

FEATURED IN

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THE AVIATOR

TOP FLIGHT PHILANTHROPY

BY CHRISTINE NEGRONI



The twin-engine Beech Baron flies over the clouds. © Paul Bowen / Science Faction / Corbis.

HAD THINGS BEEN DIFFERENT, TOM LINCOLN MIGHT HAVE become a professional pilot like his brother, but he couldn't afford to while attending college, then graduate school, at Boston University. Now that he is a successful financial analyst and portfolio manager at GE Capital in Stamford, Connecticut, Lincoln can fly whenever he wants in his 1984 six-seat, twin-engine Beech Baron.

At least ten times a year, however, the 46-year-old Lincoln doesn't take his plane where he wants to go. He flies wherever he is assigned as a volunteer pilot for Angel Flight Northeast, a regional charity that matches pilots to people who must travel long distances for medical care.

"I've flown a variety of different patients from 75 to 80 years old, to little kids," Lincoln told *The Private Journey* one afternoon after transporting 8-year-old Mason Hicks and his dad, Matthew, to Boston for a surgical procedure. On the 90-minute flight from New Jersey to make their appointment at the Shriners Hospital, young Mason sat on pillows in the right seat so he could see out the cockpit window. He was gripping the yoke with hands burned in a house fire in 2007, and Lincoln gave the boy supervised control of the plane.

"I love the kids because their eyes are so wide open about aviation," Lincoln said. "They're enamored by it and they all want to come up into the cockpit."

Pilots like Lincoln have many opportunities to use their talents and their

airplanes for good. More than 70 organizations provide transportation, disaster and humanitarian relief, and conservation and education flights.

Angel Flight Northeast makes about 3,000 trips a year from Maine to Pennsylvania. Angel Flight West — serving Alaska to Southern California — handled nearly 6,000 flights in 2013. But east, west, and everywhere in between, rising fuel costs have taken a toll on philanthropic flying.

"It's expensive for people to get into it now," said Keith D'Entremont of Angel Flight Northeast explaining that the nonprofit would probably fly less this year than last. Only an ongoing and energetic recruitment effort has enabled the west coast organization to bring the number of flights back up after a two-year downturn.

Gas "is an integral part of what it costs" said Tom Torti, a 56-year-old contractor from New York and a volunteer pilot for Veterans Airlift Command, which flies military veterans to visit family, attend military funerals, or get medical care. It doesn't matter if it is "a Cessna 172 or a Gulfstream, fuel is what makes the airplanes go."

Torti's 2007 Cessna Citation Mustang burns about \$1,500 of fuel each hour. A trip he made carrying a veteran from Washington, D.C. to southern Florida cost him \$3,700 without accounting for engine wear or the time he took off from work to make the flight.

"It's a great hardship for [these individuals] to fly on the airlines," Torti said of his passengers. He remembered his first meeting with a 19-year-old patient at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center who lost his legs to an IED in Afghanistan. The soldier wanted to attend a memorial service in North Carolina, but traveling on a commercial airline would have been difficult.

"We know about going through security and how early you have to get to the airport before the flight...and getting on and off the airplane." As a passenger on the twin-engine light jet, the young man was escorted directly to the plane, which flies at 350 knots with a 1,000-mile range.

Pilots can take a tax deduction for their charitable flights while accruing flight time. While these incentives are a plus, volunteer pilots consistently say they are motivated by a desire to "give back," an expression that can mean many things.

When asked what prompts his work with veterans, Torti tells his story. At age 11 his older brother joined the U.S. Air Force. It made a big impression and motivated him to learn to fly. "I looked up to that," he said. "He served and I didn't. I feel like I want to do my part."

Lincoln is unlikely to fulfill his youthful ambition to fly professionally, but when in command of an Angel Flight he shares the experience of an airline pilot, putting his passengers at ease and trying to make the flight comfortable. Unlike an airline captain, when the charity flight lands, Lincoln's passengers shower him with gratitude and the image of general aviation is elevated.

"Over the last few years this industry has been beaten down a lot," Lincoln states. But outside the spotlight, thousands of private pilots just like Tom are "trying to do something good" with their planes. ♣



Tom Lincoln at the controls of an Angel Flight.