

PILOTES VOLONTAIRES



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FOUNDERS OF THE ASSOCIATION

José BENAVENTE FUENTES - President

José BENAVENTE FUENTES has close to 25 years of experience in humanitarian aid. He has intervened in many countries subject to armed conflict by providing his competencies in the areas of water supply as well as humanitarian air-rescue operations. His passion for flying led him to become a professional pilot in 2006.



The thought of an air-rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea in particular has been on his mind for a long time and has developed ever since he was in Conakry, Guinea about fifteen years ago:

« The idea crossed my mind a long time ago... there was already talk about crossing from Senegal to the Canary Islands and the shipwrecks happening at that time.»



Benoit MICOLON - Treasurer

Passionate about flying since he was very young, Benoit MICOLON spends most of his time in the air, both for leisure (paraglider, glider, microlight) as well as professionally. He is currently an airline pilot on a B-747 and totals around 6,000 hours of flying time. This sturdy experience enables him to provide the aeronautical expertise required to successfully manage the air-rescue operations of Volunteer Pilots.

Benoit says that he was only interested in flying until his friend José, whom he met when training to be a pilot, shared the Volunteer Pilots project with him:

« When José explained the inhuman conditions in which these people depart from Libya, I decided to join the project. »



Birth of the project

This initiative stems from the admission that the Mediterranean Sea has become a huge cemetery (see numbers communicated by the International Organization for Migration which represent actual recorded deaths) <https://missingmigrants.iom.int>.



José Benaventa was already touched by this odyssey 15 years ago when he was working for the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) in Guinea. He remembers the ship wrecks of refugees trying to cross from the coast of Senegal to the Canary Islands. Already then he thought a solution must be found to avoid this human tragedy and reverse fate.

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The bodies of migrants then started being washed up by the Mediterranean on the beaches of the Spanish peninsula. This tragedy has kept growing in numbers. Following the humanitarian crises in the Middle East and Africa, millions of people are thrown onto the path of exile and try to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Thousands of lives continue to be lost at the bottom of the sea in desperate attempts to cross to Europe. Then on September 2, 2015, 3-year old Aylan, his 5-year old brother Galip and their mother Rehan died following the capsizing of their boat, the only survivor being the father and husband. The image of Aylan will be shared around the world and José will again be shocked like millions of other people having seen the photo. He becomes obsessed with the idea that children should only be on beaches to play, to create happy memories but not to die.



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José then starts to follow the activities of various NGOs dedicated to saving lives at sea. He rapidly realizes how difficult it must be for rescue ships to spot boats in distress skimming the water. He then decides to look for solutions to solve this problem

To verify his solution, he starts off by renting a plane for an exploratory mission over the Mediterranean in order to evaluate requirements as well as to meet the rescue ship crews during their stopovers in Malta or Sicily.



At the same time, he contacts his friend Benoit whom he met 15 years earlier when both were preparing to become professional pilots and proposes that he join him on his evaluation mission. Benoit immediately accepts. As of that date, both José and Benoit start combining their efforts on this project. It is January 2018.

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A few days later, they establish direct contact with the humanitarian organizations active in the Mediterranean Sea off the coasts of Libya. These all confirm the difficulty in spotting boats in distress with binoculars from the deck of a ship. It is a fact: people drown without anybody knowing.

It then became obvious to our two pilots that there was an urgent need to propose an aerial observation service communicating to the ships on site in order to save lives.

At this point in their lives, José and Benoit had managed to save some money and they decided to immediately invest it in their project, in the essence of time. They had enough money to buy a small plane, convey it to the search zone and perform around 15 flights.

Additional financing is needed to pursue this project, and they have started to collect funds via the website of the association that was created in January 2018.

Three months later, using their vacation time, they arrive in Malta where they take off for their very first reconnaissance flight.



PRESENTATION OF THE ASSOCIATION

Action scope

Created in 2018, Volunteer Pilots is a non-profit association (French law of 1901) whose mission it is to provide air patrol support for search and rescue services for persons in distress at sea.

Its action is based on the respect of Human Rights and Dignity regardless of nationality, ethnicity, origin, social-class, political or religious convictions.

In the Mediterranean specifically, Volunteer Pilots base their action on the existing Convention on the Law of the Sea.



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The International Convention of 1979 on maritime search and rescue operations: (SAR Convention), the interested State parties “... make sure that assistance is given to any person in distress at sea... regardless of their nationality or status and of the circumstances in which this person was found” (Chapter 2, paragraph 2.1.10) and attend to “...delivering medical first aid or other care they might need and help them to a safe place” (Chapter 1, paragraph 1.3.2).

Objectives

In the Mediterranean, the main objective is to decrease the mortality rate due to drowning of persons who are navigating off the coasts of Libya on makeshift boats totally unsuited to this type of crossing.

More specifically, the objective is to fly over the sea in international waters to spot boats in distress so that they can be rescued by other ships.



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Beneficiaries

Any person in distress at sea and spotted by the association during one of its flight missions.



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Team

The Volunteer Pilots team today is comprised of about 10 volunteers who each in their respective area of competency is responsible for the organization and management of air shifts, the management of communication operations and relations with the press, fund raising, the search for donors, the social networks activity and the IT development of the association's website.

