



## West Michigan Air Care ... In The Beginning

I have many fond memories from overseeing and managing the first air medical merger in the United States to form a consortium on March 21, 1993. I had read all about the Kalamazoo hospitals and how competition had led to higher prices and not lower ones from a front-page Wall Street Journal article in June 1990. Borgess Medical Center and Bronson Methodist Hospital, with pressure from the business community, looked at ways they could better cooperate, and West Michigan Air Care was one of the resulting decisions. They had already been working together with Michigan State University Kalamazoo Center for Medical Studies (MSUKCMS).

I knew that there would be skepticism among the staff at both Borgess InFlight and Bronson CareFlite that they had been sold out, and I predicted that the receiving physicians and staff at both hospitals felt that there would be no way that this new program would be better than their own hospital-based one. With time we proved these worries wrong, but it took many action steps and about one year to get there and really hit our stride.

After putting together a human resources plan with benefits, job descriptions, etc., and started the interviewing process, one of the things that I made clear with the board when I was hired was that I wanted the best people and that there would not be a quota from each side. It ended up being fairly well split but not by design. It was also helpful for each hospital to guarantee other positions in their respective hospitals for staff that did not want to join West Michigan Air Care.

The decision was made before I arrived in Kalamazoo that we were going to be a FAA Part 135 program and that we were going to order a new Eurocopter AS 365 Dauphin helicopter after first repainting and using the Dauphin (N365SJ) that

Borgess had. The CareFlite Bell 412 was sold. Borgess InFlight had a Part 135 Certificate and Bronson CareFlite used an air operator, OmniFlight. Due to the time and complexity of writing and receiving approval of a whole new FAA Part 135 certificate, which had been initially mandated by the joint merger committee, I gained approval from the board to transfer the Borgess InFlight certificate. It made perfect sense since we were flying the same type of aircraft and our Director of Operations had been the Director at InFlight. That process went smoothly. After negotiating with Eurocopter, now called Airbus, a new Eurocopter AS 365 or N365WM was put into service in 1993. N365SJ, was used for a full-time backup, which was great to have to cover maintenance and for a solid in-service time.

After staff were hired and leadership positions announced, the task of creating a new team from those that had been at either program began. One of the things we did with leadership was a ropes course at the Adventure Center in Mattawan, Michigan. It was a great way to build trust and get to know each other. We also made many other decisions on uniforms, helmets, medical equipment, and the configuration of the new aircraft to name just a few.

Initially the administrative offices were housed at Borgess and the hangar was used for the backup aircraft. The main operations and communications center were at Bronson. It was the plan that we would move to a hangar and offices at the Kalamazoo / Battle Creek International Airport. After looking at several hangars



and doing construction feasibility it was decided to stay in the current configuration since the cost was so prohibitive and we had so many aviation resources such as fuel and hangars at both hospitals.

The merger saved over \$1 million dollars in the first full year and in each subsequent year. Thanks to so many dedicated staff members we proved that West Michigan Air Care could deliver excellent quality of care and do it without worries that any transports were not going to the appropriate facility or being re-directed.

I look back at my time in Kalamazoo with much fondness. It was a wonderful experience merging two programs and running an independent air medical transport program. I have such a passion for this business and have West Michigan Air Care to thank for helping me discover and build that passion. Congratulations to you all for building such a wonderful program. Thank you!

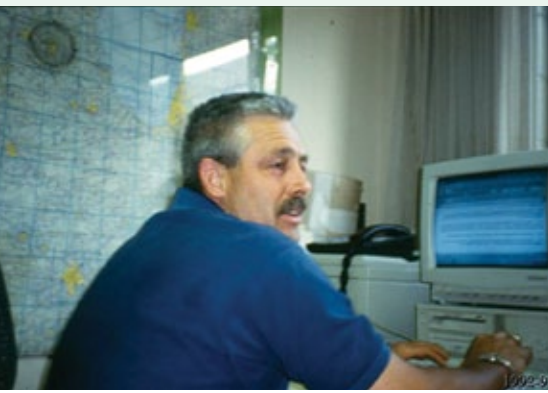
By Edward R. Eroo  
First President & CEO  
West Michigan Air Care

