



Flight

An odyssey
of kindness

NOEL MARSHALL

Across

America

Like EAA, the Flight Across America (FLAA) was a grass-roots effort. It was nothing short of an incredible life event, and it succeeded through the cooperation of strangers from every state in the nation, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. This group of pilots/strangers, now almost family, contributed their talents, time, and know-how to fly and to promote understanding of general aviation, and to honor those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001. I'm honored to have represented Wisconsin, along with my husband, Bob Warner, EAA's executive vice president, and we would like to share a tale that is almost too big to tell.

FLAA was organized as a response to the events of September 11 and the ensuing emotional devastation they inflicted on the victims' families, and on an activity that we love—flying. The initial idea came from an unlikely source, Molly Peebles, a young, divorced mother of three, who was scheduled to take her private pilot checkride that September day in Redmond, Washington. Molly has since earned her certificate and checked out in complex aircraft, but that wasn't enough. Over coffee with a friend, Molly hatched an idea that would continue to grow—enriched by the talents and kindness of strangers.

A Web of Flights

The idea was simple. Create a website where pilots could register their flights between August 11 and September 11, 2002, and then have pilots from every state join together and fly to New York City. Molly saw this as a way to symbolically connect our nation through flight, a way to promote aviation, a way to stand up and be counted for the freedom of flight—and a way to unite and heal our country.

As I watched flights being logged on the Flight Across America website (at www.flightacrossamerica.com) the resulting picture reminded me of a spider web. I remembered a sci-

ence teacher who taught me that by equal weight a spider's silk is five times stronger than steel and twice as strong as Kevlar (man's strongest product). Bob and I wanted to contribute to the strength of that web by promoting flights and involvement in our home state. By the end of August, pilots had logged or pledged to log flights to more than 90 percent of Wisconsin's 135 public-use airports.

Another reason we felt so strongly about getting involved was to protect our flying privileges. We are privileged in this country to have the freedom to fly, yet there are those, including the terrorists, who would like to clip our wings. September 11, 2001, was to have been a special day for Bob and me, as we looked forward to celebrating our 14th wedding anniversary with dinner at a favorite Greek restaurant.

Our plans abruptly changed, along with those of an entire nation. A big change was our freedom of flight. The staff at EAA, along with the rest of the aviation community, faced the formidable task of quickly, logically, and safely repairing our clipped wings and ensuring that our flying privileges wouldn't be another victim of



JERRY SCHMIDT

September 11. Bob and I saw Flight Across America as an opportunity to demonstrate that the freedom of flight is alive and well.

A Nationwide Antidote

Nothing anyone can do will undo the events of September 11. What we could do, however, was band together under the wing of Flight Across America and demonstrate our love for aviation while honoring those who served and those who fell victim. As flag bearers were selected from each state, our FLAA family grew more talented. We pooled our resources, and it seemed that any obstacle that presented itself was

overcome by another generous soul who joined our journey.

Molly started her journey on August 11 with fellow pilot Chuck Oppermann. Chuck made the FLAA website a reality, and then he joined Molly as a U.S. flag bearer. They flew from Washington in Chuck's Cessna 182, which they named the *Spirit of America*.

Our odyssey started at EAA's Pioneer Airport on August 31, where we organized a "Never Forget" ceremony to welcome Molly and Chuck. Joining us were the flag bearers from Illinois, Minnesota, and Michigan and a Wisconsin family who lost their 48-year-old son,

Old Glory reflects on a marble memorial commemorating the heroes of Flight 93.

U.S. Army Lt. Col. Dennis M. Johnson, on duty at the Pentagon. Lt. Gov. Margaret Farrow gave the family a Wisconsin flag that bore their son's name. Wisconsin Congressman Tom Petri gave Bob and me an identical flag, and we carried it with pride as we visited the three sites where freedom was attacked.

Originally, FLAA was to fly the flags east and present them to the citizens of New York City. Donna Miller, an American Airlines pilot

After being flown above the Wisconsin capital, Bob Warner, EAA executive vice president, assisted by Congressman Tom Petri and Lt. Gov. Margaret Farrow, posts our flag at EAA's "Never Forget" ceremony.



AUGUST 31, 2002

JIM KOENIG

Donna Miller, right, eulogizes those lost at Shanksville: "We are here to honor their memory and celebrate their spirit." Our visit was made possible by Somerset Aero Club, Bill LeRoy of US Airways, and Denver ALPA Council 33.



