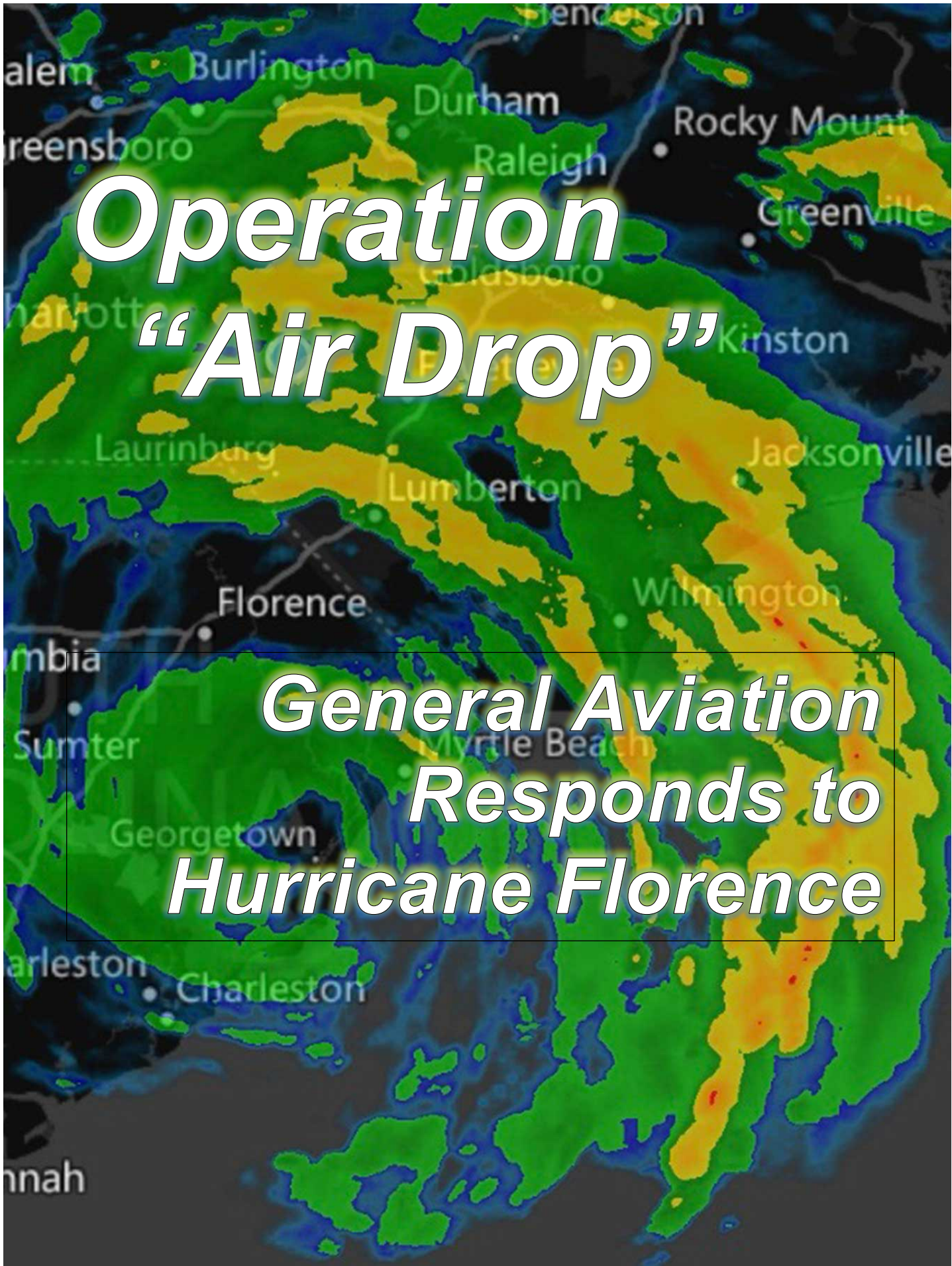


A weather radar map of the Southeastern United States, showing the path of Hurricane Florence. The map uses a color scale from green to red to indicate precipitation intensity. The hurricane's path is visible as a bright yellow and red area moving from the Atlantic Ocean towards the coast. Major cities are labeled across the region, including Raleigh, Durham, Charlotte, and Jacksonville.

Operation “Air Drop”

*General Aviation
Responds to
Hurricane Florence*

Operation Air Drop — General Aviation's Response to Hurricane Florence

By Mike Jones

Cessna Pilots Magazine, originally published: October 2018

General aviation pilots across the southeastern United States put down their hundred-dollar hamburgers in September 2018 to become an integral part of the emergency relief effort for Hurricane Florence. More than 250 G.A. pilots, including myself and my reliable old Centurion, volunteered with “Operation Airdrop” to fly relief supplies to the closest point of need. No reimbursement was involved; all the pilots donated their time, their planes and the fuel.

