

Real Life Stories

Missionary Pilot Dies Transporting Coronavirus Supplies

A 40-year-old American missionary pilot delivering COVID-19 supplies to remote villages died in a plane crash in Indonesia on Tuesday, May 12, 2020.

Joyce Lin, a pilot with Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF), was transporting rapid test kits and school supplies to a village in Papua, the easternmost province in the far-flung island chain. She took off from the city of Sentani at 6:27 a.m. and made a distress call two minutes later, MAF spokesman Brad Hoaglund said. A search-and-rescue team found her Kodiak 100 airplane crashed into nearby Lake Sentani and recovered her body from about 40 feet under the water, according to local police.

Lin was an experienced pilot and a certified flight instructor. She completed her first solo flight for MAF in March. Approved to fly to 20 villages (of about 150 served by MAF), she led the drive to procure soap for missionaries and aid workers dealing with the threat of coronavirus and transported medicine, COVID-19 tests, and personal protective equipment across the area.



“We feel a great sense of loss but a great sense of comfort as well, because Joyce was doing what she loved to do and she was faithful to the calling that God had placed on her life,” David Holsten, president of MAF, told Christianity Today. “She gave her life serving the Lord in a way that was impacting others.”

MAF has not had a fatal accident in 23 years, Holsten said. Civil aviation authorities are investigating the cause of the crash. There were no other passengers on board because of coronavirus flight restrictions, according to Hoaglund. Travel remains restricted in Indonesia, but MAF has permission to fly cargo and people facing medical emergencies.

A graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Lin had planned and trained to become a missionary pilot for a decade. She first interned with MAF in 2010, earned her commercial license in 2015, and moved to Papua in 2019.

“It felt amazing to land the Kodiak on my own for the first time,” she wrote in a support-raising letter in December. “This has been my dream airplane ever since I found out about mission aviation. I landed the Kodiak at both paved and unpaved airstrips and practiced emergency procedures.”

Lin was raised in Colorado and Maryland, the daughter of Taiwanese Christian immigrants. She became a Christian as a child through an outreach program at a local evangelical church. After earning a degree in computer science from MIT and working in IT for a decade, Lin felt called to ministry. At Gordon-Conwell, she discovered missionary aviation: a job that combined her interests in flying, her computer skills, and her call to Christian service.

She was immediately convinced of God’s calling and reoriented her life around the goal of becoming a missionary pilot. In addition to flying supplies to missionaries and humanitarian aid workers in Papua, she helped set up and maintained a computer system to give them access to the internet.

In December, Lin defended the work of the missionaries in a letter to her friends and family back in the United States.

“Before anyone objects to Christians or Westerners changing the way other people live,” she wrote, “it’s important to know that Papua was not a tropical paradise before the arrival of Christian missionaries. Papuan tribes lived to kill one another. ... People lived in constant fear of other tribes and the spirit world.”

On one of her first flights for MAF, Lin had to divert to Wamena—the largest town in the Papua highlands—because of bad weather. At the airport, she discovered a woman in need of an emergency evacuation flight for

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major surgery. All flights were canceled because of the COVID-19 lockdown, but Lin was allowed to fly the woman to Sentani. Lin saw this as evidence God was using her.

“There is a famous verse that Christians like to quote from Romans 8:28,” she wrote, “which says God is able to work all things together for the good of those he called according to his purpose. As I’ve looked back on my life, it has been cool to see the many ways in which this verse has been true in this calling to serve in Indonesia.”

On Tuesday, a small memorial of red roses was left on the runway in the highlands village where Lin was scheduled to land. “Pilot Joyce Lin,” one card read, “till we meet again.”

Lin is survived by her parents and two sisters.

. . . Gleaned from Christianity Today