SEPTEMBER 5, 2002

JERRY SCHMIDT

furloughed in the aftermath of September 11 after three days on the job, felt the FLAA mission should be expanded to honor those who died at Shanksville, Pennsylvania. In Colorado, Donna teamed up with Nancy Aldrich, a retired United Airlines captain (aka “Captain Grandma”), and they declared themselves the “only unmanned FLAA flight.” These ladies gave us a tremendous gift: they harnessed their resources and hosted a memorial service on Thursday, September 5, at the crash site of United Airlines Flight 93.

That’s where many FLAA flag bearers met for the first time. Bob and I were in the last of the 31 planes to land at Somerset County, Pennsylvania. As we taxied and eventually found a parking spot in the grass, emotion welled within us as we saw the swarm of aircraft, each proudly wearing the official FLAA logo, and watched the breeze gently fan the field of state flags.

Later, as the sun set over an unsuspecting Pennsylvania farm field that looked more conducive to soccer than a memorial, we shared a simple service that remembered the heroic spirit of the 40 citizens who saved the lives of many. At dawn the next day, September 6, 2002, our FLAA “freedom formation” headed southeast to Frederick, Maryland, where the group grew to 40 aircraft.

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Minnesota’s Kevin Rebman, assisted by Maryland’s flag bearer, Tom Meacham, had decided that our journey should include a visit to the Pentagon to honor our fallen countrymen. They created an agenda that overcame such logistical challenges as rush hour traffic in Washington, D.C.

After a tour of AOPA’s headquarters and a lunch honoring the FLAA participants, we traveled to a grassy knoll that overlooks the reconstructed section of the Pentagon. Several Pentagon officials received

us and joined us in a prayer for the 184 victims and their surviving family and friends. In support of FLAA, American Airlines pilots provided roses—one for each state—for us to present in honor of the Pentagon victims.

It was difficult to process the emotions of those 24 hours, and I’m not sure I ever will. It was a joy, however, to get to learn more about our FLAA compatriots during a late-night dinner COMM1 Radio Simulator hosted. Dinner was served under the starlit skies of Frederick, which has always been a special place for me because it’s where I earned my pilot wings many years ago.

The next morning the reality of aircraft ownership asserted itself for several flag bearers, including us. On short final to Somerset County, Bob had felt dripping on his leg. After investigating its source after landing, sure enough, it smelled like kerosene. Fellow flag bearer Pete Eschleman of the D.C. area, and the owner of an aircraft repair company, helped repair our compass.

Catching up with the FLAA flock for brunch at Wilkes-Barre/Scranton on Saturday, September 7, we were the guests of Pennsylvania flag bearer David Pekala and Frank Paczewski of Tech Aviation. We were warmly greeted, fed a fantastic brunch, and shooed off to New Jersey’s Essex

Lt. Col. Mercadante, USAF, and Capt. Epperson, chaplain, USN, lead us in prayer at a humble memorial directly in front of the Pentagon crash site. We saw repairs being completed and preparations made for September 11.



SEPTEMBER 6, 2002

Gus Fraser explains the State of Liberty TFR at our safety briefing. Yankee Air Force provided ground support during our stay. In his role as an AirLifeLine pilot, Gus also flew the Nevada flag in the Honor Flight.



SEPTEMBER 7, 2002

County Airport, which would become our base camp for the next few days.

FLAA's family was now complete, with flag bearers from every state and the District of Columbia (Puerto Rico was delayed in arriving). We gathered in a hangar provided by C&W Aero Services and were the guests of the North Jersey 99s, led by Susan Loricchio and Mary Sullivan, where we were plied with food, a poem, and songs.

With this hospitality was the realization that in about 12 hours we 50-plus airplanes would fly our flags in an "Honor Flight" down the famed Hudson River corridor. Flag bearer Gus Fraser, who was key in soliciting local aviation officials' support, briefed us on the operational and safety procedures we would follow.

After the briefing I worked with my sister, Sherry Marshall, a pilot and professional meeting planner, and Hilary Lawrence, a volunteer EAA photographer, to organize the final phase of our journey. We sold banquet tickets, gave directions, and herded approximately 200 flag bearers and family members to our FLAA banquet.