Operation Airdrop was conceived by Texan Doug Jackson after Hurricane Harvey pounded Houston with catastrophic flooding in 2017. Hurricane Florence was similar. It delivered five days of heavy rain to the Carolina low countries. One friend said the crescendo of flooding “was like being stalked by a turtle: slow but relentless.”

Hurricane Florence

With Florence, the damage was not caused by high winds but by flood waters that overwhelmed dikes, covered roads, tore out bridges, and rendered large parts of North and South Carolina completely inaccessible. My personal rain gauge recorded 17 inches of precipitation while the shoreline, about 150 miles to the east, was battered with up to 40 inches. For a week, the coastal city

of Wilmington was an island: 200,000 people were completely isolated. As near as I can tell, Operation Airdrop is the only organization performing aviation-based relief work on this scale, and both the concept and the details were thoroughly tested with Florence. Like the Berlin Airlift in 1948, Operation Airdrop was a life-saver.

Airdrop initially planned a staging center at Statesville Airport, north of Charlotte

International but they hoped for a location closer to the disaster area. TAC Air, the terrific FBO at Raleigh-Durham International Airport (RDU), offered an empty terminal building. Their facility was ideal: spacious, brightly lit, lots of bathrooms, fast WIFI and abundant electricity. It offered easy access to the ramp and easy access from airport roads for people making donations.

“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, and to make some difference.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson



The flooding was bad, but the disruption to the highway system was the biggest problem because it stopped the flow of relief supplies. It also destroyed jobs, so the people hardest hit not only lost their homes but their incomes.

The local pilot community heard about the operation primarily via Facebook postings, many written by Dan Benedix. Benedix is a force of nature; an energetic serial entrepreneur based near Raleigh, an avid flyer, an enthusiastic and skilled user of social media, and possessed with boundless energy.



Dan Benedix, one of the key movers behind Operation Airdrop.

On September 16th Benedix posted a bold challenge. “The weather is slowly moving out and we are hoping for some breaks tomorrow,” he wrote. “Donations are coming... This effort has been unbelievable and fast. Let’s haul some supplies to these folks.” Pilots from the Carolinas, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Florida and even Texas stepped up to the plate.

The need was enormous and urgent. It wasn’t as perilous as bush flying, but we aren’t bush pilots. We’re just regular folks flying heavily loaded GA planes into uncertain conditions to unknown people. There even were efforts to fly into Stagg Field, a soggy grass strip, and another plan to land supplies at a drag racing track. Conditions were worrisome and data was vague.

Making a Difference

Roger Montgomery, a 400-hour local pilot and a network engineer for a local I.T. company, told me about one of his Airdrop missions.

“My flight was to Henderson Field, near Wilmington. I’m flying low, over Interstate 40,” he said, and what he saw amazed him. “The road was empty, blocked by flooding. There’s water everywhere. I flew over a power substation,



Volunteers used hotel luggage carts to transport pre-assembled, pre-weighted loads to airplanes on the ramp. Weight-and-balance issues were carefully managed by each pilot.



The old TAC Air terminal building at RDU was converted into the Airdrop logistics center and filled with donated supplies. Cardboard boxes originally used for adult beverages were often used because they're very sturdy. Photo courtesy Roger Montgomery.



The initial rudimentary mission planning process quickly became fairly sophisticated, with computers, white boards and city-by-city flight assignments.



Originally, the team attempted to customize each load for the needs of the individual communities. This caused delays, so they simplified the system to include a little bit of everything in each load.

completely under water. In one neighborhood all you could see were roof tops. Entire towns were islands. ATC keeps asking me, do you see the field? Finally I spot it, and report back to Washington Center, I've got a problem here. I can't land —three-quarters of the runway is under water!"

Neal Clayton, Operation Airdrop Chief Technology Officer, felt the North Carolina response was phenomenal. "We surpassed every number we had with Harvey," Clayton noted. "In Raleigh, about 300 [planes] actually showed up, flew 540 missions, and 285,000 pounds were delivered in just six days."

Clayton reported the ground support was awesome, too. He lives outside of Dallas and got a phone call at 4:30am on Thursday. It was a guy outside the TAC Air terminal at RDU. He reported there were twenty volunteers there, kicking in the doors, eager to help. "And that's at 5:30 in the morning local time. We've never seen that energy before." The first flight was Monday and the project closed down when the major roads re-opened the following Sunday.

The generosity of the flying community was amazing. Grover McNair lives near Raleigh and is a commercial ferry pilot for Lifestyle Aviation. Lifestyle Aviation loaned McNair a brand-new Diamond to use for the week, no charge. He flew nine missions. "Lifestyle was very, very generous for these people," he said. "They helped us get supplies to people who really needed them, faster than anybody, without red tape. We really made a difference."

