

A Conversation With...

» » » *Gail Fike of EraMED*



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EraMED is an air medical service company providing medical institutions with 24-hour flight services. In addition to employing pilots, maintenance technicians and communications staff, EraMED operates a fleet of helicopters. Thomas Inman, contributing writer for *Avionics News*, recently spoke with Gail Fike, a maintenance technician at EraMED's Geisinger Health System base.

Upon graduation from Pennsylvania College of Technology, Fike was presented with the Academic Vice President and Provost's Award for scholastic achievement and service, as well as the Aviation Technology Faculty Award for demonstrating academic achievement, ethics, teamwork, professionalism and a commitment to excellence in the field of aviation maintenance.

EraMED sounds like an interesting place to work. What can you tell me about the company?

EraMED is a relatively new name in the helicopter emergency medical services industry. We came about when United Technologies (who owns Keystone Helicopter) sold off the flight services division of Keystone Helicopter to Seacor. Seacor owns Era Helicopters, an established name in the industry, and we are a sister company of Era Helicopters right now. By next year, we will still hold the EraMED name, but will be under the same umbrella as Era Helicopters, which in my eyes is a really welcome move.

When Keystone sold the flight services division, all of us were pretty nervous about what the future held for us, and where we'd head from there. Now, with becoming part of Era Helicopters in our future, it's opportunities galore. Since Era is much older and established, the relationships they have within the industry are great, and becoming part of that will be great.

Overall, speaking of the future, EraMED will be a great place to work, where hopefully being part of Era Helicopters will allow EraMED employees chances to advance their careers in every field from aviation maintenance to management, purchasing, administration, safety and many more related professions. Going back over the last few months, every few weeks we get e-mails with job openings ranging in location from Puerto Rico to Alaska.

What is the corporate culture like at EraMED?

The corporate culture at EraMED is pretty calm and laid back, while at the same time, more than able to respond effectively and quickly to urgent situations. The working relationship with our upper management is really great. Although we've got to follow our chain of command, working with our supervisors higher up the chain isn't intimidating or awkward. It's really comfortable, and a great opportunity to learn from people who've been in the industry for years and who want to pass on their knowledge to help the rest of us do our jobs to the best of our abilities.

Do you work alone?

On an average day, most field mechanics work alone. But on the days that aren't average, there are quite a few people available for advice, help and second opinions. At Geisinger's Life Flight Program, there are five bases, each with their own aircraft. Although I'm a field mechanic, just like the mechanics at the other four bases, my base is different in that our contract's (Geisinger) maintenance supervisor and lead mechanic also work from the same location.

Our maintenance supervisor is like our contract's director of maintenance. He oversees everything maintenance, and his duties are primarily administrative. Although he's got his hand in everything, if needed, he turns wrenches to help the rest of us out. He's responsible for relaying information to the end-customer and is the mechanics' liaison when it comes to disputes or issues between aircraft maintenance and the medical end of things. He's responsible for the program maintenance in every aspect, from approving aircraft billing statements to ensuring mechanics are completing their daily duties to company standards.

The lead mechanic is our, sort of, in-house tech rep. He's there to assist on larger jobs on location and available at all hours of the day and weekends to aid in unscheduled maintenance. He is a first point of contact if any of the base mechanics have an issue we can't solve ourselves. He's the one we go to for help when we need it and the one who can bring in other tech reps — inside EraMED or outside — to aid in effectively getting out-of-service aircraft back in service.

Even though the seven of us have different duties, we all work as a close team when there is an issue. On a day where heavy maintenance is scheduled, the lead mechanic assists to help keep out-of-service time down. On larger projects, it's not uncommon to bring an aircraft to our central base, in Danville, Pa., and have a few mechanics team up

to complete several different tasks at once while keeping the aircraft out of service for as short a time as practical, and safe. During the course of a week, one base mechanic may work a day or two alone, a day with our lead on a large project and, occasionally, a day or two on someone else's aircraft during a large project.

How long have you been with them?

I've been at my current position and location since July 2006. At that time, the company I started with was Keystone Helicopter's Flight Services Division. January 1, 2007, we became EraMED LLC, and by next year, we'll be Era Helicopters, doing business as EraMED.

What is a typical day like for you at work?

Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a typical day. Let's say it's a Monday morning. My normal start time is 7 a.m. It's also our pilots' shift change. After talking to both pilots about how things went over the weekend, I'll print a new inspection run. The info about discrepancies or unscheduled maintenance and knowing which inspections are coming due helps me inform our maintenance supervisor about how much out-of-service time my aircraft will need that week, usually about one day. If it would be a long time, we'll break it up into two days.

When there are no scheduled inspections or unscheduled maintenance discrepancies to take care of,

a normal day consists of doing my daily, which is making sure anything needing attention gets attended to as far as preventive maintenance, and then heading home. For me, going in at 7 a.m. and leaving around noon is the norm, but even that is considered a long day, taking into account I am on the pager the rest of the day. There have been two-hour days, and days where it felt like there was only a two-hour break. It all evens out. That's why when the aircraft is in good shape and there are no discrepancies or scheduled inspections, we take advantage of it.

What do you like best about your job?

The best part of my job is no day is ever the same as the next. It's an unbelievable opportunity to learn everything from troubleshooting skills to people skills to planning and management skills. The man who hired me made it a point to let me know he wasn't hiring a mechanic; he was hiring a sort of "business owner." Just about every aspect of maintaining the aircraft would be my responsibility.

Now, having responsibilities like ordering parts, large task preparation, scheduling maintenance and relaying info to the end-customer is a really good way of finding out what my strengths and weaknesses are. I'm improving my own effectiveness and efficiency as an employee

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and mechanic. There is a lot of stress involved in having so much responsibility though, and inside the first year at my current position, it got to be too much. Now, after being there three years, it's become more second nature to take a break when the aircraft allows it and to let go of issues that are out of my hands. It's all been an incredible learning experience and one that not many other jobs could compare to.

What is it like working through your pregnancy?

Working through my pregnancy has held a ton of surprises for me. As a bit of a control freak, it's become obvious to me that there is no controlling mother nature. It would be nice to think going all the way until birth, just as before, would be an option. Now, at the beginning of my third trimester, it seems just about impossible. The physical nature of the job is becoming more and more a worry for me. A few things, like lifting heavy items and knowing that some of the chemicals we often use can cause birth defects, weigh on my mind. Thankfully, there's been no issue whatsoever with asking others to help me out.

The amount of support from everyone has been a really pleasant surprise, from Geisinger's medical crew — some employees have come in on days off to receive fuel to prevent me from being exposed to it — to EraMED employees. For example, a mechanic gave a class on soldering, and before the rest of us got into practicing, he mentioned to me that the fumes were not something pregnant ladies should be around. It is great to know there are so many people looking out for me. Another part of the pregnancy,

which was unexpected for me, was how much my hormones control my mind. It's funny now, but one day, inspecting engine compressor blades brought me to tears. Nothing is out of the question, and learning to push my emotions aside and stay professional has been a lot more of a challenge than I had anticipated.

Are you a pilot?

No, I am not a pilot. Originally, continuing on to flight school after getting my A&P was a goal of mine, but now, after working as a mechanic for a while, it's really clear to me there is more information to take in regarding just one aspect of aviation, like the maintenance of the aircraft I work on, than I'll ever be able to learn, let alone while trying to learn the piloting aspect as well.

Personally, I concentrate on maintenance and becoming proficient since that is more important to me than trying to go to flight school or trying to be a pilot at the same time. Doing both would be spreading myself too thin and, in the long run, trying to do too much would probably end up shortchanging my ability in both areas.

How did you come about choosing aviation maintenance as a career?

Choosing aviation maintenance as a career was really by chance for me. During my senior year of high school, the large universities scared me. After visiting Penn College, it was without a doubt the right school for me; so, from there, my decision was choosing a major they offered. On looking through the school's brochures, aviation maintenance technology caught my eye. With no experience at all relating to the industry, it was a huge risk for me, but now it seems like there couldn't have been a better choice to make.

My job is more rewarding and exciting than my first choice major would have been, and it definitely seems like the right choice for me. Even though my co-workers have much more experience than me, over time, that will change. And learning more and more from the people around me, while improving my skills, is keeping me busy in the meantime. It's exciting for me to think of someday having a wealth of industry knowledge and being able to help other people entering the industry, like so many people who I've met have helped me.