That evening we received wonderful gifts from people who believed in our mission. The most precious, however, was the friendship and camaraderie that we



COURTESY DAVID LAU

The Lindbergh Connection

At EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2002, Erik Lindbergh, right, had an opportunity to learn more about Flight Across America—and then decided to take some action. As a result, the Lindbergh family donated a medallion to New York City of the *Spirit of St. Louis*, sculpted by Don F. Wiegand, on behalf of FLAA. One of the last recipients of this Lindbergh gift was Astronaut/Senator John Glenn. But time was short; the 70-pound medallion was only completed the day before our ceremony. EAA Aviation Foundation Board Member Dave Lau, left, made sure the medallion was safely transported to New York City. With less than 48 hours notice, Dave flew from his home in Watertown, Wisconsin, to pick up the medallion in St. Louis, and safely delivered it to the FLAA banquet and ceremony. The medallion will be displayed with the FLAA state flags in a traveling exhibit and at EAA AirVenture 2003 until it becomes part of the rebuilt World Trade Center complex. Another kindness in the odyssey that was Flight Across America! For more information on the Lindbergh Foundation, visit www.lindberghfoundation.org.

Our flags made a unified flight onto the deck of the Intrepid Sea-Air-Space Museum (www.intrepidmuseum.org), which made our flag ceremony possible as it kindly donated use of their facility waiving all rental fees.

U.S. flag bearers Molly Peebles and Chuck Oppermann, center, hold a propeller signed by the flag bearers, their family, and guests at the conclusion of our flag ceremony. Our FLAA family is planning a reunion at EAA AirVenture 2003.

SEPTEMBER 8, 2002



DAVID LAU

SEPTEMBER 8, 2002



HILARY LAWRENCE

exchanged among ourselves. At the banquet's conclusion we retreated to our hotel and again studied the Honor Flight route and procedures. Our flight would start at 0600 at the airport, where a bomb and canine unit would inspect our planes before departure.

Honor Flight

Each flag started its journey by flying over its state capital. Now they would fly in honor of those who served and perished on September 11 before FLAA presented the flags to the city of New York. On Sunday, September 8, our family of fliers rose before the sun and gathered again in the C&W Aero hangar.

Gus briefed us again, as did Bob and Chuck, who had spent the last two months planning the flight that would take us down the Hudson, past the Statue of Liberty and lower Manhattan, and return us to Essex County Airport. The airport manager, control tower, FSDO, FAA headquarters, and appropriate law and security agencies knew our plan well in advance, and FLAA received outstanding cooperation. Essex County Airport Manager Tom Gomez even reserved ramp space for our aircraft and closed the airport for the duration of our flight.

Each aircraft had an Honor Flight position according to its type and speed. Our red, white, and blue RV-



Hero Bear

The first general aviation pilots flying after the terrorist attacks were charity flights organized by such groups as Angel Flight America (www.angelflightamerica.org) and AirLifeLine (www.airlifeline.org); eleven of the FLAA flag bearers are active charity pilots, and that's how we came to meet Bear, a 12-year-old golden retriever, and his "dad," Capt. Scott Shields. The pair wanted to thank the pilots who ferried rescuers as well as delivered dog booties and other gear to protect the rescue teams at Ground Zero. The dynamic duo of Bear and Scott was the first rescue team on the "pile" after the WTC collapse and is credited with the most finds. While on stage, Bear tripped, and Scott explained the plight of many rescue dogs whose insurance companies would not cover their care. Scott planned to bring Bear to EAA AirVenture 2003 to bring attention to charity flights and animal rescue; however, Bear died on September 23 from his WTC injuries. A foundation is being organized in Bear's memory (<http://bear.landofpuregold.com>).

Young Eagle Cassie Johnson, one of Col. Johnson's two daughters, is flanked by pilot Bob Warner and her Johnson grandparents, Bob and Elva, visiting from Wisconsin. Cassie plans on attending the EAA Air Academy next summer.



SEPTEMBER 13, 2002

NOEL MARSHALL

At Arlington National Cemetery, a pentagon-shaped memorial stands guard at the grave sites of military personnel killed at the Pentagon. Their graves are in the shadow of the Pentagon, visible through the trees, where they lost their lives.



