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COMMENTARY

# Jets for Vets

## Rx with wings for wounded service personnel

**W**alt Fricke returned to the U.S. in 1969 in a bad way. The 19-year-old Army warrant officer's left foot had been severed, save for his Achilles tendon, when one of the rockets on his Huey gunship exploded as he was letting down into a hot LZ in Vietnam. The field doctors wanted to amputate, but he dissuaded them. Once stabilized, he was transferred to a hospital in Fort Knox, Ky., 600 mi. from his family and fiancée, Julie in Traverse City, Mich.

Alone, severely wounded, and still a long way from home, he was so worried about the reaction to his condition by his family and Julie that he couldn't eat or sleep—"I was a basket case," he says—and shed 50 lb. from the anxiety. But once his people finally made it to the hospital a month later, their collective reaction was of such relief and joy that Fricke felt a burden lift, and he started to improve. He walked out of the hospital six months after being wounded, and then down the aisle with Julie.

A career in finance followed, during which he accumulated enough wealth to retire in his 50s. Eager to give back, he considered transporting wounded veterans in his Beagle twin, but then recalculated: Why not create a national network to transport wounded vets?

Fricke had been involved in a program to protect soldiers and their families from foreclosure on their houses and became acquainted with some military brass in the process; he shared his airlift idea with them. Then, one day in November 2006, the Defense Department called to say a wounded Marine had just traveled from Melbourne, Fla., to Camp Lejeune, N.C., on frequent-flier miles to attend an award ceremony. The 430-nm trip had taken 13 hr., and involved something like five different flights. Having to use a wheelchair and crutches at each stop, the young man



CESSNA AIRCRAFT

arrived so exhausted he could not enjoy the ceremony. The question: Could Fricke get him home?

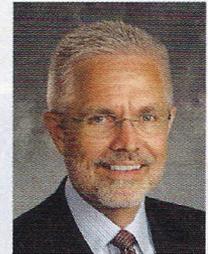
He called five pilots he knew in the region, and every one of them said they would do it. The following day, the wounded Marine was home in 2.5 hr., door to door. The Veterans Airlift Command (VAC) was in business.



VETERANS AIRLIFT COMMAND

Since then VAC's network of 1,900 volunteer pilots and a like number of aircraft have transported 4,500 wounded veterans and their families—

one third of them in this year alone—to reunions, events and treatment centers throughout the U.S. The number of missions keeps increasing, and Fricke hopes to double the fleet in the next few years, with an emphasis on turbine-powered, all-weather aircraft, and complement it with flight hours donated by fractional aircraft owners.



VETERANS AIRLIFT COMMAND

Walt Fricke

Two recent additions to the VAC fleet were particularly noteworthy. An anonymous veteran donated an Eclipse 500 light jet to the effort, free and clear. That aircraft is undergoing some upgrades now and Eclipse Aerospace has agreed to help underwrite the cost of bringing it to the Total Eclipse standard. And Scott Earnest, Cessna Aircraft's new CEO, was so impressed with VAC's mission that he has dedicated a Citation Mustang to it and had the "American Patriot" painted accordingly (see photo).

Although VAC is essentially an on-line operation, it has three employees and Fricke says it costs about \$400,000 to run the program annually, including buying airline tickets when necessary.

Bruce Rose, CEO of Carrington Holding Co., whose aircraft are part of the VAC network, weighed in this year by hosting a California golf tourney that raised \$350,000 for the cause.

Window World, another VAC supporter, sponsored the creation of a custom Orange County Chopper motorcycle (see photo) that brought \$340,000 at a VAC auction, and then was donated back to the organization. Fricke plans to put it on display at the Signature FBO at Washington Dulles International Airport and at other aviation and medical centers around the country.

Even though it seems the project "is getting out of hand" at times, Fricke says the effort is well worth it: "The reward of seeing these wounded kids finally welcomed home or reunited with the men in their units is just unbelievable and keeps us going." ☺