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Get your kick from Champagne

Flight Angels 2016 supported by decorated US veteran

When a decorated fighter pilot with seven combat deployments tells you that Flight Angels 2016 is a “noble cause”, you know you want to be involved.

Doug Champagne was hooked on aviation from an early age. His story is an inspiration...

“I must have been about four-years-old when my dad took me to Detroit Metropolitan Airport’s skybridge for the first time. You could watch the commercial aircraft taking off and landing, and for a dime you could listen in to the air traffic controllers talking to the pilots.”

That early love of flight never left Colonel Doug ‘Bubbles’ Champagne, but it took a disappointment with college life - and an investment in a ‘noble cause’ by his father - to set him off on a life-long career in the cockpit.

“I had taken a place in college to study computing. It was the next big thing back in the early 1980s, but it just wasn’t for me. So I told my dad I was quitting and going to take some time out, get a job and decide what to do with my life.

“He told me that ‘quitting wasn’t an option’. The next day he suggested we take a drive over to the University of Western Michigan where there was an opportunity to study aviation. I told him we couldn’t afford it, but he insisted.

“My dad had sold his prized coin collection that he’d started when he was 10, and sent me off to renew my love of all things flight-related.”

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After graduating with honours, Doug needed to figure out a way of paying for his flying habit. So he began the lengthy process of applying to join the US Air Force as a fighter pilot. He was accepted into training in September 1987.

What followed was a long and illustrious career in the USAF. As an F16 pilot he was deployed to the Middle East as part of Operation Desert Storm and his unit played a key role in the battle for Fallujah following the invasion of Iraq.

He also flew one of the first combat missions with live ammunition over US air space on September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of the terrible events that day which changed the world forever, Doug was airborne the same night over Detroit, providing part of the shield the US threw up over all its major cities.

"We were at war on home soil. As we flew in a pattern over Detroit I looked out across the sky, where you can normally see thousands of blinking lights – aircraft going to and fro across the United States - there was nothing, just nothing.

"That was an eerie feeling."

Doug recently retired from his military career, and now flies corporate jets for a living. His aviation credentials make him a star attraction for Flight Angels 2016, but why get involved in the first place?

"I think in today's modern world we've forgotten about looking out for each other. Not completely, but people don't do it the way they used to.

"This is a noble cause - helping young people. I can't think of a better way to give something back."

The association with the event comes from a friendship struck up with aviation journalist and flight simulations pioneer Jane Rachel Whittaker.

The pair got to know each other after Jane's wife read an article in the press about Doug's daughter, Katie. Both women are congenital quad amputees, and that support and friendship has blossomed over the years to the extent Katie now works for Jane at developer Keystone Games.

"Anything I can do to help a disadvantaged young person, I'm there," added Doug. "I'm looking forward to getting back in the cockpit and showing what the F16 can do. I hope people sign up and join me for the flight. It's going to be a great ride."

Flight Angels 2016 will be broadcast live around the world from September 16-18. A live stream will show 30 hours of flights, interviews, chats and special events.

Flight Angels will be raising funds for three charities in the UK and USA: Over the Wall, the SeriousFun Children's Network and Vision of Flight. Over the Wall and SeriousFun offer help and support to families of children with life-limiting illnesses. Vision of Flight is dedicated to encouraging young people, often from underprivileged backgrounds, into a career in aviation.

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Details of how to take part in Flight Angels 2016 are available at **www.flight-angels.com** - where you can also learn more about the charities, make a donation or book a seat on Concorde.

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