What do you see in your future?

My future is really up in the air. Right now, with the current economy, I feel really lucky to have a job — the same one I've had for the past few years — without worrying about pay cuts and the like that so many other people are facing. Although retiring as a mechanic 30 years from now isn't part of my future plans, who knows where the future will take me. There are so many choices, but right now, my goal is to become a better and more knowledgeable mechanic.

Knowing it all is impossible, but there is still so much for me to learn. Doing a job only half-heartedly isn't me, and pursuing other areas feels like something that should wait until after my confidence as a mechanic is a little higher. Once that confidence is there, then it will be time to consider different positions or furthering my education. I'm still a young pup and want to learn as much as possible from the people around me. That's not to say if opportunity knocked, I wouldn't answer, but for now, learning more about how to improve my current skill set can only help me in the future.

For more information, contact EraMed at 484-288-2800 or visit www.eramedllc.com. □



Teaming Up with Aviation Museums to Learn Restoration Work

Sometimes, we call it “studentizing” or “studentization.” It is the slow process of deterioration caused by students making mistakes as they learn to repair aircraft. Students might overtighten or strip screws. They might drop tools, dent airframes or break windscreens. They might bump and break navigation light lenses or static wicks. Over time, the fleet deteriorates, and some students lose respect for the aircraft, thus accelerating the studentization process. This process represents a challenge for schools teaching avionics or aviation maintenance.

Another challenge facing schools is providing stimulating projects. One method of providing stimulating projects, while encouraging students to act carefully and professionally, is to reach out to the aviation community. Schools can reach out in different ways.

Operating as a repair station and taking on work from local aircraft owners is one method of reaching out. In this case, the

school must be careful not to take business away from those who employ the school’s graduates. Furthermore, the school should be careful to take on projects that fit into the curriculum. The owners of the aircraft must be patient, because work completed at a school will take longer than the same work completed at a repair shop. Often called “live work,” these projects can be stimulating for students. Most schools only allow the most responsible students to perform live work; therefore, these projects provide incentive for students to perform at their best.

In some cases, schools can take on restoration projects. Some restorations can be considered live work, but others might be for display purposes only. These types of projects promote pride in workmanship, and often, they don’t have the same time requirements as other maintenance projects. Furthermore, most restoration projects will not take business away from future employers.

Some might argue restoration

projects don’t provide students with an opportunity to work with modern technology. The counter argument is most live work projects don’t involve modern technology either. Many live work aircraft are older and operated by weekend pilots on a tight budget.

Both live and restoration work will help a school build its reputation within the larger aviation community. In some cases, live or restoration work can help offset the cost of providing an aviation maintenance program. In some cases, the work can help students acquire a sense of service to the community.

I have been involved in several live-work projects and restoration projects over the years. In some cases, I acted merely as a facilitator; in others, I was an active participant. A few of these projects are described below:

At a former institution, our aviation maintenance and avionics programs worked to build the fleet for the flight program. Over the years, we



Pennsylvania College of Technology students inspect Adventist World Aviation's Cessna 150.

restored a Cessna 337 Skymaster and a Cessna 150. Both projects involved extensive airframe restorations, the installation of newly overhauled engines and new avionics. Students from all facets of the department were involved, and all could take pride in the work accomplished.

More recently, the institution where I currently teach, Pennsylvania College of Technology, just completed work on a 2001 Piper Archer. A large local company purchased the aircraft after it had been damaged in an off-airport landing. The damage wasn't too severe, and the company decided to repair it and add it to the company's flying club fleet. Once the paperwork was

completed, the Archer's wings were removed and it was stored in a Florida hangar awaiting transport to Williamsport, Pa. While waiting to be picked up, two hurricanes passed through, thus damaging the airframe extensively. The local company now had an airplane requiring extensive repairs — repairs for which the company had not planned.

A deal was struck with the school. Under the supervision of faculty and senior students, the Archer received a new fire bulkhead, nose gear, several pieces of new airframe skin and a new paint job. The students overhauled the main landing gear and completed wiring repairs. The aircraft is ready to

return to its owner, who will complete some minor work, inspect the aircraft and re-register it. Many students can take pride in this work.

