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# Life Flight crew shrinks rescue time for badly injured patients

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By Tony Lystra / The Daily News | Posted: Saturday, January 23, 2010 10:30 pm | (3) Comments



Bill Wagner / The Daily News  
Life Flight crew members load a patient in Astoria on Friday.



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Just after 9:30 a.m. Friday, Andre McGann spun up the blades of a blue helicopter perched atop the parking garage at St. John Medical Center. The chopper rose steadily above a concrete pad, pitched forward and leaped off the building's edge, swooping over Lake Sacajawea, and heading northwest, along the Columbia River.

McGann, a 42-year-old pilot for the Life Flight air ambulance company stationed in Longview, was accompanied by a nurse and a paramedic, who would help him move a patient from Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria to Oregon Health and Science University in Portland.

There is probably no faster way to get a human being from one hospital to another — or from an accident scene to an emergency room — than by helicopter.

A chopper can reach Portland from Longview in about 18 minutes. The aircraft are agile enough to touch down on roads, parking lots and rooftops. And

yet, they are also big enough to accommodate a pilot, a two-person medical crew, \$400,000 in medical equipment and a patient laid out on a stretcher.

For nearly a year, McGann has been piloting this \$4 million helicopter over communities along the Columbia River, snatching up patients from the grips of brutal wrecks or ferrying heart attack, stroke and even H1N1 victims to larger hospitals where they will be treated by specialists.

The helicopter, which has been based in Longview since late 2008, has been "a godsend for us in rural communities," said Lori Christiansen, the manager of the Astoria hospital's emergency department. "It's huge — getting these people to a higher level of care."

McGann, who works as a Seattle paramedic two weeks out of the month, said his career choices are probably not a coincidence. In 1974, three days before his seventh birthday, he was struck by a car in Edgewater, Md., where he lived as a boy. He said he suffered 27 fractures between his legs and pelvis as well as a torn colon and lacerated kidney. He was airlifted to Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore.

"I never thought I'd be a paramedic or a helicopter pilot. I'm both," said McGann, who studied to become a medical equipment technician at the University of Washington. "So I have this bizarre kind of subconscious career choice."

McGann flew helicopter tours in Alaska for six months in 2007, then flew Seattle's Kiro/King 5 news helicopter until early last year. He started flying for Life Flight in May.

He has a near-photographic memory when it comes to numbers. He can punch figures into the aircraft's gauges that he calculated hours before back at the base.

Medics call him "Twinkle Toes" for his especially soft landings.

McGann has also become particularly popular at the Longview Life Flight base for his cooking, a skill he cultivated during two decades of living in fire houses. On a recent evening he served Alaskan cod with fried bread, homemade tartar sauce, new potatoes and a greek salad.

"I was able to quickly become one of the favorite pilots because I went right straight through their stomachs," McGann said with a grin.

The pilots, medics and nurses stationed in Longview spend their shifts in two hangars that are within a

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The pilots, medics and nurses stationed in Longview spend their shifts in two bungalows that are within a quick jog of St. John. Each includes a TV, a few bedrooms and a kitchen. McGann calls it a throwback to "college living."

The medical crews work one 12-hour shift and one 24-hour shift each week. Pilots work 12-hour shifts so they do not become too fatigued in a single night.

Crews are often put on "stand by" which can mean sitting in the helicopter in the middle of the night, only to be told to go back to bed. On Wednesday, the crew working the day shift wasn't activated once. Instead, the medics checked the expiration dates on their medication stocks and watched "Judge Judy" and "The People's Court."

It's a job where, in just 20 minutes, you can go from couch zombie to racing through the darkness at 1,000 feet with a dying man's head in your lap.

### **'Adapt and overcome'**

McGann brought the helicopter in low over Astoria, rotated 90 degrees and touched down on Columbia Memorial's helipad. Nurse Trevor Liston, 36, of Portland, and paramedic Jodi Franzman, 37, of Vancouver piled out.

The pair, who were riding with McGann on Friday, spent about 20 minutes inside the hospital, learning about their patient's vital signs and medications.

(Life Flight jealously guards its patients' confidentiality and agreed to bring The Daily News on its flights only if the newspaper published nothing about the patients involved, including their condition, age or gender.)

