

Pet project: Pilots N Paws flies to the rescue of dogs and cats.

Airborne pet rescue

By CINDY HOEDEL

AT THE Midwest National Air Center near Excelsior Springs in Missouri, the United States, a white Piper Cherokee drifts to earth like a paper airplane in the bright twilight, the buzz of its single engine only slightly louder than the chirp of grasshoppers in the surrounding farmland.

On the ground, the plane noses down deserted runways and taxis towards the padlocked terminal building. The propeller coughs to a stop, and the pilot unfolds his body backwards through the passenger-side door.

Standing on the wing he asks his passenger: "Honey Bee, do you want to get out?"

Honey Bee, a two-year-old Bluetick Coonhound, raises her head and cocks her floppy velvet ears. But she remains rooted to the backseat where she has slept most of the two hours since the gentle-voiced stranger picked her up at Spirit of St Louis Airport and loaded her into this strange vehicle that vibrates like a pickup but is much louder.

The pilot strokes Honey Bee under the chin, then leans in and scoops up the 23kg hound, no easy feat, while trying to keep his footing on a convex aircraft wing. Even cradling a coonhound, Sam Taylor has the squared shoulders and



In good hands: Sam Taylor pets Honey Bee, a Bluetick Coonhound as they fly in his Piper Cherokee. Taylor flies for the Pilots N Paws charity, an organisation that uses pilots willing to volunteer their time and planes to ferry animals to new homes around the United States.

stick-straight posture of military servicemen.

Taylor is a retired Navy helicopter pilot who flew search-and-rescue missions during the Vietnam War. Now he flies animal rescue mis-

sions in his plane for a nationwide network called Pilots N Paws. On average, Taylor goes on one to three rescue flights a week.

Most flights are in the 241km range, but he has flown much far-

ther. In September 2010, Taylor was part of a mission that rescued 171 dogs from Louisiana after the gulf oil spill.

Taylor would go more often if he could afford it. Pilots N Paws

pilots pay for their own gas, which averages US\$48 (RM153) per hour. Last year, Taylor spent US\$3,255 (RM10,376) on gas for rescue flights. This year, he's up to US\$2,400 (RM7,650) already.

Taylor has transported 279 dogs and one cat, and he has pictures of every one of them. The bottom drawer of a metal file cabinet in the upstairs office of his Kansas City home is filled with manila folders labelled in a neat cursive hand in pencil: "Tuff the Weimaraner," "Pippen the Italian Greyhound," "Layla the English Pointer."

And now "Honey Bee, the Bluetick Coonhound."

Honey Bee was rescued from a farm in rural Kentucky where a once-respected breeder descended into ill health and hoarding behaviour and ultimately abandoned his property, leaving behind 29 Coonhounds, many locked in kennels, horse stalls and the house.

Over the next five days, Honey Bee will be handed off 21 more times in a relay stretching 3,460km from Excelsior Springs to Reseda, California, near Los Angeles. But first, Taylor pushes his airplane into its hangar, pulls the door shut and locks it. The blanket Honey Bee slept on in the plane is draped over his arm. He spreads the blanket over the front seat of his silver pickup.

"She's familiar with the blanket.

so that is a comforting thing," he explains.

Honey Bee's story is typical in many ways of how animal rescues in America play out nowadays. Pilots N Paws is just one part of a complex network that functions like a modern Underground Railroad for animals.

Honey Bee came out of the South. The lack of spay-neuter laws in many Southern states combined with their higher shelter euthanasia rates – 70% is not uncommon – sets up a continuous flow of dogs and cats to the rest of the country. More than half the rescues Taylor flies are shelter-to-shelter transfers, moving an animal facing euthanasia at an overcrowded shelter to a no-kill shelter.

Many rescued dogs start their new lives with a stay at a long-term foster home while volunteers post information online in hopes of finding an adoptive family. Once an adoption is arranged, the rescue organisation contacts a volunteer transport coordinator to cobble together a route that often involves six to two dozen legs by road and by land.

Pilots N Paws runs a website where transport coordinators post routes where pilots are needed to "connect the dots" between overland segments of an animal's journey.

Joan Nickum, a transport coordinator from Kansas City, Kansas, met Taylor at a Platte Woods, Missouri, gas station to take Honey Bee to a foster in Kansas City for two nights to bridge the gap until a driver was available to take her to Emporia, the next leg of her journey.

Short-term fosters are different from long-term fosters. They are often the unsung heroes supporting the more-heralded pilots, drivers and long-term foster farms.

These fosters prefer to remain

anonymous because often they live in towns and cities with codes limiting the number of animals allowed under one roof. Being animal lovers, they usually already have the maximum allowable number of pets, so by sheltering rescue animals, even for a night or two, they are exposing themselves to complaints and fines.

Pilots N Paws was co-founded in 2008 by Debi Boies of Landrum, South Carolina, and her pilot friend Jon Wehrenberg, after the latter offered to fly a dog Boies had adopted from Florida.

Today the network has 2,700 volunteer pilots in all 50 states and has flown more than 10,000 animals.

Kansas City author Patrick Regan, who has written a book about the organisation called *Dog Is My Co-Pilot*, said of all the pilots he met in the course of his book, Taylor stands apart because of his professionalism and compassion for dogs.

"He's just such a great guy," Nickum agrees. "There's been very few times when he hasn't responded with, 'You betcha.'"

Taylor is respected and beloved by rescue groups for the precision of his communications, paperwork and scheduling. He says his military experience gave him organisational skills and a love of problem-solving.

"If I see two dogs coming in I try to combine them into one trip. The last thing I do before every flight is look online to see if any other dogs have popped up. It's a resource management instinct," he says.

Early this year, Taylor's plane was out for maintenance. After he got it back, he flew four rescue missions before spending 11 days in Guatemala with his church group installing a water purification system. Since getting

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Kathy Erins, of St Louis, Missouri, helping Taylor load Honey Bee into his plane at the Spirit of St Louis Airport in Chesterfield.



Honey Bee looking around the cabin of the plane.