

Pilot perspective

By Bruce Williams - Seattle, WA
AirLifeLine volunteer pilot since 2000

By most measures, this trip from Boeing Field (KBFI) in Seattle to Medford (KMFR) is routine. In some 30 years of flying, I've followed the route down the spine of the Cascade Mountains dozens of times in my A36 and other airplanes. A couple of hours outbound, typically a little less on the return if the usual southerly tailwinds cooperate. I've made the trip to give presentations, to watch plays at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, and as a convenient stop on longer flights into California. Today, I'm solo on the leg south; again, nothing unusual about that.

A check of the weather suggests I'll be able to enjoy the sights—Mts. Rainier, Adams, St. Helens, Jefferson, and Shasta—and if time and ATC allow, perhaps a dogleg for a peek at Crater Lake. The log from my flight planning software reads like familiar sheet music, handy if memory lapses between oft-played chords: OLM UBG CVO EUG OED.

And the flight south is, in fact, routine. The wheels thump into the wells, and the ritual of frequency changes and twists of the course selector begins. I hear the efficient voices of people I know only as "Departure" and "Center," the needles assume their proper places on the dials, and the landmarks scroll by on schedule. Nothing special.

At Medford, I pick up my passenger. As she takes her seat and straps in, my passenger goes through the motions

with a practiced ease, and after acknowledging the safety briefing and before I close the rear door, she produces a bag of yarn and resumes work on her latest crochet project. Apparently, it's just another flight for her, too.

But when we level off at cruise and I check in with her, I have time to remember that this is not "just another flight." While I traveled south, she rode north from California to meet me for the final leg of yet another journey to round of medical treatments in Seattle. She has an exotic form of ovarian cancer, and the best care available is at medical centers far from her home. By the time we make this trip, she's flown the route almost as often as I have. But while the flight is a pleasant diversion from my normal workday, for her it's a ride back to intrusive tests; uncomfortable, sterile surroundings; and long days away from home.

The world my passenger lives in is as alien to me as the arcana of flying must be to her. As we spoke before takeoff, she explained that her belly, swollen as if near the end of pregnancy, is a consequence of her cancer. It was a just a fact she mentioned casually to help me understand why we needed to extend the seat belt to its full length. I use the same tone to explain how to open the Bonanza's door or to reassure first-time flyers that the "thunk" of the retracting gear is normal.

Her matter-of-fact comment reminds me that I often use AirLifeLine missions to teach my passengers—especially the kids—about airplanes and flying. Too often, I now realize, I've been so focused on passing along my knowledge that I haven't noticed how much these extraordinary people can teach me.

During my time as a volunteer pilot, I've carried parents making yet another trip with their seriously ill children. Children helping their aged, terminally ill parents make a final journey home. And kids recovering from chemotherapy or burns leaving their parents behind as they head to summer camp.

Many of my AirLifeLine passengers are veteran flyers, and I understand now that whatever concerns they might once have had about flying—especially in small airplanes—long ago were eclipsed by their experience confronting fears I can't begin to imagine.

And so, as we ride through the occasional bump on the descent into Seattle and I busy myself with the approach and landing to come, I'm no longer surprised that my passenger is still calmly turning her crochet hook, just along for the ride. It's I who finally understand that this is not just another flight, that there is no such thing as a routine day, and that those of us so fortunate to have been trained to fly still have so much to learn.