



Sport Aviation

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Good Samaritans

How GA is making a difference in the villages of Papua New Guinea

One Piece at a Time

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BROTHERHOOD

An opportunity that changed lives

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M I S S I O N :

HOPE

THE HEROES BEHIND SAMARITAN AVIATION



BY CHRISTINA BASKEN

"IT'S A VERY ROUGH ENVIRONMENT," MARK SAID.

"If you can imagine a river the size of the Mississippi, the color is chocolate brown, it rises and falls up to 20 feet in three days so every time you go in it's a different landing area. You're landing on the side of a muddy river, sometimes the riverbank is 20 feet above your wing, sometimes your wing is 2 feet above the bank. There's a lot of things you need to be careful of — there's crocodiles, lots of debris, sandbars. Then, also, you're docking between trees sometimes, and you've got 30 feet to put the plane in there."

Mark Palm, EAA 570084, the founder and a pilot for Samaritan Aviation, risks his life to fly into remote locations to save the lives of thousands without access to health care in Papua New Guinea.

M

Mark was just 16 years old when he came up with the idea for Samaritan Aviation.

"I had a chance to go to Mexico with my youth group to build houses and see another culture," Mark said. "Seeing how other people live, realizing the blessing that we have — the access that we have to hospitals, to food, to any type of thing — we just have access to everything in America when you compare it to other cultures and countries. After seeing that, I was reading some scripture actually on an old abandoned well one morning as a 16-year-old, and I just felt God speak to me — and what I heard was, 'Mark, I want you to use your passion for people and aviation to share my love in a remote part of the world.'"

That moment completely changed Mark's life. Once he returned home from his youth group trip to Mexico, all he could think about was how to make that happen. Three years later, he found his answer.

"As a 19-year-old, I had a chance to go to Papua New Guinea for the first time with a friend who was born over there," Mark said.

Mark said they went around the country, lived on some remote islands, and lived with the people in the bush houses.

"We fished with them, we bathed in the ocean, we just lived life with them," he said.

He said they also talked to them about some of their biggest struggles.

"They brought a kid to us, this little boy with a tropical ulcer," Mark said. "Usually you get a small cut or an infection, and it just grows and grows, and pretty soon you can lose your leg very quickly and even die from these infections. They brought this little kid, and for a few dollars' worth of medicine that we had, we bandaged his leg, gave him some antibiotics, and potentially saved his life."

Seeing the lack of access to medicine and the large amounts of water that the locals were living in opened Mark's eyes to the struggles that everyday people in Papua New Guinea were facing.

“And that’s where the idea of the seaplane came from,” Mark said. “We came up with the name Samaritan Aviation and the logo, and that’s really where it all began.”

Samaritan Aviation is a Christian non-profit charity. Mark said the goal of the organization is to “be the hands and feet of Jesus and to love people without expecting anything in return.”

Mark started Samaritan Aviation 20 years ago. It took him 10 years going around the United States to raise awareness to get the funding he needed to finally go to Papua New Guinea and help those in need.

“I’ll never forget the first flight that we did,” Mark said. “I got this call on Good Friday of 2010, and they said, ‘We have this mother. She’s been in labor for three days. Can you help us?’ And I remember rushing around.”

Mark remembers being able to fly the plane out in terrible weather. They loaded the stretcher and landed on the side of a muddy river. There they loaded the unconscious woman on the stretcher and flew back to Wewak. They got her to the hospital, and she went in for emergency surgery.

The next day my wife, I, and the kids show up at the hospital, and I’ll never forget walking into the recovery area and seeing this lady sitting there alive and holding a little baby boy,” Mark said.

Since 2010, Samaritan Aviation has flown more than 1,250 patients and delivered 180,000 pounds of medical supplies to 40 different aid posts.

For many villagers, a trip to the hospital can mean a multiday hike. Mark and his team provide medical relief and fly villagers to the hospital free of charge.

Mark currently operates with three seaplanes, three pilots, and a medical director. When he first started, it was just Mark and his family.

“Apparently, I was pretty intense back in my younger days,” Mark said with a laugh.

His wife, Kirsten, shared how her husband’s dream became a family business.

