

THE LITTLE GIRL FROM LEXINGTON

By Kenny Miller

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LEXINGTON NE- "Do what you can to make her comfortable," the nurse said as the ambulance slowly backed toward the door of our Lear jet. "I don't think she will survive the flight to California."

From the size of the crowd and the number of get well signs, you could tell our patient was a popular central Nebraska young girl. But, she was likely to die on this airplane trip as we did our best to get her to San Jose and a last hope. She was going to have a heart and lung transplant at the Stanford University Medical Center. Veno Occlusive, a very rare disease was clogging her lungs. She was slowly suffocating. I never imagined I would face something like this when I became a pilot.

She was covered with a blue blanket. Her plastic oxygen mask went from clear to cloudy with each breath. There were bags of life-saving fluids attached to the long silver stainless steel rods and from the bottom of the bag dropped those clear plastic lifelines which lead to the IV entry points in both arms. She wore a brightly colored scarf on her head. Just below the scarf, I made contact with two blue eyes. They were glued on me as I helped load her stretcher into the airplane. I smiled and slowly mouthed the words, "Hi, you'll be OK."

The eyes squinted and the mask turned white as she tried to smile. She seemed so terribly fragile and weak. Once she was transferred to our on board stretcher and the paramedic crew had everything properly assembled, it was time to be on our way.

As I started to close the jet's door I noticed him. He wasn't moving away from the plane with the others. He just stood there, holding a small suitcase. He seemed a little over-whelmed with everything. I could see a toughness in him and at the same time, a gentleness. He seemed like a strong man--maybe an area farmer. I would not have thought much more about him except for the tears. Tears didn't belong on a strong face like his.

"Wait a second before you start the engines," I said to the captain. I opened the bottom part of the door, climbed out of the plane and walked over to the man. "Are you OK, sir?"

"They told me there was no room in the plane and I couldn't go," he said. "I'm her father."

I looked back at the plane and noticed only one small monitor sitting on the only seat left in the plane--the small and uncomfortable seat which covered the portable potty. The seat is right behind the crew and a few feet in front of the end the stretcher. In my mind and I was sure in his, the seat would be just fine. Within a few seconds, he was snugly strapped in, holding the small monitor in his lap, and the crowd was cheering an even louder good-bye as we took the runway and started our takeoff roll.

"Denver Center...Lifeguard 500 double Romeo climbing to flight level 240," I said into the small boom microphone as our little jet climbed its way to the heavens. Our jet needed a fuel stop to make it to San Jose. With fast service in Grand Junction, Colorado we would be back in the air in less than

ten minutes.

"Lifeguard 500 double Romeo, Denver Center, radar contact," came the quick reply from air traffic control. "Fly heading 233 radar vectors to Grand Junction climb and maintain flight level 410."

By simply saying the word, "lifeguard," the aviation world and its rules suddenly change. The controllers move your plane to the front of the line. It's only right. We were in a life and death battle with time.

"Are you warm enough and comfortable?" I asked as I looked over my shoulder at the paramedics and their patient. It was busy back there. One of the paramedics was listening through a stethoscope and the other was adjusting the flow from the one of the IV bags. I could no longer see the young girl's eyes. The paramedics gave me a thumbs-up that all was fine. So far so good.

The weather was on our young passenger's side--clear skies and unlimited visibility. We could see Grand Junction over one hundred miles away and could even make out the small black line that would soon turn into our runway. Her father watched over my shoulder as we started our descent into Grand Junction. He had a gentle hold on her left slipper-covered foot.

As we made our descent into Grand Junction, I had a strange feeling come over me. I looked over my left shoulder thinking one of the paramedics wanted something. An instant double take hit my flying busy head as I noticed our special passenger was propped up on her elbows watching us fly. Her eyes had a twinkle in them and the oxygen mask was turning from clear to white in a nice slow rhythm of what appeared to be very normal breathing.

"Turn it," I said to the captain.

"What?"

"Do some gentle turns so she can see the mountains."

He looked over his right shoulder and smiled as he made a series of gentle turns to reveal the grand splendor of the Colorado Rockies on a crystal clear day.

"Can you see Aspen ski area over there?" I asked her and indicated she should look out of the right side windows. She leaned toward the windows and stared for a minute and then turned back toward me. The oxygen mask turned white and pressed tightly against her face as she moved her head up and down to indicate yes.

A cheer erupted from two happy paramedics, her father, and two pilots. After a quick fuel stop, we were back in the air headed for San Jose. For the rest of our trip, our special passenger got the worst of the commercial pilot treatment.

"On your left is Salt Lake City. That's the Teton mountain range over there. That's Reno, Nevada and the big lake that looks like it is on top of the mountains is Lake Tahoe. That's the Godfather's house--there may be a horse without a head in the yard."

Her father, still gently holding her foot in his left hand, smiled and relayed every bit of information. She seem to giggle and smile more than ever as she was able to see each of the tourist points as the plane raced for California. She watched us enter the fluffy layer of cotton soft clouds and listened to the engine power adjustments and the radio calls as we glided

through the quiet stillness of the fog covered San Jose sky.

She watched the solid blanket of white fog turn to flying wisps as the Lear broke through the last of the fog to the running rabbit light that lead to the safe warm greeting of the yellow runway lights ahead of us. Finally, we were on the ground.

Another ambulance waited as we taxied to the ramp through the bay area drizzle. Our paramedics transferred her to another stretcher and started moving the stretcher through the door.

"Hold it!" said one of the paramedics.

I looked back from my seat thinking there was a problem. There, raised between our two pilot seats, was a small arm with an IV taped to the top of a reaching out hand. Her hand took hold of my left little finger and gave it a gentle squeeze. The squint in her eyes and the white breaths in the mask told me she was still smiling.

The tears were gone from her father's face. He smiled and waved good-bye as he boarded the ambulance and sat across from her. Almost instinctively, he reached over and began to hold her slipper-covered foot.

The ambulance attendant closed the door and I watched the flashing red lights turn to a muffled red glow as the ambulance disappeared into the fog.

Welcome to California little girl.