# 25 Years of Service

## Steve and Terry

Of the changes over the years at West Michigan Air Care, one constant since the beginning of the program has been two of the men “behind the scenes”. WMAC recently honored two of the first Air Medical Communication Specialists (ACS) who are celebrating over 25 years with the company, and over 30 years in the air medical industry: Steve Riet Kerk and Terry Tratt

In 1970, Steve graduated from Otsego High School and enlisted in the Marine Corp. He served his basic training in Camp Pendleton. He received orders to



Steve Riet Kerk

report to Vietnam shortly after that, but he did not end up being deployed, and instead served two years in infantry. After the military, Steve worked as a millwright/machinist for National Gypson Company



paper mill in Kalamazoo working seven days a week, covering all shifts.

Steve attended Kalamazoo Valley Community College for his Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) license and worked for Kellogg Ambulance Service,

who was one of two local EMS companies in Kalamazoo County, from 1973-1983. During that time he also began working at Borgess Medical Center as a patient care technician in the emergency department.

In addition to his EMS service, Steve also served as a volunteer fire fighter for Alamo Township Fire for 23 years from 1974-1997. At the time there was no previous experience needed to serve on the department and through his experience, he progressed to a training captain. Steve recalls that time of his life fondly and states with a laugh, “It was fun!”

When Borgess In-Flight was established as the air medical transport company for Borgess Medical Center, Steve’s EMT background made him eligible for a job as an air medical communication specialists (ACS). In late 1984 he was hired and began training, which at that time was done with Survival Flight in Ann Arbor. Steve states that, “A phone call for a transport would come in and you’d have a piece of paper and a map with a piece of string,” and that was how heading and distance information was obtained for the flight crew. Flight following was done with VHF radios and call backs every ten minutes.

Steve was in charge of arranging transports for Air Care’s fixed wing program when it was in service from 1995-1998. He describes having an old “bag style” cell phone that he carried at all times and would manage the details from the financial aspect, to calling in medical crew and arranging available aircraft for the transports.

Among Steve’s other responsibilities, he has kept the statistics for the company including flight volume, location of transports, patient population, demographics and crew statistics. Since the Metro Aviation merger Steve has been responsible for incorporating complete flight and flight vector into the new communications system at WMAC. He is part of the safety committee at WMAC

Terry graduated from White Water State University in White Water, Wisconsin with a marketing degree. He entered the Marine Corp and served over four years before returning to Wisconsin.

He held various jobs, including working with his father on the family farm,

before relocating to Kalamazoo. Terry was employed at the Kalamazoo/Battle Creek International Airport as an air traffic controller (ATC). This is a position he held from 1977-1981.



In December of 1984 he was hired as a dispatcher for Borgess In-Flight prior to transitioning to WMAC. Additionally he has worked at the Patient Admission and Transfer Hub (PATH) at Borgess Medical Center since about 2003 to facilitate admissions and transfers, and assist the coordination of incoming and ambulance traffic. One of Terry’s current responsibilities is maintaining policy development

After nearly 10 years for both Steve and Terry with the dispatch center at In-Flight, the 1993 merge of Bronson



Terry Tratt

Care Flite and Borgess In-Flight into WMAC brought about changes including moving the dispatch center to Bronson’s main campus, where it currently operates. They have witnessed several transitions in aircraft airframes, including a Twin Star and several different Dauphin’s, until the current EC-145 through Metro Aviation that is utilized today. Other changes occurred when

WMAC ACS's gained responsibility to cover calls for Kalamazoo Medical Communication. They manage emergent incoming transports into the county, direct ambulance traffic to the proper destinations and record calls to physicians and hospitals from ground crews. They also dispatch for the resident physician program MSU 1 that assists local EMS in Kalamazoo County

As Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems (CAMTS) and increased Health Emergency Medical Services (HEMS) programs started, safety became the foreground of the committee's standards. Some of the improvement to safety standards involve annual and on-going safety training for staff, the advancement of the radio systems and weather minimums, which Steve says "has changed how we operate immensely". From the medical crew's perspective they have seen the configuration over the years change from a doctor and nurse team, to a nurse and paramedic, to the current dual nurse/paramedic crew. Steve has observed that "the crew also has evolved to have a more critical care oriented approach to patient care" with Terry agreeing that he has seen "growth with proper utilization of critical care transports."

