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His last flights as corporate pilot end with Special Olympics



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By ALISSA SKELTON / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Saturday, July 24, 2010 7:51 pm | No Comments Posted

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They were his last two flights as a corporate pilot and Bill Wagner wanted to make them special.

He did. He made them memorable for not only himself, but also for 16 Special Olympic athletes and coaches on Saturday.

As the chief pilot for Townsend Vision based in Des Moines, Iowa, he flies the fastest civilian aircraft in the world, the Cessna Citation X.

Wagner first took to the skies as a fighter pilot in Vietnam. He has flown more than 18,000 hours and now he's retiring, he said.

At 7 a.m. Saturday, he was the first pilot to taxi out of Lincoln Airport for the Cessna airlift. He took Florida National Special Olympic athletes and coaches home to Orlando.

Then it was back to Lincoln for a second return flight, this time to Tulsa, Okla.

Just a few minutes before 2 p.m., Oklahoma Special Olympic athletes and coaches marched up to Wagner's rain forest-themed plane for what would be his last flight as a corporate pilot.

He took pictures with them but didn't want to say much about his last flight.

"I've been thinking about this day for far over a year," he said. "I am very sad, but I have a family that loves and needs me."

He had a wide smile and waved goodbye to the crowd as he climbed into the captain's seat one last time.

Bill Wagner, chief pilot for Townsend Vision, waves goodbye during the Special Olympics fly-out at Duncan Aviation on Saturday, July 24, 2010. Wagner had planned for over a year to make this flight his last before retiring when he arrives home in Des Moines, Iowa, later in the day. (TED KIRK / Lincoln Journal Star)

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A close friend, Pam Garrett of Seward, said she didn't expect him to say much.

"He's emotional and he probably just needed to get going," she said.

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At 2 p.m., the UPS tug was pulling the plane away. Volunteers waved and Doyle Garrett ran alongside the plane to salute his longtime pilot friend.

Doyle Garrett is project manager for Duncan Aviation in Lincoln. He met Wagner in 1978 and they've been friends ever since.

Garrett said Wagner always signs his letters with tailwinds -- the way Wagner hoped to always fly.

"I think he's saying goodbye to this portion of his flight career as a corporate pilot, but we will still see him in the aviation business," he said.

Wagner plans to move to Denver on Sunday with his wife to be closer to his daughter Brooke, who is a TV anchor. His son, Matt, is a captain for Continental Express.

Wagner will stop in Lincoln again Sunday in his private single-engine plane en route to Denver.

Duncan Aviation is presenting him with an award: an old propeller with the words "Best wishes to a longtime customer, friend and colleague in aviation from your friends at Duncan Aviation."

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