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CARE FLIGHT CELEBRATES 30 YEARS OF EVOLUTION AND EXCELLENCE

Reno, NV – The first civilian hospital based helicopter air ambulance; “Flight For Life” started at St. Anthony’s Hospital in Denver, Colorado in 1972. Flight nurses Jane Miller and Margaret Tole began flying with Flight for Life in 1975. Care Flight was born in 1981 when Miller accepted the position of Chief Flight Nurse, and along with Tole, moved to Reno, NV to start a much needed helicopter program to service the vast rural area of northern Nevada and northeastern California. Both Tole and Miller are still with the program 30 years later. Tole has also filled the roles as the program’s Vice President and Chief Nursing Officer, but has gone back to flying full time as a flight nurse. Miller is currently the program’s Vice President of Special Projects, overseeing the numerous accreditations and standards.

Originally, Care Flight was a shared service between then Washoe Medical Center and St. Mary’s Hospital, flying with just one pilot and one nurse. Care Flight was a single aircraft program flying the Aérospatiale Alouette III, the same aircraft flown at Flight for Life. The Alouette was ideal for the high altitudes of Denver and the Reno/Tahoe area as it was designed to fly in the Swiss Alps. By 1986 Care Flight was the busiest single medical helicopter program in the country, operating 24 hours a day, 356 days a year, and transporting an average of 1200 patients annually.

In 1994, helicopter manufacture McDonald Douglas asked Care Flight to be the test program for their twin engine MD900 for Emergency Medical Service (EMS) use. The MD900 was much faster than the Alouette and had more room to accommodate the addition of a second nurse, EMT, or paramedic. Care Flight flew the MD900 for 10 years and in 2004 switched to the high performance American Eurocopter B3 Astar, which Care Flight still operates today. The Astar is perfectly equipped to fly in the Nevada desert and Sierra Nevada Mountains. Excellent at flying in high heat and elevation, the Astar’s biggest claim to fame is that it is the only aircraft to successfully land atop Mt. Everest.

In 1999, Northern Nevada was growing and significant populations were emerging outside the Reno and Carson City areas, which prompted Care Flight to open a second base, Care Flight 2 in Gardnerville, NV. The addition of Care Flight 2 provided twice the capacity and reduced the response time to areas south east of Reno and to South Lake Tahoe and Alpine County. Initially, the base in Gardnerville was staffed 12 hours per shift during the day. In 2001 the base was extended to a 24-hour base and remains that way today staging out of the Carson Valley Medical Center.

In 2003 Care Flight expanded again by adding Care Flight 3 in Truckee, CA providing faster response to Plumas, Lassen, Placer, and Nevada counties as well as increasing the overall patient capacity of Care Flight. As with the Gardnerville base, Truckee began as a 12-hour base but by 2006 the need for the service dictated the extension to a 24-hour operation. Care Flight 3 is stationed at the Truckee Tahoe Airport.



Care Flight, since its inception, has always been vigilant when it comes to safety, performance, and clinical excellence. The program cuts no corners or spares any cost when it comes to making the program as safe and effective as possible. In addition to the high-end aircraft, Care Flight is on the front edge of safety equipment and protocol adaptation. “Safety is our number one priority because we can’t provide exceptional patient care if you don’t operate safely,” says Margaret Tole, Vice President of Care Flight.

Care Flight is well ahead of the National Transportation Safety Board’s recommendations for medical helicopter operations. Care Flight has satellite phones in each aircraft to ensure another communication option that is especially needed when flying in rural Nevada and other areas where cell service and even radio repeaters can be inconsistent. Care Flight has also been flying with night vision goggles since 2005, and in 2008, Care Flight again upgraded the safety equipment in the aircraft with the addition of Terrain Avoidance and Warning Systems (TAWS), as well as dual, moving, GPS systems with live weather feeds, and upgraded satellite phones.

Care Flight has come a long way in 30 years and is proud to be a permanent fixture in so many northern Nevada and northeastern California communities. The trademark “Blue and Silver” of Care Flight’s helicopters and uniforms has become a sign of hope at hospitals and medical scenes across the region. Today Care Flight employs 21 critical care flight nurses, 12 critical care flight paramedics, and holds the top accreditations in the business. In addition to the medical staff, Care Flight contracts with Air Methods Corporation, the largest air medical transport companies in the country, to furnish the program’s aviation component with 13 very experienced and skilled pilots as well as 5 full time mechanics and FAA certificate.

Care Flight appreciates the continued support of Renown Regional Medical Center, the Truckee Tahoe Airport, and the Carson Valley Medical Center where its three bases are located as well as partner hospitals Northern Nevada Medical Center, and St. Mary’s Regional Medical Center. Care Flight would especially like to thank the numerous fire departments, rural hospitals, EMS agencies, volunteer organizations, law enforcement, and the communities they serve. “Without these dedicated individuals, Care Flight would be unable to perform its role as effectively and we are grateful for all their hard work and dedication”, says Tole.

“As we take a moment to celebrate our 30 years in service I am proud and amazed at how far this program has come and so pleased to have been a part of it from its inception”, said Tole. “We have had a wonderful 30 years serving our communities and we are looking forward to another 30.”

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