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Feature Article

Still Soaring: Health First's First Flight Turns 30

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Ronnie Watson has been asked over and over what his best moment has been as a paramedic for Health First's First Flight. It has pretty much been every one of them.

"I always go back to the fact that my job provides me with the opportunity to help someone in a time of need, big or small," said Watson, who has been in his role for about 3 1/2 years. "It is not always about a 'lifesaving' moment for me. I truly get the same satisfaction from holding the hand of a scared patient as I do performing the intervention that undoubtedly extended someone's life. I truly feel beyond blessed to be given the knowledge, abilities and opportunity to do my job."

With trauma being the Number One cause of death for Americans 1 to 46 years old, having a medical evacuation helicopter on call is a critically important asset to any community. Last September, Health First marked 30 years of First Flight, the Integrated Delivery Network's mobile medical unit that transports critically injured patients to the health care they desperately need in the aftermath of a trauma or life-threatening illness. It is the sole air ambulance serving Brevard County, Florida.

Among the first responders for traumas, First Flight is based at Health First's Holmes Regional Medical Center in Melbourne, Florida, working in tandem with emergency care providers at the hospital, which is a certified level II trauma center. Since its inception, First Flight has quickly delivered more than 20,000 patients to receive the emergency care they needed.

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"Being able to get to the scene of a trauma or other medical emergency as quickly as possible is crucial," said Brett Esrock, chief executive officer of Holmes Regional. "When you are severely injured, there is no time to spare. Having a medical helicopter to transport our most critical patients at a moment's notice has saved countless lives over the past 3 decades—and certainly many more to come."

Although based in Brevard, a county on the east central coast of Florida with more than half a million residents, First Flight serves beyond the county's borders. Indian River and portions of Osceola and Orange counties also depend on the air ambulance for emergency transport.

The helicopter is an EC-135 twin-turbo engine Eurocopter equipped with the latest medical equipment. Operated by Metro Aviation, it can accommodate 2 patients along with 3 crewmembers.

"Working on a helicopter automatically comes with an expectation of being the 'best of the best' in regard to care," said Watson. "There are not many jobs that provide you with the autonomy and variety that working at First Flight does. We have a large protocol to follow and are held to a very high standard in implementing those protocols. I am proud to work for a program like First Flight, because we are constantly working to improve the service we provide."

A Look Back

In 1988, Ronald Reagan was President; space shuttle Discovery led the NASA back into spaceflight; and, on the local front, First Flight debuted. Much like the Integrated Delivery Network it supports, this air ambulance program has become a trusted part of

the healthcare landscape throughout the 72-mile-long county it covers. Countless lives have been saved, thanks to the quick-acting team and the aircraft on which it relies.

First Flight services began as Care Flight, a flight program based aboard a 350S ASTAR helicopter. The name was changed to First Flight in 1994 because of copyright issues. In 1995, the program contracted with Metro Aviation, which allowed for an upgrade to a BO105 helicopter.

When Holmes Regional became an accredited level II trauma center that same year, First Flight saw their call volume more than double, from approximately 400 flights annually to 855. In 2000, the flight program obtained their EC135 helicopter, which they continue to use today. The year 2004 saw First Flight attain its own hangar and maintenance facility.

The improvements just kept coming. Twelve years ago, the air ambulance service began carrying blood for critically ill and injured patients. In 2011, night vision goggles were added to the crew's repertoire.

Looking back on the past three decades, First Flight has plenty to celebrate. As of mid-July 2018, nearly 20,000 patients have been transported, a total of 16,500 flight hours have been logged, and more than 1.7 million miles have been flown.

Answering the Call

First Flight essentially serves as an in-flight intensive care unit (ICU)—a must for the "golden hour," when patients are at their most vulnerable, struggling to survive. When First Flight's communications center receives a call from local emergency medical services or law enforcement, the flight crew

is notified immediately and is en route within minutes.

“I love the variety in patients that this affords us,” Watson said of his work. “We can transport a critically ill ICU patient with a balloon pump, and the very next flight transport a patient from the scene of an injury.”

The experienced flight crew are pilots and more. The highly trained team includes medical personnel with backgrounds in emergency, critical care, flight and prehospital nursing care. On each flight, the following are onboard:

1. A pilot with more than 3,500 hours of flight time; many of these pilots have military experience
2. A licensed paramedic who is certified in advanced cardiac life support, pediatric advanced life support, prehospital trauma life support and Department of Transportation air medical crew core curriculum
3. A registered nurse with a minimum of five years of experience in critical care, who also holds a dual certification as a licensed paramedic; registered nurses must hold the same certifications listed earlier for paramedics

Licensed by the State of Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, First Flight’s crew provides interfacility care and prehospital services, helping to expedite critical care trauma victims, such as people severely injured in a car crash or those with a life-threatening illness.

