

# On a mission



The *Air Ambulance Review* spoke to **Denise Waye**, president of AirCARE1 International, about the importance of medical experience, business strategy and geographical problem-solving

**How did you first get started in aeromedicine?**

While working as a critical care nurse in a busy emergency room, I was approached by a paramedic who flew for a long-range air ambulance company. I had always wanted to fly and had considered becoming a flight attendant. Since I was a nurse, I thought it would be great to use my nursing skills while flying. My two interests went hand in hand in starting a new career.

**Can you tell us how this career path led to you becoming president of AirCARE1 International?**

I had been working at an air ambulance company as a flight nurse for a while. I had approached the owners of the company about making what I thought were some critical operational changes to improve safety, and they told me that when I owned my own company, I could do things however I wanted. So I did! I started AirCARE1 International with my former

partner over 10 years ago.

**How have your experiences as a critical care nurse shaped the way you approach managing your company?**

Having flown thousands of patients throughout my years as a flight nurse, I have first-hand experience of the good, the bad and the ugly. Being on the front line myself, I fully appreciate the challenges of flight medicine and what my crews go through during their missions. Additionally, during my time as a flight nurse, my interest in aviation led me to become a pilot. Being both a nurse and a pilot helped me gain valuable insights into running an air ambulance company.

The knowledge gained from these experiences has helped shape my approach in managing AirCARE1 International. These experiences have helped create the foundational elements of the company, influenced how we train our company personnel, and helped develop processes for best practices. We are always looking to improve our processes.

**Have you made any special adaptations to your aircraft or medical equipment in order to allow you to transport bariatric patients? If so, what kind of investments have you made, and how many of these patients have you been transporting since then?**

When I founded AirCARE1 International, I visited several companies that made stretcher systems to see if they could design a system specifically for us. I chose a company who

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designed a system that could accommodate bariatric patients up to 450 pounds. This system provided a method to safely load our bariatric patients and to reduce potential injury to our crewmembers. Since then, we have transported quite a few bariatric patients.

**The US air ambulance market represents a highly competitive business environment – what strategies have you needed to employ in order to navigate it and stay ahead of the game?**

The best strategy we have employed is building a reputation based on the core values of honesty, integrity and trust. We have developed a very honest and open relationship with our clients, who know we will do right by their patients at all times and trust us to make the best decisions for them.

We have also built a programme focused on a holistic approach to patient care while providing our patients with the highest level of medical expertise. This unique approach takes into account the whole wellbeing of our patients as we attend to their medical needs as well.

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We understand how stressful an air ambulance transport can be on our patients and their family members. To reduce their stress, we provide a variety of holistic measures to ensure their transports are as stress-free as possible. Some of these holistic measures include having our patients listen to soothing music on noise-cancelling headsets as well as receiving hand massages with aromatherapy. As a former music major in college, I have witnessed the healing power of music. As a nurse, I have seen the power of touch therapy and aromatherapy on ill patients. We have integrated these measures into our care, which brings a sense of wellbeing and peace of mind to our patients.

### **AirCARE1 is a preferred provider for International Assistance Group (IAG). How did that tie-up come about?**

We were contacted directly by IAG and were requested to apply to become a preferred provider after being recommended by several members of IAG. It has been an honour to be recognised in the industry and become an IAG preferred provider.

### **Working in South American countries can present some unique logistical difficulties, such as gaining flight clearance and visas for medical crew. How does the company overcome such issues?**

We utilise a handling service to expedite the process when we operate in South America.

Logistics can be very difficult and have the potential to become a nightmare, especially when serving remote locations. Language and cultural differences can be huge barriers that can affect the timeliness of the mission. The people in South America are a genuinely kind and wonderful people but they tend to do things their own way which can impact the mission. When we perform South American missions, we are always on high alert and expect deviations to occur. We have learned to be prepared for the unexpected and to have contingencies in place. We have gained quite a bit of experience in doing South American missions and have built processes based on these experiences. Sometimes the most difficult part is having our clients understand the time it takes to put everything into place.

### **What are the most challenging aspects of your role?**

Managing the responsibilities of a growing company while building an infrastructure that successfully accommodates that growth. We have increased our customer base quite a bit through our marketing and branding efforts but want to ensure we have a sustainable and purposeful growth that does not outpace itself. During this growth, the challenge has been to delegate responsibilities to my great team of employees while resisting my natural impulse to jump into the mix of things.

### **Can you describe a typical day as president of AirCARE1, if there is such a thing?**

I actually prepare for my day in the office the night before. I will make a list of items to do the next day. This helps me to clear my mind so I can go to sleep. The first thing I do in the morning when I wake up is to check my phone for any messages that might have come through during the night (if something had been urgent,

I would have been woken up). I also check on the status of any flights that have gone on during the night or those that are launching early in the morning to see how things are going.

I try to make time to exercise for at least 30 minutes each morning. This helps me prepare mentally and physically for the day. After I am done exercising, I typically field several phone calls as well as respond to emails. I then plan my day and then head to the office. Although I plan what I would like to accomplish during my day,

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I never know what is actually going to happen since this is aviation! Once I am in the office, I make my rounds to greet my team and see how everyone is doing and to see what is on their agenda for the day. I will stop by our operations centre to catch up on how flights are doing and if there are any pending flights or any issues. The rest of the day may be spent on the phone, building relationships with clients, having meetings, putting out any fires that may come up as well as being available for those who need to discuss any issues with me.

### **What is your favourite aspect of your job?**

My favourite aspect of my job is the ability to help make a difference in the lives of others. I love the ability to solve problems by adapting, improvising and overcoming to make a mission work. There are so many moving parts, it's like putting together a 3D puzzle. Each day is different, there is never a dull moment. I just love when a mission comes together!

### **What are your proudest achievements, both professionally and personally?**

My proudest professional achievements were going back to nursing school after I had five kids and then starting AirCARE1 International because I truly wanted to make a difference in the lives of our patients. It has been very exciting to see the growth of the company and how hard our employees have worked to make this happen. It is an honour to work with such a great team who are truly committed to our mission. My proudest personal achievements are having had those five children and a great husband who I have been married to for 38 years. All of my children have grown up to be very smart, talented and successful adults with great spouses who have provided me with 13 grandchildren! ■







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