But it was a complex operation, and it took an army of volunteers to make it work. "The TAC Air [facility] was a huge benefit, because we could get bigger planes, and refuel faster," Benedix explained. "Plus everybody was very impressed with the air traffic controllers at RDU and Washington Center."

ATC Support

I can confirm the ATC team at RDU was amazing. The airport was a madhouse: the Army commandeered the normal GA runway for their fleet of



The volunteer ground crews were the terrific unsung heroes of Airdrop. They enthusiastically raced the donations out to each airplane and loaded them while the pilots supervised the weight-and-balance.



Grover McNair (blue shirt), a professional ferry pilot, became expert at shoe-horning supplies into the Diamond loaned by Lifestyle Aviation



From lumbering Short 360s to petite Skyhawks,, everybody carried what they could. This is Mike Robertson, ready to taxi in his Grumman Tiger

helicopters. A C-17 flew in to support President Trump's inspection tour. Commercial operations continued unabated, and Airdrop threw hundreds of rusty pilots with flakey radios at the ATC team at Raleigh. RDU is set up to handle a max of 700 operations per day but they handled more than 2,000 per day at the peak, according to Airdrop's Clayton.

All the Airdrop flights operated under the "Compassion" call sign. "Early on, we had a Short 360 going out to deliver supplies," Clayton recalled. "ATC told them to expect their clearance delivery in four hours or so. Four hours — just to get their clearance! But when they found out it was a Compassion flight, they bumped him to the top of the list."

The variety of cargo was astounding. Pilatus turboprops carried heavy bulky cargo, like water and wheelbarrows. Smaller planes carried paper towels, new shoes still in their boxes, hand sanitizers, tampons, canned food, bottled water and baby diapers. Diapers were in huge demand because they're so good at absorbing stuff. Weight-and-balances were always worrisome.

One pilot recalled, "We opened all the big boxes. I put the bulky light stuff in the way back of the airplane, heavy stuff on the back seat, and fifty pounds of clothes in a huge garbage bag on the front seat."

Carolyn Rhinebarger is a retired marketing expert who lives in Chapel Hill, NC. She used her skills to publicize the Airdrop effort and stimulate donations.

"It's all about the supplies. First I wrote a press release, then I started on Facebook," Rhinebarger told me. "I called the 'tip lines' at the local TV stations, and we got multiple stories and Facebook Live reports. Without the donations, this wouldn't have happened. It just grew and grew. It was great to see it unfold."

There's a crucial psychology to charitable efforts. "People don't open their wallets for nothing — they want to be sure their donation is going to make a

difference,” Rhinebarger explained. “I posted a picture of an empty slot in the terminal building which was labeled ‘Food’ but there wasn’t any. In 30 minutes, moms were pulling up in their SUVs with loads of food and other supplies. The immediacy compelled people to donate, again and again.”

Emergency Logistics

The photos tell the tale: almost overnight, the old TAC Air terminal became a jam-packed warehouse. All of the pilots commented on the chaos in the terminal at the beginning and the manner in which it quickly matured into a smooth-running logistics center.

Early on, many pilots like myself were very concerned about the chaos in the TAC Air terminal. Turn-arounds were slow; time was wasted. McNair recalled, “I really had my doubts, when I walked into TAC Air. Is this what it’s going to be like all week?” Roger Montgomery agreed. He remembers, “On Monday, you walked in the door at TAC Air and it was crazy. You just didn’t know what to expect.” They were weighing cargo with a bathroom scale.

But systems improved as the week went by. Hundreds of volunteers helped on the ground, but everyone agrees Ashley Vandermark was the super-star organizer who built the logistical systems. Dan Benedix listed some of the other hall-of-famers: “Jil Christensen starred at fund raising and ground coordination. TROSA movers were rock stars and broke down pallets of water and supplies. Dave Kerr was the silent coordinator of flights to loads, he had the patience of a saint and did a fantastic job of getting the right things on the right planes to the right places.” We both agreed many others deserve sainthood, as well.

But it took days to get the bugs worked out. Computers, chairs and tables were scrounged from somewhere. White boards appeared. City-by-city mission plans materialized. Local restaurants donated astounding quantities of snacks for the volunteers. But even as we got better, special missions materialized which required improvisation.



To speed turn-arounds, Vandermark directed the ground volunteers to cluster cargo into categories: “Food”, “Cleaners”, “Pet Supplies” and so on. Rather than customizing each shipment, they built “standard loads” of 250 lbs. and pre-loaded them onto hotel luggage carts. Teams of people raced each load across the ramp to waiting airplanes. TAC Air refueled everybody as quickly as possible (plus they waived ramp fees and offered a discount on avgas). Somebody named Jeff from Virginia even paid my TAC Air avgas invoice one day. I don’t know who he was or why he picked me, but thanks!