The three-person team arrives on the scene within minutes, coordinating and assisting emergency medical services. One trauma patient can be flown at a time, either an adult or child. The crew is also equipped to handle delicate circumstances, such as moving high-risk obstetrical patients and cardiac patients who require intra-aortic balloon pump therapy.

They can also coordinate transferring patients to other facilities, such as those who require level I trauma services in the Orlando area. First Flight also provides rotor wing and fixed wing flight arrangements.

Emergencies and More

First Flight is not just a quick-response medical transport team. Crew members often lead educational programs about what they do as well as what the general public can do to ensure the community’s well-being. From injury prevention and safety programs to educating other health care professionals, their contribution to the health of Brevard’s residents goes beyond flying the severely injured to the hospital.

Last July, the First Flight team hosted Keiser University nursing students at Holmes Regional. The future care providers were given the opportunity to not only hear about the crucial role the crew plays but also a chance to step atop the roof, experience the helipad, sit in and get a feel for the helicopter itself, and soak in the expansive view of the region. In addition to being able to talk to an actual flight paramedic and flight nurse, students were given a tour of the

trauma room and emergency department at Holmes Regional.

A Critical Asset

Having a locally based air ambulance service probably is not something most people think about until their life or a loved one’s depends on emergency services immediately. It is a resource that has proved invaluable. The Association of Air Medical Services reports that studies have shown that medevac transport of trauma patients has reduced the number of days needed in the hospital/ICU and can result in better patient outcomes.

According to “Air Medical Services: Critical Component of Modern Healthcare Systems,” a public policy paper by the MedEvac Foundation International, introducing an air ambulance into a crisis situation radically changes emergency response time and improves efficiency and access for millions of US citizens facing a life-threatening injury or illness.¹ With helicopter emergency medical services, “the processes of diagnosis, decision-making, transportation, emergency stabilization, and critical care are no longer sequential, but occur simultaneously—faster and more effectively.”¹ According to the MedEvac Foundation International, in the past half-century, the chances of dying from sudden or catastrophic illness have been greatly reduced, thanks to enhancements and specializations in modern emergency medicine. Air medical services are a major part of that. The Association of Air Medical Services reports that every 90 seconds in the



Figure 1. Health First’s First Flight has flown more than 1.7 million miles.



Figure 2. Health First's First Flight has transported nearly 20,000 patients since its inception in 1988. Health First's First Flight, which has served Brevard County, Florida, for three decades now, is seen in this file photo flying over the Indian River Lagoon.

United States alone, a medevac helicopter responds to a call to help a person in need.

"Air medical critical care transport reduces morbidity, improves overall health-care system efficiency, and saves lives," the paper states. "More importantly, it helps critical care patients regain productivity—reducing the likelihood that a critical care patient will suffer long-term disability as a result of injury or illness. Air medicine does so by getting the patient to the right specialty critical care to determine what the patient needs to optimize recovery."¹

Watson, who has spent 17 years in emergency medicine, exemplifies that the crew takes what they do to heart. He speaks out

being a flight paramedic after being an emergency medical technician and wanting to expand on his part in saving people's lives.

"We are expected to have a unique skill set that includes excellent patient assessment, in-depth knowledge of the body/body systems, extremely proficient didactic skills and rapid critical thinking," he said of his role. "This all has to be done under a large amount of physical and psychological stressors. Working in the helicopter can be tricky due to noises, smells, helicopter movement and being in very close quarters. That adds to the stress already present by knowing that your decision can be life changing and/or life ending."

For Watson, it's a calling. "I thoroughly love the field of prehospital emergency medicine," he said. "It has afforded me such an opportunity to help people from all different walks of life, in all different points in their lives. I have seen people in the lowest of lows and highest of highs in their life. I have been there and tried my very best to make the bad and good moments better for them."

He and the rest of the First Flight team clearly have done just that. Holmes Regional's Esrock notes that the air ambulance has played a crucial part in compassionately caring for Brevard residents and beyond when they need it most.



Figure 3. Health First's First Flight, which has served Brevard County, Florida, for three decades now, is seen in this file photo flying over the Indian River Lagoon.



Figure 4. Health First's First Flight works with Health First's Holmes Regional Medical Center in Melbourne, Florida, to deliver critically ill or injured patients the care they need.

"It really has been an incredible asset to the community," Esrock said. "When someone is severely injured or facing a sudden, life-threatening health crisis, our team is here to assist local responders. First Flight

quickly and safely cares for these patients while getting them where they need to be."

Health First's First Flight has been serving Brevard County, Florida, and beyond for 30 years. Photo courtesy of Health First [Figures 1–4](#).

Reference

1. Kevin McGinnis, MPS, EMT-P Kevin Hutton, MD, FACEP. Air medical services: critical component of modern healthcare systems. Alexandria, VA: MedE-vac Foundation International; 2011.