

Flights of Mercy – Liga International

From Saddles to Cessnas, Liga International Flying Doctors of Mercy are Changing Lives

By Donia Moore



Pilot Volunteer Tim Murphy and friends. (Courtesy of Liga)

A train trip through the dusty Sinaloa desert of Mexico gave birth to the idea, which became Liga (League) International (Flying Doctors of Mercy). When physician, Iner Sheld Ritchie, traveled to Mexico City from the U.S. to treat then-President Abelardo Rodriguez in the 1930s, he noticed great illness and suffering as he passed through the country of the Yaqui Indians, some of Mexico's poorest residents. He discussed the situation with the President, who offered help. Dr. Ritchie's idea grew during his three-month long "vacation" horseback trips into Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja, California to treat his impoverished "patients."

Word of his healing expeditions went the rounds of

his medical colleagues, and it wasn't long before he had a cadre of physicians joining him to help. Liga was on its way.

Pilot Doctors

World War II accelerated the growth of the small aircraft industry and of Liga as well. Many doctors had trained as pilots for the war effort and now wanted to alleviate misery and suffering wherever possible. With the growing popularity and accessibility of private aircraft, it became possible to do in a weekend what had previously taken Dr. Ritchie three months to accomplish on horseback. The volunteer fleet of intrepid medical teams and their small private airplanes expanded quietly, helping the sick and injured to have better lives. *Liga* became known as the "Flying Doctors of Mercy." From the original handful of medical team participants, Liga now boasts over 2,000 active volunteer physicians, dentists, nurses, optometrists, audiologists, pharmacists, chiropractors, pilots, assistants, technicians, and support members.

Tim Murphy knows personally how Liga changes lives. He is one of the Legion of Liga volunteer pilots who fly to Liga clinics in Mexico on a regular basis. He and his hardworking Cessna Centurion depart his home FBO early on Friday mornings, returning late Sunday afternoons, ferrying doctors, equipment, and medical supplies. "You go through an entire cultural transformation in the blink of an eye," he says. "We take so much for granted in our society that coming from a culture of "haves" to one of "have-nots" for the first time is a cultural shock in its own right."

Tim is an attorney who got involved in Liga almost 15 years ago when he met a doctor through a family friend. The doctor needed a ride to El Fuerte, Sinaloa, Mexico to treat a patient. Tim was flying a Cessna 172 XP at that time and had never made a trip like this before. Upon their arrival, the doctor needed help and had Tim assisting him in the OR an hour after they touched down. Tim remembers feeling very grateful for his prior 37 years of experience and specialized training as a firefighter. Another Liga

adventure had him transporting a television show crew between the clinics as they filmed a documentary about Liga's work. Through their eyes, as they listened to the stories of the patients, doctors, and villagers, he saw a side of Liga he hadn't before and wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

A New Way of "Seeing" Life



Maria and mom traveling to US for surgery in Liga Volunteer pilot Tim Murphy's Cessna. (Courtesy of Liga)

Surgical removal of cataracts caused by exposure to the harsh environment in which many people exist here is a major part of clinical treatment. One of Tim's favorite experiences involved a case of mistaken identity—his. He was wearing scrubs and helping to clean the clinic after a full day's use when a lady shyly approached him, hugged him, and began to cry. She had mistaken him for one of the ophthalmologists. She had just had cataracts removed and could see her son for the first time in six years through her tears of happiness.

When Tim met five-year-old Maria and her mother, his own life changed drastically. Maria had a large tumor growing on her face. Her mother brought her

to the clinic to get help. Because of the nature and location of the life-threatening tumor, surgery couldn't be performed in Mexico due to the high risk involved. After the surgeons had cleared it with a hospital in California and with the Mexican government, he flew to El Fuerte, picked up mother and child and brought them back to the U.S. for the donated, scheduled surgery. Maria's mother stayed with Tim and his gracious wife during her daughter's operation and hospitalization. Although Tim and his family tried to make them welcome, there was still some hesitation over the food they offered. Suddenly a light clicked on in Tim's mind. He took the mother to a nearby market that carried Mexican food. After hearing her story, the kind owner invited the mother to choose whatever groceries she needed. When Tim reached into his pocket to pay, the grocer insisted on donating the cost of the groceries. "This is often the experience that Liga engenders—extending the reach of kindness."

Liga Season



Dental Exam with Liga Volunteer Dr. Steven Cavagnolo, DDS.