Over the years. They both feel as if they have seen changes in the overall operations at WMAC, as well as in the industry, to where refined procedures over the years have made the operations more effective.

Outside of WMAC, Steve enjoys spending time with his seven kids, twelve grandkids, two great grandkids and wife of 15 years, Yvonne. He likes playing his guitar, singing, cooking, golf, traveling to Nashville, North Carolina (his favorite), Orlando and Atlanta.

Terry lives in Kalamazoo with his wife Karen of 36 years and has three grown children. Terry enjoys watching seasonal sports and is always a loyal Green Bay Packers fan, "Go Pack Go"!

We are proud to have Terry and Steve as part of our WMAC family, and thank them for their years of hard work and dedication!

*By Sara Sturgeon BSN, RN, CFRN, NREMT-P  
Flight Nurse  
West Michigan Air Care*

## John

There are a several things in life I'm good at. Apparently, getting out of being the helicopter mechanic in Kalamazoo is not one of those.

Finding myself fresh out of three years in the U.S. Army and then A&P school I was working in the maintenance hangar at OmniFlight Helicopters in Janesville, Wisconsin when a supervisor (Sup) came up to me one afternoon and the following conversation ensued:

Sup: "You have experience on Bell 412's, don't you?"

Me: "No, Hueys".

Sup: "Close enough! Pack a toolbox, they need you in Kalamazoo."

Me: "When?"

Sup: "Tomorrow morning. It's only for a couple weeks."

The next morning I entered the hangar at Bronson Methodist Hospital for the very first time, set my toolbox down, touched the 412, and ran to update my resume. All I had to do on day 1 was an impending 25 hour airframe inspection, relatively simple ... unless you find a cracked exhaust stack. Within one hour of my arrival I had grounded the aircraft. 17 hours later it was back in service and my first day in Kalamazoo was in the books.

That was April, 1991.

I finished the two weeks and happily returned home to Wisconsin, only to be sent back to Kalamazoo two weeks later ... for three weeks this time, then a month, then another month. Sometime that fall I was informed that I was to be the lucky winner in the 'Who Gets To Be Kalamazoo's Next Full Time Mechanic sweepstakes'. In that same meeting my buddy received the same prestigious position for Sioux Falls, South Dakota so I, admittedly reluctantly, packed everything and moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Since then, the airframes have changed, teammates have come and gone, the company name has changed, friendships have formed, I've gotten remarried, six grandchildren have arrived, and the key still works in the hangar door. It would seem I have, again somewhat reluctantly, made a career of this.

It's funny how life changes. Now, when I travel, I find myself happily returning home to Kalamazoo.

*By John Eichel  
Lead A&P Engineer  
West Michigan Air Care*



*John Eichel*



## Please Join Us to Celebrate Our 25th Anniversary

August 26th, 2018 from 1:00–4:00 p.m.

Kalamazoo County Parks and Expo Center

2900 Lake Street, Kalamazoo MI 49048

On March 21, 2018 West Michigan Air Care celebrated 25 years of air medical transport service in Southwest Michigan and the surrounding regions. We would like to thank our community and the many hospitals, fire departments, EMS and law enforcement agencies that we have had the honor to work alongside with over the years.

- » WMAC's EC 145 Airbus helicopter will be on site and open to the public.
- » Refreshments, entertainment and kid friendly activities will be provided



## Upcoming Events

- » **Fall Conference 2018 is fast approaching! Register now!**  
For food, fun, and networking all while receiving good education and lots of nursing and EMS credits, join us Saturday, October 6th for WMAC Fall Conference! Plan on a great time and lots of giveaways. Visit [AirCare.org](http://AirCare.org) for more details and to register now.
- » Keep your eye on our Facebook page for more information on dates and location.

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