



[Home](#) > [News & Videos](#) > [GA pilots fly for Midwest flood relief](#)

GA PILOTS FLY FOR MIDWEST FLOOD RELIEF

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By Dan Namowitz

Aerial views gave communities in Nebraska, Iowa, and elsewhere their first look at the scale of destruction from historic flooding triggered by heavy rains and melting snows as their neighbors downstream braced for high water moving in their direction under clouded skies.

Pilots rushed to respond—and before long their independent efforts coalesced into a major, coordinated operation highlighted by many individual volunteer light-aircraft owners getting airborne and a Lincoln, Nebraska, charter service donating repeated flights to and from a landlocked airport in a Beechcraft King Air twin turboprop.

Doing it 'the Nebraska way'

The phones didn't stop ringing at Silverhawk Aviation in Lincoln, Nebraska, for hours after word got around on social media that the charter operator was flying stranded people out of Fremont, Nebraska, from the municipal airport after flooding described by the National Weather Service as historic and catastrophic had made roads and bridges impassable.

Brad Higgins, a pilot and photographer, rode along on several evacuation flights in a company Beechcraft King Air and captured the scene in images and videos. With no end in sight to demand for evacuations on March 17, Higgins said, the company's president, Mike Gerdes, made a decision: "The owner just said, 'Let's do this. This is the Nebraska way.' He decided to have free flights all day Sunday."

The passengers who flew out in that King Air, which was capable of bringing seven people out of Fremont on each trip, won't soon forget their timely travel. Higgins estimates that in 24 trips, the company flew out 170 people, delivering them to two airports in Omaha as well as Columbus, Lincoln, and Wahoo as two other corporate aircraft joined the effort.

Higgins recalls that after a flight to Lincoln, he drove a passenger to the bus terminal.

More pilots take off

The working pilots soon had plenty of company on the ramp in Fremont as owners of light airplanes caught wind of the situation and sprang into action as soon as skies cleared.

Josh Tocko recalled that it was the evening on March 16 when pilots in the Omaha area started getting the word over social media and other channels that an impromptu relief effort would begin the next day.

By morning, he and other pilots were loading up airplanes ranging from a Cessna 152 to a Pilatus turboprop at Omaha's Millard Airport and other places.

"It was our Nebraska version of the Berlin Airlift," said Tocko, who instructs for **Oracle Aviation** at Millard, and flew a company Piper PA-28 on multiple 15-minute hops to and from deluged Fremont.

"At first it was organized chaos," he said, describing a scene of volunteers stuffing aircraft with supplies toted onto the ramp in a golf cart and other conveyances.

Six cases of water took up most of the useful load of his airplane on some of his flights, with other items crammed into "every last space," and unloaded in Fremont by a "human chain."

Ginny Wescott, whose husband, Victor, works for Oracle Aviation, said she and pilots' spouses Susan McGillick and Rachel Tiller went to work backstopping the effort that, according to her records, added up to 36 pilots conducting close to 60 flights.

"I organized pilots and supplies, Susan handled people needing to be flown in and out of Fremont, and Rachel worked to get donations to the airport," she said in an email. "It was amazing to see the outpouring of love and support from the community. We saw tears of joy, happiness, relief and exhaustion, sometimes all on the same face."

Wescott said pilots with no airplane to fly spent their own money to rent one and participate. Others donned reflective vests and worked as line crew. "I am not from Nebraska as we are a military family. But I am proud to live among the people that call this place home," she wrote.

As with the King Air flights, Tocko said, passengers "from every walk of life" climbed aboard his Piper single for the outbound runs.

"One had an appointment for surgery the next day. Another was a baby that had been visiting grandparents," he said, recalling other passengers including a high school student who needed to get home, and people scheduled to go on a cruise out of Florida the next day.

In all, Tocko said, he flew out 18 people in two days, and for all of them, it was their first flight in a light airplane.

"All took it in good stride because they were very happy to get out," he said.

Those people stranded in Fremont, Nebraska, on the Platte River found their way out, and supplies found their way in on board those aircraft starting March 16 as the emergency response gained critical mass.