October to June is Liga season. Volunteers fly to Sinaloa, Mexico on the first Friday of every month and return home on the first Sunday. They spend a full day in the clinics, located in El Fuerte and San Blas, about 50 miles apart.

El Fuerte Clinic is in a rural agricultural village of 30,000 people. Dating from 1564, the town nestles on the banks of Rio Fuerte, serving as a departure point for eastbound Copper Canyon visitors. The clinic opened its doors in 1969 and sees an average

of 400 people per month for services, including dental, eye, orthopedic, and gynecology.

San Blas Clinic serves the small seaside community of San Blas, an area in which gray whale sightings are frequent. Opened in 1978, the clinic originally offered general medical services. Today, the staff sees an average of 300 people per month. The services offered here include dental, eye, podiatry, pediatrics, urology, neurology, and cardiology.

Many Little Hearts



Liga clinic in El Fuerte. (Courtesy of Liga)

Liga has established five major programs in Mexico. The Children's Heart Program was created in 1996 to provide necessary surgery. Start-up funds were donated by Liga volunteers to transport children needing surgery from their homes in Mexico to the United States. Currently, the majority of patients have surgery in excellent hospital centers in the cities of Obregon and Culiacan in Mexico. In the past year, with support from generous donors, Liga has averaged one to two operations a month, including high-risk patients in need of complicated surgery.

The Liga Eye Ophthalmology program is the busiest of all the projects, performing hundreds of cataract and other eye surgeries annually. Once a year, the clinic arranges to have an anesthesiologist and pediatric ophthalmologist present to operate on children and adults with eye muscle problems.

Liga also provides audiology, dental, and orthopedic programs.

Clinic trips may be short, but the determined volunteer teams treat everything from cleft palates to hernias, cataracts to clubfeet. Occasionally, medical team members come across conditions requiring more extensive treatment. Arrangements are made and patients are transported by *Liga* planes to hospitals in California and other areas to treat more serious cases, such as heart surgeries.

Mind and Body

The medical clinics represent a large portion of Liga's activity, but there is more to providing opportunities for a better life. Education is still out of reach for many young people in Mexico, and Liga has stepped in to help fill the breach.

Several self-supporting medical, agricultural, and industrial schools were founded with Liga's help. The largest of these is Colegio del Pacifico, near Navojoa in Sonora. This school houses 300 students, training them in a vocation and encouraging them to return to the more isolated areas of Mexico where their time and talents are sorely needed. Universidad de Montemorelos, one of Mexico's major universities, has benefited from Liga's direct establishment of its School of Medicine, School of Nutrition, School of Dental Technology, and the Dental Residency Program.

Does Liga Need Me?



Liga volunteer Renee Vinyard and friends with plane in Mexico. (Courtesy of Liga)

Yes. Liga needs pilots, physicians, doctors in all specialties, dentists, pharmacists, and support volunteers. Members can expect to work in and around the clinics—maybe flying teams to Mexico, helping in a clinic, checking in patients, translating, keeping records of treatments, cleaning the clinics, and more. They are assigned tasks based on the clinics' needs, and extra hands are always welcomed.

Pilot Volunteer Requirements

Pilot Volunteers need to meet the following profile requirements:

- FR Pilot with More than 600 hours total time
- Signed Volunteer and Pilot Waivers
- Be a paid member of LIGA International
- Mexico Flight Experience Not Required!

In addition, Pilot Volunteers are required to download, review, and submit a number of documents found on the Liga website. An experienced Liga pilot will be assigned to accompany new pilot volunteers flying for the first couple trips. Flights generally travel in a coordinated flight plan effort, checking in with each other on a regular basis.

Non-Pilot Volunteer Requirements

- Be a paid member of LIGA International
- Pay a Pilot Reimbursement Fee, covering part of the fuel

All non-pilot volunteers are matched with geographic location of their pilots by Liga's travel coordinator.

Ready, Set, Go!

Volunteers need a valid passport with them to enter and leave Mexico.

Bring money for meals and hotel stays, as these are not included in the Liga fees. Liga has monetary guidelines, hotel and dining suggestions, and packing information on the Liga website.

(www.ligainternational.org)

Ready to roll with Liga? Contact Pat Savage at Liga International (patsavage@ligainternational.org). Take the time to talk with an experienced Medical Staff member or Pilot Volunteer before you go.

You'll be changing lives—maybe even your own.