



Air-Child VA

The VA that takes the concept of community to a whole new level

Once in a while, you find yourself surprised. Maybe it's meeting a friend you haven't seen for years or finding a few pounds in a pocket. It's often a pleasant feeling. Surprises are a good thing. This issue, I've found just such a 'surprise' in the form of a VA. I love the VAs I get to talk

with - the sense of community is always a strong point. However, this particular VA takes the feeling of community to a whole new level. Introducing Air-Child.

From little acorns...

Forum talk is often a dangerous thing. It's like drinking at 2am and deciding to change the

world. Way back in 2007, a random meeting on a German flight sim forum threw up just such a conversation. Peter Schindler and Norbert Wöller found a common interest in somehow doing more with their hobby than just flying. A way of 'doing more' soon presented itself. A few emails and phone calls and something unique was formed. Combining a VA with a system to allow people and companies to sponsor the airline seems incredibly left field, but oh what an idea. That sponsorship would go to a charity, UNICEF to be precise. When it came to the name though, CEO Christopher Bennett described it best: "The desire to help children in need should be the heart and the passion behind all activities of the airline, and so there was no doubt about the name: Air-Child."

Rather than then jumping into a full-on VA launch, a team was assembled to discuss what kind of VA they wanted to be. Within six months the team had grown and they now had a regular set of pilots who were busy testing the VA's infrastructure, ensuring everything would be ready for the public. It wasn't until autumn 2008 that a public beta of Air-Child was made available. Eighty people signed up and more than 50 flew enough flights to provide feedback on what worked and what didn't.



Above: There really is something for everyone at Air-Child.



Above: The backcountry gets you away from the big airports.



*Above: X-Plane users are very well represented at Air-Child. The IXEG 737-300 is a superb bird to fly.
Below: Heavy metal for long-haul? No problem!*



By June 2009 it was all systems go and Air-Child officially opened to everyone.

More fluffy than stuffy

There are plenty of VAs out there that can feel a bit constrictive with more rules than flights. The team behind Air-Child wanted to be as far away from a stuffy airline as possible. The airline isn't formed by the management but its members. The members call the shots. If someone wants to improve things at the VA, they can. There's no passing it through committees to reach the right people. It's very noticeable that no one at the VA has a job title. No vice presidents or CEOs, just regular members getting on with it. I like that. I also like its website. Okay, it's a little 'turn of the century' but it's incredibly open. For most of these VA articles I rely on people to provide me with either access to the whole site or for someone to provide me with things like a pilot roster and fleet list. At Air-Child, everything is open to the public. There are no 'pilot-only' areas and everything you want to know is there where you need it, which is refreshing. Christopher tells me it's been the VA's policy since day one to be as open as possible.

There are few rules as well. Members treat each other with respect and most rules are unwritten. I get the impression

that Air-Child is a VA that likes you to relax and enjoy what you're doing.

Charity begins at Air-Child

Air-Child VA offers a sponsoring program to support the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF. In fact the whole idea of Air-Child VA is focused around this concept. UNICEF activities cover health care, education and protection for children all over the world as well as a continuous struggle for children's rights. I can't think of a more noble charity than UNICEF, but how does it work for members. I'll let Christopher explain: "Although one major purpose of our airline is to generate money for UNICEF (that is: as much money as possible!) we decided not to charge any of our members. Instead we invite everyone, especially companies of any description, to take part in this charity program. So how does that work? Basically, it's very easy. As a sponsoring partner you will be paying a certain amount of money for every flight that is completed (and ☑



Cargo flights are just one of the many flight options available.

reported) by Air-Child pilots. This can be as low as 1 cent or as much as 1 Euro per flight; it's up to you. You tell us the base, we calculate the total. Every three months we will send you an e-mail, showing the total number of flights during this period and the total amount of money you will have to send to UNICEF."

"Now, 'how many flights would that be?' you may ask, 'and how can I make sure it's not going to cost me thousands of Euros each month?' Simple, just set a limit. For example, you agree to pay 0.5 cent for each reported flight but limit it to a maximum of €5 a month. That means, starting with flight number 1001, you'll not be charged any more. If there's only 600 flights that month, you'll only pay €3. For that donation you get a receipt sent directly by UNICEF, you'll get a dedicated place on our website showing your name (if you're a single person) or your company logo as well as a link to your own website, if you wish. Though not much, this is a good way to show others that you care. By the way: no one will get to see how much money you have actually accumulated and transferred. All we are publishing is the total of all sponsoring transfers every three months."

Pilots' perspective

The ability to give to UNICEF only works with Air-Child's pilots. Without flights being flown, the money wouldn't flow. Air-Child operates a fleet of 394 aircraft and it includes all the usual suspects such as the 747, A320 and even the old MD-11. Hidden

away though, and perfect if you fancy something that's not your usual airliner, the VA also operates the Cessna 172, Cessna 208, Lockheed L-100, and even the Dornier 228-200. That's a fair amount of choice.

Members get access to not only their own forums but a TeamSpeak server that can provide company on those long transatlantic crossings.

Flights come in scheduled, charter and cargo form as well and there are plenty of hubs to choose from including my own home city of Vienna. I love that a wide variety of sims are supported, including FS2004, plus all versions of X-Plane and Prepar3D. Pilots have a choice of recording software as well, ranging from X-ACARS, FSPassengers and FSKeeper plus others. All are available from the Air-Child Website.

The VA can also boast of some impressive credentials. Members can enjoy discounts at Aerosoft as part of the VA partner program. The VA also counts on the support of VATSIM with VACC Austria and VATGER certifying the airline as an official VATSIM Airline.

To date there are around 150 active pilots and over 1000 registered pilots. I'm fairly certain I'm one of those registered pilots.

Looking to the future

In late 2016, founders Herr Schindler and Herr Wöller decided to retire. Christopher Bennett was very keen though not to let Air-Child retire with them, so he contacted them and offered to take over the running

of Air-Child. A new Executive Staff / Board of Directors was implemented in early 2017, which is currently working on modernising the VA to come up to current web-development standards. This will include a complete custom-coded Flight Operations Centre which is expected to go into beta testing before the Christmas holiday of 2017. In addition to that, the introduction of SmartCars 2 for the VA promises to be a huge improvement over the current flight recording clients.

Conclusion

It's a rare thing to feel humbled by a simple idea. Air-Child and its commitment to help those less fortunate has done just that. Only the annual madness that is Worldflight comes close to taking our hobby beyond the spare rooms and basements we inhabit and tries to make the world a better place. This VA feels special. Beyond the charity work, the open nature of the management, the wealth of aircraft and routes available and the ability to use a wide selection of flight sims gives this VA that little bit extra. The airline is currently going through some changes but I doubt it will lose its purpose. Pilots here don't fly for the hours on their logbook. They fly knowing that those hours have contributed to a better life for a child who may be suffering; who can't get on board with that? For more information on Air-Child, visit www.air-child.com. If you fly for a VA or run one and fancy being featured here, drop me a line at jessica@pcpilot.net

By Jessica Bannister-Pearce

PCP



Old-school piloting in the MD-89