

Wheels and Wings when Minutes Matter!

Tuesday 23 November, 2021

Last Tuesday, Civil Air Support (CAS) and the National Association of Blood Bikes (NABB) united with the Northern Ireland Community Rescue Service to deliver time-critical bacteria from a healthy donor in Birmingham to a patient with an urgent need in an acute hospital in Belfast.

There can be few better examples of voluntary organisations working together in partnership that are entirely different in their operational focus but united in their ambition to provide urgent support where needs are great and alternative solutions are limited.

In 2015, NABB launched a national service to provide FMT (Faecal Microbiome Transplant) material, distributed from a specialist Midlands hospital to multiple locations across the country to treat patients suffering with *C. difficile colitis*. Despite the versatile agility of two-wheeled transport however, some parts of the UK are just too difficult to reach within the limited useful life of these time-critical cargoes.

Working with Civil Air Support in three-leg relay operations, FMT material can be delivered from the University of Birmingham Microbiome Treatment Centre (MTC) to practically any part of the UK whilst the bacteria are still able to successfully treat patients for whom alternative therapies and antibiotics have failed.

Recent relay operations have delivered FMT samples from Birmingham to Newquay, Perranporth and most recently the Mater Infirmorum Hospital in Belfast city centre. As always, the service has been provided free of charge by volunteers including Blood Bikes riders in Birmingham, Community Rescue Service workers in Belfast, and the Piper PA-28 Warrior that was provided courtesy of its CAS pilot and the Azure Flying Club at Cranfield.

The use of unpaid volunteers for critical missions does nothing to diminish the standard of service delivery. Blood Bikes riders are all highly experienced with impeccable safety standards, and CAS pilots are amongst the best qualified aviators in the world.

This most recent mission was flown by Civil Air Support Operations Manager Dr Guy Gratton. Like many CAS pilots, Guy has a rich and diverse background in aviation so the organisation (and those whom it serves) benefit from his considerable professional training and experience.

Guy is a chartered aeronautical and mechanical engineer with extensive experience across aircraft design, certification, operations and testing. He also holds a Commercial Pilots Licence with test pilot and instructor qualifications and has flown over 1900 hours in 110 aircraft types from microlights to fast jets.

Professionally, Guy delivers research programmes at Cranfield University in the overlap between aeronautical engineering and environmental science. He is also a published author of many works on aviation safety related topics.

On Monday evening, Guy repositioned a PA-28 (G-BTNT) from Cranfield to Halfpenny Green airport, Wolverhampton and filed an IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) flight plan in readiness for Tuesday's mission. Pre-flight checks began at 08:30 on Tuesday morning and the FMT samples arrived by Blood Bike shortly before 09:00. The Warrior was airborne by 09:16 and a climb to the planned cruising altitude of 8,000 feet was swiftly expedited by Air Traffic Controllers who understood the urgency of the mission.

Guy routed North towards Stoke on Trent before turning North-West and coasted out at West Kirby on The Wirral at 10:04. Some 50 minutes later, the Warrior passed overhead Port St Mary on the South-West peninsula of the Isle of Man, and from there Guy continued on track to Belfast Lough before turning on to his final approach into George Best Belfast City Airport. He was provided with a Radar Vektored ILS (Instrument Landing System) approach by helpful Air Traffic Controllers and landed the Piper Warrior on Runway 22 at 11:36.

In recognition of the urgent nature of the endeavour, Belfast City Airport Handling Agents AVFlight expedited Guy's arrival procedures and the PA 28 was swiftly marshalled to an apron location where a motorbike was waiting to relay the precious cargo to the Mater Infirmorum hospital in the City Centre.

Guy was particularly grateful for the support of AVFlight. *"Not only did they waive the usual fees, but AVFlight managed the Belfast Airport part of the operation so that I was able to deliver the package into the hands of the Community Rescue Service rider within 5 minutes of landing! That's pretty impressive*

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at a busy international airport”.

The FMT material was rushed the 4.7 miles from George Best Airport to “The Mater” arriving shortly before 12:00 noon. All in all, not a bad morning’s work for Civil Air Support, Blood Bikes and the Community Rescue Service, proving once again (if there were ever any doubt) that ‘the whole is greater than the sum of the parts!’

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