“Mark knew for sure he wanted to go,” Kirsten said. “But as we’re dating, you know, he’s asking me on our first date if I would like to go, and be willing to go, to Papua New Guinea, and if not, then, you know, we’ll just be friends. So, from the beginning, I knew his lifestyle would be heading out to Papua New Guinea, remote areas, and flying. And, so, as we get married that next year, we’re discussing and brainstorming all about Samaritan Aviation. But it wasn’t a name yet. It wasn’t an organization yet. And we were brainstorming names of what we think we should call it and things like that.”

Mark, Kirsten, and their three kids move from their home in California to Papua New Guinea for two to three years at a time.

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Check out the digital edition of EAA Sport Aviation for a video about Samaritan Aviation.

Sierra, the oldest of Mark and Kirsten's children, was just 7 years old when she first moved to Papua New Guinea.

"As a little girl, I think it was more like, I didn't know what to expect," Sierra said. "And, so, I was just following my parents, and I was like, 'Oh, we're going to be put on this adventure.' I don't think I ever realized how much of an impact and how much it would affect my life by going there. ... I was a willing participant. I was just going to come with my family and see, I guess, how everything happens."

Kirsten said that while their family is living in Papua New Guinea, they all play several different roles in helping the local community.

ON THE MAP

PAPUA NEW GUINEA



"When Mark goes on the flights, he calls me for weather checks, so I always called myself the weather lady," Kirsten said. "He would ask me where the clouds would come in because the weather would change so drastically there."

Kirsten said she also does a lot of administrative work, like payroll, along with her daughter.

"I'm also part of the outreaches whenever we go out and do vaccinations into the villages," she said.

Kirsten said that Samaritan Aviation truly is a family effort.

"Our kids got to experience going everywhere because I didn't leave them at home," she said.

She said the kids would be along when she picked up medicine for Mark to take on a flight, when patients would arrive at the airport, and when they drove the ambulance.

"It definitely was our kids involved in this effort as well," she said.

Sierra said she likes to help her parents with hospital ministry work as much as she can, but she also volunteers her time working in a clinic and assisting her dad on medical flights.

"In the hospital ministry, I go and talk with the patients [and] bring them food and clothes," Sierra said. "I used to once a week work in a clinic where I would help sort medicine and help give medicine to different patients. I've been on a few vaccination outreaches where we would go with our airplane to a remote village and give vaccines to hundreds of kids there. Going on the flights with my dad was always really cool because I would get to bring medicine with him, and get to see the villages all the time, and go on life flights with him when he's bringing patients."

Living in Papua New Guinea really changed the way Sierra viewed her home life in California. Living in Papua New Guinea has made her more grateful for the things she has, she said.

"We had a trampoline in our backyard [in Papua New Guinea], and some of the neighborhood kids came over and they saw it and they were asking us over and over again, 'What is this, what do you do on this?'" she said. "We brought them on it, and we showed them what to do."

Seeing the smiles and excitement on their faces was "really cool," she said.



QUALIFICATIONS

TO BE A SAMARITAN AVIATION MISSIONARY PILOT/MECHANIC

MINIMUM SKILLS/QUALIFICATIONS REQUIRED:

- Commercial certificate with instrument and seaplane ratings.
- Minimum of 500 flight-time hours.
- 100 hours of high-performance time.
- Management and leadership experience.
- Airframe and powerplant certificate.
- Inspection authorization preferred.
- Leadership and training skills.

RESPONSIBILITIES:

A. Life flights

- On call 24/7 to respond to emergencies in the East Sepik Province.
- Coordinate with a nurse to make decisions on which life flights to perform based on location, weather, and status of the patient.
- Coordinate with nurses from Boram hospital and our partners to ensure a flight nurse will be on each flight.
- Coordinate with nurses from Boram hospital to ensure we have supplies on all flights, including needles, bandages, drip lines, etc.
- Coordinate with Samaritan Aviation staff to confirm an ambulance is on-site when the patient arrives.

B. Medicine delivery

- Coordinate with the director of area medical services (AMS) to ensure AMS, the 10 nongovernmental organizations, and provincial government office staff who oversee the 30 clinics Samaritan Aviation distributes medical supplies to are coordinating with one another.

C. Disaster relief and emergency response

- Work with the provincial disaster response coordinator to ensure Samaritan Aviation is in a position to offer rapid response to potential disasters.

D. Oversight of air operations and routine maintenance

- Keep logbooks and paperwork up to date in a professional manner.
- Perform preventive maintenance, inspections, and repairs in accordance with FAR Part 43 (approved maintenance for pilots).
- Order parts needed for continued and future operations.
- Maintain good relations with other Papua New Guinea aviation service providers.

