world countries, fun is sharing his skills, time and passion for those desperately in need. And fun is exactly what he had when he went on his first mission to Peru, an 11-day tour of some of the area's most impoverished and needy areas. While doing an arduous eight-day trek through the Andes to reach remote villages, Dr. Atwell experienced the enormous rewards of helping some of the world's poorest people. He had more fun than one man should, and he was hooked on the program.

"I started going once or twice a year to places like Mexico, South America, Central America, Jamaica," he says. "Anyone who had a plane and was willing to make the trip, that's what the program's about."

It did not take long for the program to expand overseas to places like Thailand, India, Africa and Mongolia. While the doctors and other volunteers are forced to fly commercial to some of these remote venues, they all have the same thing in common: all expenses come out of their own pockets. "Though rare, local authorities can sometimes help us obtain favorable pricing on housing when we get there because they are so grateful for our help." He adds, "Our governments may not be getting along at the time, but when it's people-to-people, there is an excellent relationship."

As the program has grown, so have the trips. They can range from jaunts into war zones to locations where the only place to stay is a tent with no amenities to larger cities that offer hotels and buses to the poorer regions. "One year we took a white water rafting trip and stopped at villages along the way to help. We're trying to get another one of those going again for the next year."

The Flying Doctors of America is not solely limited to doctors or pilots. An entire staff of volunteers is required to work behind the scenes to make the trips run smoother. "We have a need for people with clerical skills, nursing skills, and just about any skills that involve helping and caring about people who don't have the same advantages." He adds with a laugh, "And we need pilots with planes as well." And while much of the expenses come from the volunteers, it is tax deductible. "We also try to schedule some sightseeing trips and other side trips along the way, too."

Dr. Atwell and the legions of volunteers who make up the Flying Doctors of America have indeed flown to greater heights than many people have ever known. For anyone who wants to volunteer the time and money, these heights are equally attainable. "I can't tell you enough," he concludes. "It's simply the best thing I do every year!"

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