The plane of Volunteer Pilots: Colibri

The association's plane is named Colibri – Hummingbird - in reference to a native American-Indian legend. It is a MCR-4S Dynaero model, a light single-engine propeller plane with 4 seats. It was bought by Benoit and José with their personal funds in order to move swiftly and gain time prior to actual fund raising. This is clearly an emergency as starting in May, weather conditions become better and the number of boats in distress increases.

Benoit and José chose this plane because of the following criteria:

- It offers great front, side and back vision.
- It is cost-efficient, about €150 per flight hour.
- It is able to fly about 9 hours and travel around 1,800 km a day.



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Financing

The Volunteer Pilots association is financed by private donations. The funds collected are allocated to operating expenses, expenses related to the use of the plane and the logistics behind the search and rescue missions. The annual operating budget is approximately €280,000.

SEQUENCE OF A PROGRAMMED INTERVENTION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Context

For many years the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea has been one of the routes used by populations fleeing their country and wishing to reach the European continent. They cross on makeshift boats in disastrous conditions with very little hope of survival.

The organizers of these crossings are aware that they are sending these people to a near certain death by drowning. The “Zodiac” boats are generally made of wood or rubber, overloaded with passengers, with no means of direction and their engines are old and unsuitable. In addition, the amount of fuel is just sufficient to leave the coast but never enough for the whole crossing. There is generally little or no drinking water or food on board.

Sadly, the result is predictable. After a few hours of random navigation, these boats reach the open sea, run out of fuel and start to drift. Very often they start to sink progressively, panic strikes and generally the weaker passengers, being the women and children, die first. The others are very quickly condemned to the same fate as their only hope to avoid death is to be spotted and rescued by another ship.

By their nature, these boats are not easily detectable by the radars of ships sailing nearby because they return little or no signal. It is therefore mainly by visual observation that they can be spotted and this means the chances are very slim. The ships dealing with search and rescue missions to vessels in distress in this geographical area have a wide experience in sea rescues and have saved thousands of people over the past few years.

They are however aware of the large number of boats that are never spotted in time and that simply disappear. Sadly, the rescue teams often come across the floating remains of wrecks with no one on board which means that all the passengers probably died by drowning a few days or perhaps only a few hours earlier.



Action plan

The NGO « Volunteer Pilots » wishes to deploy the means to provide an aerial observation service communicating to the search and rescue ships on site in order to increase the probability of spotting boats in distress.

This action is to be coordinated with the MRCC (Maritime Rescue Coordination Center) based in Rome, Italy. This will include the organization of air patrols over the sea to detect and signal the presence of boats in distress by communicating their geographic coordinates to the rescue coordination center.

The MRCC is required to comply to the International Conventions for the Safety of Life at Sea and must therefore make sure that the rescued persons are brought to a “place of safety”.

If Volunteer Pilots were to realize that these international conventions were no longer adhered to by the rescue operations teams, they would be obliged to cancel their air patrol support activity.

The strict compliance to the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue is vital to us.



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Area of intervention

It is situated in a rectangular perimeter of 150 km long and 50 km wide. The area of interest for these operations is off the coast of Libya, less than 24 nautical miles from the Libyan coast. This research area can be increased or reduced in terms of search surface but it can also be moved based on the routes followed by the populations in exile.

Start date for search missions

The start date is May 1st, 2018.

Needs assessment and response analysis

The evaluation of needs was elaborated on the basis of the information exchanged with the humanitarian organizations active in search and rescue missions in this part of the Mediterranean.

These organizations manage to detect a number of vessels from their rescue ships but they are aware that these are difficult to spot due to the fact they are made of wood or rubber, are small and simply float on the water or move with no wake.

Our mission was developed based on their experience and our goal is to provide additional observation by air patrol, essential to existing maritime rescue teams in the area.



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Human resources and equipment

At this point in the project, the association has chosen the island of Malta to set up its operations base and to park the plane. It takes about an hour flying time to reach the search area and the pilots should be able to patrol for 5 to 6 hours. Volunteer Pilots could also decide to operate from another base, closer to the search area, such as the island of Lampedusa.

Operations will be managed on the ground by a head of mission permanently based in Malta. He will be responsible, among other things, for the coordination of the pilots' departures and arrivals as they take turns to patrol, the planning of the plane's maintenance, general logistics of the operations base as well as those of the living base where the team will be housed.

The patrol missions crew will be comprised of a captain (professional pilot), seconded by another pilot (potentially non-professional) and an observer. The flight will be under the responsibility of the captain. The observation of the area will be carried out by the second pilot and the observer who will also manage the communication with the MRCC.



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Synergy with other actions

This air patrol support is being integrated into an existing search and rescue operation coordinated by the MRCC (Marine Rescue Coordination Center). The center has a general view of all the ships sailing in the area and can therefore request them to intervene in the case of vessels in distress. If other air patrol means are deployed in the same area by other organizations having the same objectives, the association will make sure to coordinate its actions to increase its efficiency.

Expected results

- Increase in the number of identified vessels in distress in the Mediterranean, off the coast of Libya.
- Increase in number and frequency of air patrol means deployed to identify vessels in distress in the Mediterranean, off the coast of Libya.
- Reduction of the risk of drowning for exiled persons navigating in the Mediterranean off the coast of Libya.



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