E. Fuel orders

- Maintain and monitor aviation fuel stored in Wewak and order and arrange shipping as necessary.

F. Mechanic, hangar, and other responsibilities

- Train Papua New Guinea employees.
- Perform scheduled and unscheduled maintenance on aircraft so that they are available for dispatch as scheduled.
- Perform engineering duties in a timely, efficient, and accurate manner.
- Ensure continued airworthiness of the aircraft.
- Ensure the aircraft are clean and neat.
- Ensure the aircraft records are current and complete.
- Keep up an aviation calendar of anticipated maintenance and inspection dates.
- Maintain the equipment and facilities for the aircraft.
- Participate in community health projects in villages along the Sepik.
- Participate in hospital activities when called upon.

For more information, visit www.SamaritanAviation.org.

LIFE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Mark said the typical housing for someone living in Papua New Guinea is a bush house with no electricity and no clean water.

“Some of these villages are on the water 365 days a year, so they literally get out of their hut onto a canoe, and that’s their life,” Mark said. “They don’t touch land for the whole day. So, it’s a very remote place. These people, when they have issues, they have no way to get to the hospital. And before we came we heard stories after stories of people dying, trying to go two days with a baby that’s sick or a lady who’s [suffering from] obstructed birth and people carrying her two to three days and then dying on the way.”

Mark said an average flight is 45 minutes. They will oftentimes travel with a nurse or midwife.

“Sometimes we bring a nurse with us, so if it’s a snake bite, we can bring in anti-venom and start anti-venom on them before we bring them in,” Mark said. “If it’s a birthing issue, we can bring a midwife from the hospital. If it’s a trauma, we can bring a trauma nurse. ... We’re able to specialize in the type of emergency response that we have so that we’re able to give them the best care until they get to a hospital.”

Mark and Kirsten in Kaup village.

HOPE IN ACTION

In 2009, three months before Mark and his family arrived, there was a cholera outbreak on the river. About 3,000 people died, he said.

“Since we’ve been there, we’ve had many outbreaks that we’ve helped stop, and we’ve never lost more than three lives through an outbreak like that,” he said.

Having an airplane that allows for quick response, medicine, and support from nurses in these remote areas has made all the difference, Mark said.

“You talk about civil aviation, you discuss it and the importance of it, but in this country without civil aviation or small aircraft, 80 percent of the country’s cut off really,” he said.

Villagers are excited and run up to the airplane when they arrive, Mark said.

“To them, that’s the most exciting thing they’ve seen is an airplane, landing on the water, coming into their village,” Mark said. “A lot of times they’re throwing flowers up in the air, and they’re just welcoming and celebrating the fact that we’re there. It’s just an amazing honor to serve the people over there.”



Being able to sit with them and talk about forgiveness, grace, and compassion for others is a powerful part of what they do, Mark said.

“That’s what we believe God’s done for us,” he said. “And so, I think that’s a powerful message.”

Mark said he requires his staff to take two weeks off work every six weeks because the work they do can be mentally and physically exhausting.

“I’ve been picking up a patient before and kind of been in the middle of a tribal war,” he said. “That’s not a good feeling when people are chasing each other with machetes and bush knives. I’ve had people die on the airplane that had been cut and things like that. It’s very hard. But we’re there to serve and we’re there to love them, where they’re at.”

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A SAMARITAN PILOT

Mark said there is a lot of training that takes place before a pilot can fly a mission.

“Our pilots, on average, take six months, even experienced pilots, to come in the country and learn the language, the culture, and then just the operation side of what we do,” Mark said. “It’s a very rugged area.”

Pilots also have to learn the ins and outs of the area. The only fuel is in Wewak, where they take off, so the pilot has to have enough fuel to get back.

There’s also lots of weather to deal with over there, Mark said.

“It’s tropical South Pacific,” he said. “So, you got the big thunder heads that come up every day. Fog in the morning on the river and then lots of weather in the afternoons.”

So far, Samaritan Aviation has successfully operated more than 3,000 hours with zero incidents or accidents.

“We were told it couldn’t be done when we first came,” Mark said. “We were told the river’s too muddy, it’s too much debris, and we’ve been able to show that it’s a proven model.”

Aside from flying in rough weather conditions, the Samaritan team also faces several other day-to-day challenges.

