

Life Flight Now Conducting Flights Under IFR

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requests can now be made with greater certainty, he said, adding that healthcare and pre-hospital providers across the region can now depend upon Life Flight's much-needed service even more. "Flights conducted under IFR are highly structured and further enhance safety by ensuring constant communication and radar contact with air traffic control," he said. To achieve the prestigious IFR certification, Life Flight pilots undergo rigorous training and are required to achieve airline transport pilot (ATP) licensure, which is the same required of pilots who fly commercial airplanes. The didactic and practical portions of the IFR training curriculum take approximately one month to complete and involve meeting the most challenging standards in aviation. "Each training flight is conducted with numerous instrument takeoffs, approaches and emergency simulations," said Grubbs. "We use extensive line-oriented flight training, or LOFT, scenario-based training and hands-on flight operations to ensure that our aviators are unflappable, proficient and exacting. All of the flight training is in the actual helicopter while flying in the Southeast Texas airspace for thorough familiarization."

Grubbs said that Life Flight pilots are all required to have their instrument-rated license upon hire, and ATP licensure within at least two years of hire. Of Life Flight's 21 pilots, 17 are ATP-licensed and the other four are currently undergoing IFR training. "It is the highest standard in our field, and fewer than 5 percent of helicopter emergency medical service pilots across the country are IFR certified," he said. "The maximum benefit of flying under IFR is to avoid the risks associated with flying during those conditions. The safety of our crew and patients is our No. 1 priority."

The Life Flight fleet, which completes more than 3,000 missions each year, consists of six Airbus EC-145 helicopters, all of which are equipped and certified for single-pilot IFR operation. The John S. Dunn Helipad at Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center can accommodate four helicopters at one time, and is considered one of the busiest helipads in the United States. In addition to the 21 pilots, the nationally acclaimed Life Flight team includes 21 flight nurses, 18 paramedics/dispatchers and eight mechanics. Each helicopter is inspected and serviced daily.

According to Grubbs, the Life Flight fleet's technology, capability and avionics are among the most advanced in the industry. "These helicopters have dual autopilots and GPS units, weather radar, 3X color moving-map displays, terrain and obstacle warning systems, traffic avoidance systems, and XM Satellite Aviation Weather," he said. "Each system on every aircraft has a backup, and some of our avionics and flight instruments have two backups. Our helicopters are capable of flying instrument approaches directly to runways at a height of 50 feet while coupled to the autopilot system."

Founded in 1976 by James "Red" Duke, M.D., who still serves as medical director of the program today, Life Flight retrieves critically ill and injured patients in the Greater Houston area and beyond, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Most locations are accessible in less than 15 minutes, within a 150-mile radius of Houston, including Harris County, Southeast Texas and part of Western Louisiana. Provided as a community service by Memorial Hermann, Life Flight operates as a hospital-based, not-for-profit organization. It costs approximately \$3 million annually to support the program, none of which comes from tax dollars.



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