



THE SCHULTZ FIRE viewed from Flagstaff Pulliam Airport, Arizona (left).

ERICKSON AIR-CRANE heli-tanker returns to the airport for refueling (above).

HOW AN AIRPORT HELPED SAVE A TOWN

What’s that smoke?” I wondered, startled, as I strode to meet friends at a downtown Flagstaff music festival. At first no one else seemed to notice the plume billowing overhead—I guess it’s a pilot’s nature to peer continually upward—but sidewalk crowds soon began gathering to snap cell-phone photos.

There was a perverse beauty to this gargantuan column of soot piercing a cobalt Arizona sky, and I found myself craving my own camera to photograph orange-and-white air tankers and helicopters swarming to attack under a vivid midday moon.

Flagstaff is not a big place, and the thought of so large a fire close to town was scary. But no one seemed to know anything about it. Just south of town at Flagstaff Pulliam Airport, however, Wiseman Aviation owner Orville Wiseman had received a tearful call from his son, Grant.

“Firemen just came to our house, dad; they said we need to evacuate right now!” The airwaves soon had news of the “Hardy Fire” threatening the city’s east side.

Wiseman e-mailed me: “Guess whose house was one of the closest to the initial fire? When I saw the smoke from the airport this morning I knew we were in trouble. By the time I led our caravan of animals and belongings out the driveway, 50-foot flames were racing through the nearby woods toward town. The hotels are full, so we’re staying in the hangar tonight and hoping we might be able to go home sometime tomorrow. We brought a horse, goats, dogs, cats, and some geese with us to the airport.

“They called in eight slurry bombers from all over the Southwest this afternoon to work the fire, which right away told me how bad it is—since there are only 19 large

air tankers in the entire United States. We were soon busy fueling them at our Winslow location, and supporting heli-tankers here in Flagstaff. The fire is just two miles off the end of the runway.”

The next morning Wiseman reported more bad news. “A few hours ago a new fire broke out on Shultz Pass, the result of a campfire gone wrong. When I flew to Winslow to check on things there, I learned of yet another startup down on the Mogollon Rim. The fire that threatened our home is pretty well under tabs, but we cannot move back yet. It feels like Armageddon here!”

Fortunately for Jean and me, the Hardy and Schultz fires were burning across town from our own home, but a wind shift could quickly change that situation. “Top off the *Flying Carpet*,” ordered Jean, while prioritizing belongings for possible evacuation. “We might need to move it at a moment’s notice.”

Wiseman’s challenges were just beginning, however. Along with the eight air tankers battling the fire from Winslow, four monstrous Erickson Air-Crane heli-tankers and 12 other fixed- and rotary-wing fire attack aircraft now clogged Flagstaff’s transient parking ramp. That meant all other general aviation arrivals had to be relocated and serviced at distant corners of the airport. There was also the challenge of fueling all those firefighting aircraft. The four heli-tankers alone burn 500 gallons per flight hour each.

ERICKSON AIR-CRANE

Maximum external load:
25,000 pounds

Powerplant: Two Pratt & Whitney JFTD 12A-4A engines rated at 9,600 hp each

Main rotor area: 72 feet, 2.85 inches

Since fuel orders normally take 12 hours to reach the airport, Wiseman implored his supplier to increase delivery speed and quantities. I suspect it was an emotional plea; along with protecting the property of 60,000 neighbors, timely arrival of that fuel might help suppress the fire threatening his own neighborhood. To service the aircraft, Wiseman contracted an additional fuel truck to be driven 320 miles from Albuquerque overnight. Wiseman e-mailed insider photos and news snippets:

“The Air-Cranes require eight to nine hours of maintenance per flight hour,” he wrote, “so their mechanics work from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. daily keeping the aircraft online. My staff is keeping similar hours to support everyone. The helicopters have switched from drawing water wherever they can find it, to loading from mobile retardant bases at the base of the mountain. That’s working well, but the retardant must be washed off the helicopters each time they refuel, which is every 90 minutes. The governor came in yesterday afternoon for a visit; it’s been a long week.”

When the fires ended in late June, they had consumed 16,000 acres, including the eastern slopes of the town’s signature San Francisco Peaks. Although hundreds of homes were evacuated, not one burned thanks to heroic work by ground and aerial firefighters.

Even then the aviation effort wasn’t over. Helicopters soon airlifted hay and seed to stabilize fire-ravaged slopes of the San Francisco Peaks against flooding and mudslides during the coming monsoon thunderstorms. Wiseman Aviation and the Flagstaff ATC tower received government citations for exemplary performance in supporting the firefighting activities.

If anyone doubts what an airport can do for a town, they should study what happened in Flagstaff, Arizona, in June 2010. Without it, this story—and this community—might have had very different endings. 🎧

Greg Brown’s books include *Flying Carpet*, *The Savvy Flight Instructor*, and *You Can Fly!*

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