“About 20 percent of what we do involves violence as well,” Mark said. “It’s an eye-for-an-eye culture, and so you might bring in someone who’s been speared, and their normal reaction from being raised in that community is to go back and figure out who they can get back, right? So, it’s revenge, and it never stops. Some of these tribes will be at war for years, 10, 15 years.”



THE FUTURE OF SAMARITAN AVIATION

Samaritan Aviation has been so successful with its operation that the Papua New Guinea government has asked it to expand to the other side of the island. New Guinea is the second-largest island in the world. There are more than 7 million people that live in Papua New Guinea alone.

"In the middle of the island, it's 14,000-foot mountains all the way down," Mark said. "And so, when I talk about expansion, I'm talking about some place that's 250 miles away that's up and over big mountains. So, it's like setting up a whole new operation. It's not like just an extension of what we're doing. It's whole new housing for families, maintenance, all of that."

Mark said the reason why Samaritan Aviation has been so successful so far is because of the partnership with the Papua New Guinea government.

"Our goal wasn't to go over there and do our own thing," he said. "Our goal was to go over there and say, 'How can we help what you guys are doing to make the system better?' We have a partnership agreement with the National Department of Health now. So, we've been working with the National Department of Health for all these years and just serving alongside to make what they're doing better. Because before we were there, they didn't have anything as far as emergency evacuation. Getting medical supplies would take three to six months to get out to these clinics, and now we get them out the first day we get them."

"If you can imagine, getting medicine, someone puts it in the car, they drive it three or four hours, and it goes on a boat for a couple of days," Mark said. "A lot of times the rain wrecks the medical supplies, people steal it, or it gets given away. So, to have that accountability where we can grab medical supplies and fly it right to the village, making sure 100 percent of it gets there. That's a huge part, too, making sure they have medical supplies because it's very discouraging for the people to hike two days to a medical clinic and then there's no medicine. And once that happens a few times, people just give up."

Locals patiently wait for medical supplies.

Sierra Palm helps care for a newborn.

"THE AFTER AFFECT"

When he comes home, Mark said he often jokes about "first world problems" and learns to appreciate the little things in life.

"It's like oh, you're stuck in traffic, or the fast food is the wrong order, or they forget to give you your extra fries or whatever," Mark said. "You get irritated. It's like, well, these people are struggling to get fish to eat in the morning. And they're struggling with skin diseases and malnutrition and dirty water, and it's all of those things that we don't think about. You learn to appreciate the little things."

One of those little things, he said, is the sound of an airplane. In America, those who aren't involved with aviation oftentimes find the sound loud or irritating. To those remote villagers, it's something else entirely.

"To them, the sound of the airplane is a sound of hope," he said. "It's like a different paradigm shift. Your disgruntled neighbors versus this idea of the sound of the hope."

“SINCE WE’VE BEEN THERE, WE’VE HAD MANY OUTBREAKS THAT WE’VE HELPED STOP,

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through an outbreak like that.”

— MARK PALM

HOW TO HELP

As Samaritan Aviation looks to expand to different parts of the country, Mark said it’s looking for more pilots.

“We’re looking for three pilots in the next 12 months to come over and live,” Mark said.

People who are interested can go to www.SamaritanAviation.org/openings to learn more about the requirements and what it takes to prepare for flying in Papua New Guinea.

“We’re trying to finish an airplane right now, and we need about \$198,000 to finish the aircraft,” Mark said. “It’s about a \$650,000 project overall.”

This will be the organization’s third airplane.

“Right now, we have two in Papua New Guinea,” Mark said. “They’re all Cessna 206. The other ones in New Guinea right now are an 80 and 81 G model.”

A lot of work and ongoing support from partners has gone into the aircraft, Mark said.

“We’ve done Flint tip tanks, we’ve done [the] Wipaire right-hand door, we have Aerocet floats on it, we’ve put in all-new interior, and so what we have left is avionics,” he said. “Western Skyways does our engines, and they’re an amazing partner. They’ve done all of our engines on our airplanes at the cost of parts, so they’ve been a big supporter. Aerocet supports us with parts as well. Stene Aviation put on the sportsmen leading edge at cost. And so, it’s been great to have different supporters here in the [United] States that believe in what we’re doing and getting behind it, too.” *EAA*

Christina Basken, EAA 1299943, is EAA’s multimedia journalist. When she is not taking photos or writing for various publications, you can find her outside enjoying nature.

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TO GIVE!**