Flying N7591N

Personally, I flew nine cargo-carrying missions in N7591N, my Cessna Centurion. On most missions I carried 900 pounds of cargo although I often “cubed out” before running out of weight. To put this in perspective: 900

pounds completely fills a pick-up truck and then some. Most of my flights were about one hour, at 4,000 feet and VFR.

Departing one early morning from RDU the controller instructed me, “When able, steer 160° and climb to 2,500 feet. Departing traffic behind you.” I queried him, just to be sure. “Am I cleared to make a hard left turn over the passenger terminal?” I asked. “If able,” he replied calmly, sipping his coffee and glad to get me out of the way. Gear up, flaps up, nose up: I cranked old ‘91N into a 60° bank and made an exciting full-power, one-man, ten-second airshow over RDU Terminal 2. I wish I had a smoke generator on board.

Jan Squillace retired from an I.T. tech support job and flies a beautiful DA-40 Diamond. “Dan [Benedix] called me because they had this box that nobody else could carry, a huge box containing a new electrical generator for the Wilmington tower. I got it into the Diamond with about an inch to spare.”

This particular departure was complex. “RDU was a mess, with closed taxiways and tons of traffic. They asked me if I could take-off in 5,000 feet. I laughed and said, yeah, I think I can handle that,” Squillace said. “I had to file IFR to get out of RDU because of the weather, but the system wouldn’t accept IFR flights to Wilmington because the tower was closed because they didn’t have power.” Ultimately, Squillace filed for another, near-by airport which was open.

Once she was on her way, Squillace told Washington Center she was going to divert to Wilmington VFR. The controller begrudgingly approved but added, “Once you land, I have a phone number for you to call.” But before Squillace could complain, Center added, “It’s OK, Tower just wants to know where to pick up their generator.” That’s the only time Squillace hasn’t minded getting from the tower a phone number to call. “They just were really happy to see me with their generator in my back seat,” she laughs.

Montgomery recalled one mission which involved double-extra effort. “My girlfriend’s sister lives in Jacksonville (NC) and it was really hit hard. I managed to get hooked up with the airport manager there. What they needed most was

Organizations Which Contributed to the Relief Effort

Operation Airdrop

Phone: (940) 320-9407

Email: contact@operation-Airdrop.com

On the Web: <http://www.operation-Airdrop.com>

TAC Air

Raleigh-Durham International Airport

1725 East International Drive

Morrisville, NC 27560

Phone: (919) 840-4400

Email: rdufbo@tacair.com

On the Web: <https://TheArnoldCos.com/tac-air/rdu>

LifeStyle Aviation

1775 E International Dr #209

Morrisville, NC 27560

Phone: (406) 359-1669

On the Web: <https://lifestyleaviation.com/>

Email: sales@lifestyleaviation.com

Laboratory Corporation of America

531 South Spring Street

Burlington, North Carolina 27215

(336) 584-5171

Labcorp is NYSE listed under the ticker symbol LH.

to get their generator running. So I worked with Airdrop and a guy named Gerritt Raterink flew to Virginia, picked up the parts they needed, and flew back to Jacksonville to get them on-line.”

Everybody remembers their most special flight; McNair had a good one. “I flew into Columbus County, really badly hit. There was just one lonely guy at the field when I

landed,” he recalled. “I unloaded and we started chatting. He was a county commissioner, just trying to help, and he took the supplies directly to families who really needed them.”

Oddly, there were very few corporate donations, with only a few memorable exceptions. LabCorp is a leading life sciences company headquartered in Burlington, NC which deployed three Pilatus turboprops and crews to Airdrop. “Within hours our pilots and aircraft were in the air,” said David King, chairman and CEO of LabCorp. “We were privileged to help our North Carolina neighbors.” Other organizations which helped were a NASCAR team and the amazing and indispensable TAC Air FBO.

Flying with a Purpose

Raleigh pilot Philip Geiger beautifully summarized this effort on a Facebook posting. “I just got my PPL a year ago,” he wrote. “I never could have imagined that I would get to do something so impactful this soon... We were a lifeline for people who were otherwise inaccessible. I’m grateful for the opportunity to play even a small part in all of this.”

To my mind, that’s way better than a hundred-dollar hamburger. It’s a mission worth flying.



Figure 1a Cessna planes can carry a huge load, if you don't care about the fancy consumer packaging (or your upholstery). This truck shows the quantity of stuff arriving in Beaufort, NC carried in one load and delivered by the author, in his Cessna N7591N.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an entrepreneur who uses his business expertise to help G.A. airports across the country improve their governance and operations, speeding them on their way to more revenues, grants, and community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He's been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

