102ND CANDLELIGHT ALUMNI ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

DUSTIN BRUCE SMITH BIOGRAPHY JANUARY 2011

Born in 1983 and raised on the North Shore of Chicago, Dustin Bruce Smith was an unmotivated student until he began to fly airplanes and learn outdoor survival skills with Summit Adventure and the National Outdoor Leadership School. A 2001 graduate of Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Illinois, he completed high school in 3.5 years and then attended Rocky Mountain College to major in aeronautical science. He completed that four-year program in 3.5 years as well.

At RMC, he befriended many foreign students and, after graduation, visited his Belizean classmates. Having done a research paper his senior year on humanitarian aviation, his eyes were drawn to a Cessna 206 with a Wings of Hope insignia on it at the Belize Airport. That planted the seed for an ambition he had to fly humanitarian missions. He returned to Montana where he was an RMC flight instructor, and supplemented his income with construction work while corresponding with Wings of Hope about a position with them. While he waited, Dustin continued flight instructing at RMC, while also instructing whitewater kayaking. He spent a good deal of his free time fly fishing the pristine rivers of Montana in the shadows of the Beartooth Mountain Range.

Losing hope that humanitarian aviation would be in his near future, he accepted a position with a company in Northwest Wyoming doing radio telemetry tracking of wild animals in the Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks. This involved learning the nuances of flying a two-man, light-weight, tail-dragging Arctic Tern aircraft. He spent months in the remotest parts of our country doing low level mountain flying while tracking animals such as grizzly bears, wolves, mountain lions, and prairie dogs.

When he wasn’t flying, Dustin was trying to capture the illusive trout inhabiting the rivers around Dubois, Wyoming. It was a solitary life, especially in the winter, for a young man of 24. After eight months, he returned to Montana for a short while flying a UPS route, and then took a seasonal position flying a Cessna 206 in McCall, Idaho, transporting goods, fishermen, hunters, and their gear in and out of the mountainous back country. As the hunting season was drawing to a close, and Dustin saw a relaxing winter of ski instruction in his future, the call from Wings of Hope
came. Would he be willing to go to Africa and be a pilot field director for a new operation Wings of Hope was being asked to start in Tshumbe, Democratic Republic of Congo? It didn’t take long for him to respond affirmatively.

In January 2009, after an intensive three month training course in mechanical maintenance on the Cessna 206, and a crash course in French, a language Dustin had never studied, he departed for the DRC capital of Kinshasa. It took about six weeks of thrashing his way through a uniquely Congolese mountain of red tape to get his Congolese pilot’s license, and get the aircraft, already shipped ahead of him, prepared and cleared to fly to Tshumbe, which is in the south central part of Congo. On those first journeys, Dustin was accompanied by an experienced Congolese pilot who flies for Missionary Aviation Fellowship. Congo has no air traffic control to speak of and no radar systems since the African war that tore through that country less than six years ago. Navigation utilizes out-of-date maps, dead reckoning, and lots of pilot experience. Dustin often calls people on his cell phone to get weather reports in towns of destinations ahead of him.

He is proficient in many different single and multi engine aircraft and excels in difficult backcountry and remote location aviation.