

This Is Why We Are Here

Posted: 04 Feb 2015 01:32 AM PST



We have been back in Congo for almost a week. Nearly over jet lag, I returned to the hangar on Monday. Our team gathered like normal on Monday morning for scripture, prayer, and time talking about the upcoming week. The Cessna 182 has quite a few flights coming up in the next few weeks and not enough pilots, so I was needed to hop back into the pilot's seat immediately. But because it had been 3 months since I had flown this airplane, and six months since my last flight review, I needed a flight review with one of our MAF instructor pilots. This is something all of our pilots do every six months (or more if we fly multiple airplanes). An instructor rides along with us, observing us during a normal flight. Then, after we drop our passengers off, we will go out and practice special maneuvers and simulate emergencies to make sure we are on top of our game. Because I had done quite a bit of flying while back in the States there wasn't much to it, just remembering some of the intricacies and quirks of this particular aircraft.

The flight went great and we returned back to home base just before sunset. The following morning I had a trip carrying long time missionary Jim Smith (age 70) back to his home in Nkara from furlough in the States. Together, he and his wife Nancy run Laban Ministries which operates a bible training school and a Christian radio station which has more listeners than any other radio station in this area of the Congo. We had to wait out some morning weather before departing on the nearly two hour flight, but just before we departed I noticed another cell forming just east of the area to which we would be flying. There were several alternate airstrips along the way, so I decided to continue but turn around if necessary. About 30 miles from our destination, we noticed the partly cloudy skies below us had turned to mostly overcast. I found a hole and circled down below the cloud deck. We passed over our refueling stop and continued onward. The clouds were about 2,000 feet above the ground and the visibility was dropping due to rain showers and haze, but still OK. About 5 minutes away from our destination the visibility had dropped to around 2 miles - if it continued to deteriorate, I would turn around. I was concerned that we were approaching the cell that was growing on the satellite image I saw in the morning. Finally, I saw the airstrip, radioed in, completed the checklist and made a non-eventful landing. Not wanting to stick around to see if the supposed cell would intensify, I quickly offloaded the baggage, said goodbye to the passenger,

and proceeded to my refueling stop 23 miles away. Amazingly, the rain and the haze had disappeared in the time I was on the ground. I thought to myself, this is why we are here. Supporting and encouraging missionaries and providing them safe transportation.

After I made it to Vanga and refueled, I began loading the cargo for the return trip and was handed the manifest. I saw I had medical passengers, one whose weight suggested he was grown and one who would obviously be a child. Their destination was Kikongo, which happens to be one of our other frequent stops. Frequently we take medical patients to Vanga, which has one of the better hospitals in the region, despite the fact it is 200 miles into the interior. Rarely do we take patients from Vanga, as once they are healthy enough to leave, they typically return by a slower means to their village. I called for the passengers and saw that the child was the patient. She was small, only weighing around 30 pounds and couldn't speak well, so I guessed her to be 3 or 4 years old, and was carried by her father. She had no hair and had a large and bulky bandage over her right eye. As they were being buckled in, I spent some time talking to the father about my two kids and asking him some questions about his family too. I asked about the nature of the injury. He responded she was six and had a particularly nasty cancer that affects an astounding number of children in the area. The doctor had released them because there was nothing else that could be done. She didn't have much time left and they wanted to send the child back to her home. My heart broke and tears started to well up. I spent a little extra time praying with them before we took off, laying hands on both of them. The weather was fine, some small low clouds, but mostly clear. No rain, easy navigation and the trip was short, only about 40 minutes. Yet, it was the most difficult flight of my life. After we landed, I prayed with my precious cargo again and I thought to myself, now *this* is why we are here.