

Lonely skies: Phoenix Air pilot remembers 9/11 from the air

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Events of historical proportions such as Sept. 11 bring with them stories of unprecedented action. In a time of fear and unknown, one Cartersville pilot took to the skies while all other civilian aviation was grounded.

General Counsel and Vice President of Phoenix Air Randy Davis may be the only civilian pilot to have flown on the evening of 9/11.

Davis sat among colleagues, in disbelief, at his Cartersville office watching coverage of the events that unfolded just hours before a call came in requesting the aid of Phoenix Air. When the notice was made, he was the first to step forward.

"As a citizen, it was an experience I've never had and one I'll hopefully never have again in the aftermath of that type of event," Davis said. "I think every citizen that day, that night, that week and for weeks thereafter wanted to try to help in any way possible. It certainly was gratifying to be able to contribute so quickly and so directly that night."

Often contracted by the U.S. government, as well as NATO and allied nations, Phoenix Air was called upon that fateful day to charter emergency management officials from various locations across the Southeast to New York's Stewart Air National Guard Base.

"We were descending into Stewart. It was a very clear night still because it was a beautiful day, weather wise, and a beautiful night," Davis said. "You could easily see the glow of Manhattan and

sort of a smoky glow on the south end where the tragedy had occurred. It looked like smoke or fog from the south end."

Covering some 2,000 miles between the afternoon of Sept. 11 and the early morning hours of the following day, Davis piloted the Learjet 35 between Cartersville; Mobile, Ala.; Orlando, Fla.; Myrtle Beach, S.C.; Jacksonville, N.C.; and Charlotte, N.C., before delivering passengers to their destination approximately an hour outside of New York City.

"There were a number of government people scattered in different places around the South," Davis said. "This event had occurred earlier in the day and the government wanted to get them all to New York for their various function as soon as possible. They were different types of government support and relief people."

Arriving at 4 a.m., Davis returned to Cartersville around 7 a.m. Upon his arrival to Atlanta approach airspace, Davis and his co-pilot were contacted by Hartsfield's tower, full of air traffic controllers with nothing but time on their hands. The two dozen controllers calmly shared their sentiments that if anyone would be in the air it would be Phoenix Air.

Air traffic control was one of the oddities experienced throughout the duration of the Sept. 11 mission. The flight was assigned a unique transponder code from North American Defense Command [NORAD], giving the mission clearance for a non-military flight. The only other traffic seen in the

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The Daily Tribune News
**General Counsel
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skies were military aircraft, jet fighters and aerial surveillance.

With the air being unusually quiet that evening, Phoenix Air took precautions notifying law enforcement at each destination along their designated flight plan. Their forethought paid off when officials in Mobile, Ala., confirmed that residents had called with concerns when the plane was seen on approach for landing. Davis emphasized the significance of the open airspace, free of all other general aviation aircraft, where their flight was given full liberty.

“When you’re up high in a sophisticated or high performance aircraft then everything is under air traffic control and usually you’re told what altitude,

what routing,” Davis said. “It’s certainly highly unusual to be told ‘any altitude, any direction.’ ... So, that was the most unusual thing from a pure flying standpoint. Then on the other hand, you’re flying around on the night of an unprecedented national tragedy.”

The cause for this unusual flight and the circumstances surrounding it led Davis to look beyond the parameters of the mission and react to the events of the day with an attitude of service. Volunteering for the job was one way he could help those at ground zero.

“It is natural for each of us to wish to come to the aid of others when an epic human tragedy occurs. Some folks try to give blood, others gather up supplies or assist any in number of ways. My primary memory of this 9/11 midnight flight will be that it was a privilege to be able to help out in such a direct and immediate manner,” Davis said.