

Local 'angel' notches up 40th charity flight

GUNNEDAH'S Mike Barnier loves to fly – and his “angel wings” are on the much-loved VH-OTC Piper Arrow plane he has owned since 1994.

Mike recently notched up his 40th mission for Angel Flight, an Australian charity established in April 2003 by successful Queensland businessman and experienced pilot Bill Bristow AM.

Mike took off from Gunnedah airport on June 24 to transport an adult male from Tamworth to Sydney for a post-operative cancer check-up.

Mike became involved in the Angel Flight concept in November 2003 while in Deniliquin at a Piper aircraft owners' fly-in.

Although he shies away from any form of publicity, Mike realises the value of spreading the word about Angel Flight, which carries patients needing treatment at destinations where other forms of transport are physically and emotionally draining or unaffordable.

Mike has flown Angel Flight missions all over NSW and has also gone as far north as Brisbane.

“When we arrive, the passengers are picked up by Earth Angels and transported to their appointments,” Mike said.

“Sometimes we have to wait for them and other times we return home and pick them up at a later date.”

While all passengers have their own story to tell, Mike says it is hard to see young children going off to major hospitals for treatment.

“I find it quite gut-wrenching, but if helping out with travel makes it any easier for the family, then it is worth it,” he said.

Mike's selfless service for Angel Flight was recognised by founder Bill Bristow when he came to Boggabri in 2005 to attend Col “Mad-Dog” Gillham's shear-athon for Angel Flight and awarded Mike a Silver Star.

Mike is also a big fan of Bill Bristow's, who had seen first hand how charity flying in the US was making such a difference to the lives of thousands of people.

“I was flying in the US with other pilots and they were sharing with me the extraordinary feeling they experienced through charity flying,” he said.



GUNNEDAH pilot Mike Barnier beside his Piper Arrow plane before taking off for his 40th Angel Flight mission.

• PHOTO: Marie Hobson

“They are able to fly – their greatest love – while at the same time helping people going through hard times.

“With about 30 per cent of the Australian population living outside metropolitan areas, I realised then Australia badly needed a similar service.

“I decided I had to do something about it and returned home with a new sense of purpose.”

In 2005, Bill Bristow was the winner of the Australian of the Year Award - Queensland and in the Queen's birthday honours list this year, he was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for service to rural and remote communities through the establishment of Angel Flight Australia and as a supporter of charitable organisations.

Three days later, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh acknowledged Bill Bristow as one of five Queenslanders to receive a Queensland Greats Award.

Another exciting Angel Flight initiative was launched in May, with the introduction of Respite Flights aimed at providing some of Angel Flight's most needy passengers with the opportunity to take time out from their normal routine of hospital visits.

One of Australia's most successful comedians, Fiona O'Loughlin, has named

Angel Flight as her charity in NBN-TV's 2009 *Dancing With The Stars*, which started recently.

Through telephone and SMS voting, viewers can support Angel Flight by voting for Fiona and her professional dance partner to stay in the competition. Judges' scores are combined with viewer votes when determining which duo is eliminated.

Angel Flight pilots do not carry aero-medical staff or medical equipment, so do not act as an alternative to the Royal Flying Doctor Service or Air Ambulance in that capacity.

All flights are free and may involve patients or compassionate carers travelling to or from medical facilities anywhere in Australia.

While the air-operations side of Angel Flight is mainly donated by Angel Flight pilots, there is still an important ground operation to pay for.

Part-funding for this comes from foundation sponsor Demazin, but Angel Flight still needs to raise further donation dollars to deal with mission co-ordination and handling of many hundreds of flight inquiries each year.

□ To find out more about Angel Flight or to make a donation visit www.angel-flight.org.au