Although skies had cleared, the National Weather Service still predicted that the "historic and catastrophic flooding" caused by rain and rapidly melting snow would persist in "portions of the central Plains and Upper Midwest for the rest of the week," and true to predictions, a weak low pressure system was bringing additional light to moderate rain to the area on March 19.

The governors of Nebraska, Iowa, and Wisconsin declared states of emergency. Vice President Mike Pence planned a visit to the Omaha area on March 19. Temporary flight restrictions were planned in the area for several hours.

The flooding brought back memories of a prior deluge for Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts.

"In 2011, it took 108 days for water to subside, and this year the water is 4-5 feet higher. NEMA and teams across the state are working around the clock to provide relief," he tweeted on March 18.

Fremont, hit hard by the flooding, was surrounded by water for several days, thereby becoming the focus of the major general aviation volunteer-driven relief effort as the only landlocked community with an operating airport.

On March 18, an employee of **Fremont Aviation** had counted 18 airplanes outside the fixed-base operation's facility at **Fremont Municipal Airport**, said Greg Kjeldgaard, the FBO's vice president, in a quick telephone interview he granted amid the frantic activity.

"The ramp's good for about 10," he added.

March 18 was the fourth day of air relief and the first day people in Fremont, population about 25,000, had been able to get out of the city by car, he said.

"Supplies were dwindling from baby diapers to water," he said, adding that "a quarter of the town was evacuated and underwater," with bridges "wiped out" and "trains stopped here."

Pilots participated in at least one **rescue**. As the floods began to submerge the area on March 15, a Black Hawk helicopter crew came to the rescue of firefighters and the rescued occupants of two boats that capsized in raging waters.

Kjeldgaard said his family's FBO doesn't offer air charters, so he put out the word that there were many people stranded in town who needed to get out, as well as residents who had been out of town when the disaster struck and wanted to get home.

Advanced Air, in Council Bluffs, Iowa, and Silverhawk Aviation of Lincoln, Nebraska, responded with donated transportation, and many area private pilots also took up the call.

"I guess we've done at least a thousand people," Kjeldgaard said by phone. "We tried keeping track, and we couldn't."

News reports said hard-hit Offutt Air Force Base south of Omaha, Nebraska, and Council Bluffs, where the Platte and Missouri rivers come together, was badly flooded with about 60 structures that included the headquarters of the 55th Wing, and aircraft maintenance hangars.

Gary Parker, a Cessna 182 owner who works on the base, said that as the waters rose, personnel responded to the impending threat by working all night March 16 and the following morning filling sandbags—an effort that ultimately proved insufficient.

"We got word about mid-week last week that some of it was going to be very problematic with all the snow we had," he said. "I don't think the region was fully prepared for what was coming."

A U.S. Air Force veteran, Parker earned his private pilot certificate with the aero club on the base in 2006—22 years after his first solo—and now owns a 1961 Cessna 182. He keeps the airplane at Offutt, but as luck would have it, the Skylane was safely in the shop at Advanced Air in Council Bluffs for an avionics and interior upgrade when the waters began to rise.

Ginny Wescott, who works at Offutt Air Force Base and coordinated much of the relief flying, told AOPA she was able to return to her job at the base on March 19.

Down the Midwest's major rivers, flooding began, and anxious residents kept a wary eye on the waters as the next rainy system moved in. Longtime pilot and AOPA ally Rep. Sam Graves (R-Mo.) said in a March 19 telephone interview that his home airport, **Gould Peterson Municipal Airport** in Tarkio, Missouri, was above water and "absolutely jam-packed with airplanes, everyone getting their airplanes out" of flooded airports in the region.

"We've got airports under water, but we don't know the extent of the damage yet," Graves said. "It's raining today... if it continues to rain here, my home airport's going to go under."

Mainstream **news coverage** helped spread the word that GA was pitching in to help as the magnitude of the big-picture impact of the flooding emerged.

In Iowa, the *Des Moines Register*, the state's largest paper, **reported** Gov. Kim Reynolds' comment that the flooding looked like "an ocean," after an aerial inspection, adding that she planned another inspection flight above western Iowa on March 19, with Pence.

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