Each Lifeflight crew includes a paramedic, who specializes in accident-scene trauma care and a nurse, who is more accustomed to emergency room procedures. On Friday, Liston and Franzman carried with them a large, red bag, which contained just about every drug available in an emergency room or intensive care unit.

The crew also kept on the helicopter a video scope for intubating (or placing a plastic tube in a patient's airway.) Mounted on the helicopter's wall was a digital readout of the patient's vital signs. A small blue cooler carried blood in case a patient needed a mid-flight transfusion.

Crews can store additional medical equipment in hatches on the side of the helicopter, but they have to plan ahead.

"You can't just jump out on the skid and get something you need while we're moving," said Holly Ilg, a paramedic from Forest Grove who was stationed at the base Wednesday.

A motto on the aircraft, she said, is "adapt and overcome."

Liston and Franzman loaded the patient into the helicopter. The quarters are tight. The patient's feet nearly touched the front of the helicopter's cabin. Liston's legs straddled the stretcher. The patient's head was tucked between his knees. Franzman sat close to Liston and helped hang IV bags from hooks in the helicopter's ceiling.

McGann lifted off and cruised at about 500 feet over the mountain tops. Liston, while attending to the patient, watched for other aircraft. Each of the helicopter's crew wore a helmet containing earphones and a mic. Liston's voice crackled through the headphones as he pointed out an aircraft to McGann. "There's a guy at 7 o'clock."

Clouds hung low in the mountains south of Astoria, and the helicopter pitched hard to the east as McGann steered around them. "Once you go in it, it's like having your head in a bucket of milk," he said later.

### **'Three to go, one to say no'**

On Wednesday, McGann settled in front of a computer at the Longview base and brought up a live weather map to monitor trouble spots throughout the region. Weather systems are constantly changing along the coast and McGann keeps a close eye on them.

Pilots, not dispatchers or managers, have the final say on whether conditions make for safe flying, McGann said. But if any of the medical crew feels particularly worried about the risks, he said, they have the right to veto a flight.

"Three to go, one to say no," he said.

McGann said Lifeflight dispatchers make a point of not initially telling crews the exact nature of a patient's illness or injury to prevent pilots from flying in dangerous weather to save, say, a sick child. There's obviously no sense in putting a patient in the air if the helicopter isn't going to make it to the hospital, he said.

The flights can be challenging. When called to a trauma scene, McGann sometimes has to land the helicopter on rough terrain in strong winds. Power lines are a constant threat. The helicopter is equipped with two small, metal fins, above and below the windshield. Should the helicopter collide with power lines, the fins are designed to catch them and snap them before they become entangled in the blades.

McGann said he turns on every light on the aircraft's exterior during night landings in unfamiliar territory to help illuminate his surroundings. "It's like a damn Christmas tree," he said.

Landing zones at car wrecks and other emergencies are set up by the first responders on the ground, who advise McGann of obstacles nearby.

"If there's anything I decide I don't like, we're not going in," he said.

After dark, McGann wears a \$12,000 pair of night-vision goggles, which allow him to see even the leaves on

the trees of a vast, black forest. They're particularly handy for spotting radio towers and other aircraft. A medic often wears a pair, too, just to keep an eye out.

McGann said he's constantly reading accident reports issued by the National Transportation Safety Board. Some colleagues, he said, have called him "morbid." But, he said, "I would rather read about somebody else's mistakes than make them myself."

#### A nice landing

McGann, now following Highway 30, brought the helicopter toward downtown Portland. Liston phoned OHSU to make sure they were ready for his patient.

The trees and bluffs gave way to buildings and concrete. The flight from Astoria had taken 36 minutes, about ten minutes longer than usual because of the weather. By ground ambulance, it would have taken at least two hours.

Across the Willamette River, another Life Flight crew was stranded at Legacy Emmanuel Hospital because of weather problems near their base in Aurora, just south of Portland.

McGann approached OHSU's hilltop campus. For a moment it seemed as though he could fly straight into the side of one of its tall buildings. Then the helicopter lifted and swooped in a gradual arc over the roof.

It hovered for just a moment over the concrete. Then it was on the ground.

"Nice, Twinkle Toes," Franzman said.

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