



Jeff Tolbert

chief executive officer
AirMed International



Waypoint spoke to Jeff Tolbert, chief executive officer of AirMed International, US, about how the company began, and the importance of accreditation in the international air ambulance industry

Where were you born, where did you go to school and where do you live now?

I was born in Alabama, US. I graduated from the University of Alabama, and I live in Birmingham, Alabama.

In the midst of the global economic recession, AirMed International was buying aircraft and opening a new base in Hong Kong – how did the company manage to ride out the recession so well?

We did most of our expansion before the official start of the global recession and had already put all the pieces in place for it prior to the economic woes. We can't say we've ridden it out 100 per cent, because we've been hit just like everyone has.

How did you come to be part of the air ambulance industry in the first place, and to your current role as president and CEO of AirMed International?

My first company out of college was an executive jet service, with myself as pilot and sole proprietor. In 1982, I was asked to fly the first heart transplant donor in the Southeastern US on my aircraft. We picked him up in one state and delivered him to a hospital in another state. I quickly realized that moving seats out of a business jet was no way to transport patients properly, and so I started the process of outfitting a jet as a permanent air ambulance. The US had a few helicopter air ambulance programmes in operation at the time, but

other than the military, there were no jet aircraft dedicated solely to medical transports. It was definitely something that hospitals were finding themselves more in need of due to the advancement of transplants and just medicine in general. So, by the following year (1983), I was the first person in the country to operate a civilian jet equipped exclusively for medical transportation, and I've never looked back. It's been a personally rewarding career path.

Neonatal aeromedical transportations are becoming ever more common; what provisions does your company have to cater to this growing sector of the marketplace? What do you consider to be your most important asset in this regard?

With the addition of ECMO (extra corporeal membrane oxygenation) transports, AirMed is now second-to-none in our ability to perform complicated neonatal missions of every type. In my opinion, it is the system we have put in place at AirMed that is our most important asset. You can have the most well trained staff in the world, but they won't be able to perform if the aircraft is inadequate. Likewise, what good is a world-class aircraft if the staff can't perform the duties needed? We don't hold one above the other, because for us to succeed, they both have to operate at the highest levels possible.

What proportion of your medical flights are done internationally versus domestically inside the US?

Around 60 per cent are within North America and 40 per cent are international.

How important is it to be accredited in the international air ambulance industry?

Being accredited doesn't enhance patient care or safety. What it does do is say 'We are committed'. It's vital to undergo this very important certification process, both in Europe (from the European Aero-Medical Institute – EURAMI) and North America (the Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Services – CAMTS), but it is more important to live those standards 365 days a year and not just during the week before your review takes place. For AirMed, accreditation is not a big production to get ready for because we live it every single day, every hour of every day.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

I enjoy fishing and American football, but for the most part, my avocation is my vocation. Anyone who knows me knows that I work far too much because I enjoy it far too much.

What are you most proud of?

The team we have assembled at AirMed, every aspect of our staff, top to bottom.

If you could do any other job in the world, what would it be?

I've found what I am meant to do right here at AirMed. I wouldn't be anywhere else.