SEPTEMBER 14, 2002

BETH WARNER

6A followed our homebuilt counterparts—Montana’s Dave Miller in his Quickie Q2 Tri Q200 and an RV-4, complete with sunflowers, flown by Ret. Col. Ronald Williams of Kansas. (Learn more about the flag bearers at the FLAA website.)

Our flight of 51 aircraft (minus California and Puerto Rico) went safely and without incident. We will never be able to fly that route again and match the pride, emotion, and collective spirit we shared on our mission that serene morning.

After the Honor Flight we turned our flags over to Liberty Helicopters, which would fly them to the USS Intrepid, an aircraft carrier and museum docked on the Hudson River. We traveled to the ship by bus and then ferry. When the helicopter touched down on the flight deck at 3:20 p.m., we retrieved our flags. Louisiana flag bearer, Emmett Carson, a marine Vietnam veteran, designed, built, and shipped flag



JERRY SCHMIDT

Nancy Coletti sings *Voice of Freedom*, written by pilot Susan Loricchio, background, and Ed Kessel. A CD and video of the FLAA is available at www.flightacrossamerica.com.

poles and display stanchions into which our state flags were ultimately gathered. Another example of flag bearer can-do; *Semper Fi!*

With New York City’s skyscrapers as a backdrop, the simple, moving ceremony took place on the Intrepid’s deck on that perfect summer afternoon. Frank Hatfield of the FAA’s Eastern Region announced that effective September 11, 2002, the LaGuardia Airport fix would be renamed “Bravest” in honor of the New York Fire Department; the Kennedy Airport fix would be renamed “Finest” in honor of the New York Police Department; and Ground Zero would become a new fix named “Heroes,” in honor of the Port Authority of New York/New Jersey and all other victims.

FLAA’s New York flag bearer, NYPD Sgt. Rich Knoeller, accepted the “Finest” plaque from Hatfield. Rich had taken vacation the week of September 11 to finish training and

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earn his pilot's certificate. His brother-in-law, however, was on duty and was one of the 2,797 victims.

Representing the families of New York, the family of Battalion Chief Dennis A. Cross accepted our flags of friendship. Nancy Coletti then sang FLAA's theme song, *Voice of Freedom*, and dedicated her performance to her cousin, Vincent Difazio, who perished in the World Trade Center.

Erik Lindbergh, the grandson of Charles Lindbergh, spoke about spirit and possibilities and presented a sculpture of the *Spirit of St. Louis* that his family donated in honor of Flight Across America, and to become part of the WTC redevelopment and eventual memorial. Erik, who joined Molly and Chuck for the Honor Flight, said his family felt they needed to do something

because what FLAA was doing was so unequivocally positive for aviation.

It was impossible not to feel the strength of our compassion and spirit. On the deck of an aircraft carrier that defended freedom in combat, we formed a circle. We presented our flags in solemn procession, binding our gifts together with words from our hearts. One spirit, under God, united to honor, to heal, and to fly for freedom.

Before our journey home, Bob and I had one more important mission near Washington, D.C.—to meet and fly a special Young Eagle, Cassie Johnson. The daughter of Lt. Col. Dennis Johnson, whose family we'd met in Oshkosh, Cassie and her mom still live near the Pentagon. We didn't know it when we offered Cassie a Young Eagles flight, but she wants to be a pilot. After her flight, Bob said that she's a gifted 17-year-old who not only asked informed aeronautical questions, but also was a natural handling our RV's stick and rudder. Cassie plans to apply for a scholarship to attend EAA's Air Academy next summer, and we are looking forward to continuing our circle of friendship.

Two weeks after our Never Forget ceremony in Oshkosh, Bob and I visited Arlington National Cemetery. Winging our way home we reflected on our odyssey. Under the wing of the Flight Across America, we respectfully honored the more than 3,000 victims of September 11. Through the kindness and actions of numerous supporters, our Flight Across America family overcame many obstacles and stood up for something we all hold dear—our freedom of flight.

Noel Marshall is an active EAA volunteer and serves as chairman of *Protect Our Planes at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh*.



For complete information, send \$15.00 (\$20.00 overseas—checks on U.S. Banks) to: Sequoia Aircraft, Dept. S, 2000 Tomlynn St., Richmond, VA 23230. Visa/M.C., call (804) 353-1713. Fax 359-2618.



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