Much of the work on the Archer was completed as part of the capstone project course required of all Pennsylvania College of Technology bachelor's degree students. Because the project class is offered during the spring semester, students completed a fair amount of work on the airplane each spring. During the summer and fall, the aircraft was stored in the owner's hangar, and little or no work was completed. The owner was never

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in a hurry, so the four years the Archer spent with us was never a problem. We hope to see it fly soon.

Although the Archer was a very large project, students can benefit from smaller projects

health and physical education, science, religion, social studies, science and foreign languages. Students use the Cessna to obtain a private pilot's license. Allowing our students to complete an inspection helps both educational institutions.

As you read this, a college student is completing restoration

services. The PT-1 was powered by a 130 HP Franklin engine, constructed mostly of wood and had a retractable gear. The armed services never bought the design, so the prototype was the only PT-1 ever constructed.

The aircraft ended up in the hands of Frank Pannebaker, an instructor at Williamsport Technical Institute, which later became Penn College. In the 1940s, WTI students completed extensive work on the airplane. Later, the airplane was in California, where it suffered a gear-up landing. In 1970, the airplane won the Contemporary Age Outstanding Closed Cockpit Monoplane Award during the Experimental Aircraft Association's annual event. In 1993, the EAA acquired the airplane, and the PT-1 sat in front of the AirVenture Museum for many years. Now, the airplane is owned by the Piper Aviation Museum in Lock Haven, Pa.

Students have been working on the PT-1 airplane for nearly a decade; however, work has accelerated since senior students became involved. This semester, a student is completing the interior and the canopy, which are the last items needing attention.

The PT-1 has been particularly challenging to students because



The Bell UH-1H waiting for restoration work to begin.

as well. Among the live aircraft being inspected this year is a Cessna 150, owned by Adventist World Aviation. Specifically, the airplane is used by the Blue Mountain Academy near Hamburg, Pa. The academy began accepting students in 1955, and today, it provides courses in applied arts, aviation, business, computers, fine arts,

work on a very special airplane, the Piper PT-1. This student is the eighth senior completing his capstone project at the Piper Museum, the owner of the PT-1.

Designed by David Long, the PT-1 was Piper's first low-wing monoplane. Piper built this two-seat tandem aircraft as a prototype in hopes of selling the design to the armed

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there are no maintenance manuals and, for the most part, no information at all about the aircraft, other than old photographs. Many sections of the aircraft have had to be reverse engineered. For more information about the PT-1, visit www.pipermuseum.com/Projects/Museum%20Projects.html.

As the PT-1 is completed, two more students are beginning work on another aircraft owned by the Piper Museum, a Tripacer. The Tripacer will provide many more students with capstone projects for many years to come.

Another long-term project arrived at the college in December. The American Helicopter Museum and Education Center in West Chester, Pa., has a fleet of nearly 40 helicopters, autogyros and convertiplanes, including a V-22 Osprey.

Currently, the museum has a Bell TH-1L on display. The TH-1L is on loan from the military, which restricts access. The museum acquired a Bell UH-1H, and once it is restored, museum-goers will have fewer restrictions and may enter the helicopter.

Lacking the manpower to restore the rotorcraft to display condition, the museum contacted Penn College associate professor of aviation, William F. Stepp III.

Stepp worked with the college administration, faculty and museum officials to arrange a multi-year project. Although the aircraft will be used in many classes, primary responsibility for the restoration will be in the hands of senior students. The college expects the project to take approximately five years.

The UH-1H, PT-1 and Tripacer all are restorations for display purposes only. These types of restorations have an advantage in reduced liability exposure, which makes college administrators rest easier. If the projects are chosen carefully, liability can be minimized.

With limited success, I've been attempting to coin a new phrase at our school: "seniorization." Seniorization, or seniorizing, is the slow process of restoration completed by students making repairs as they learn aviation maintenance technology. Over time, students might replace stripped hardware. They might repair dents, airframes or windscreens. They might replace navigation light lenses or static wicks. Over time, the fleet can improve, and some students will gain respect for the aircraft, thus accelerating the seniorization process.

Teaming up with aircraft owners, including museums, companies and other schools, is an effective way of answering the challenges related to studentization, loss of respect and lack of stimulation. □