

How CALSTAR Flights Worked for Ernest Righetti II

by Gene Hall, CALSTAR

Well-known Santa Maria area cattle rancher Ernest Righetti II isn't going to allow two major vascular surgeries to slow him down. Earlier this year, he was transported twice by CALSTAR air ambulance to UCLA for surgery to restore circulation to one of his legs.

"I am taking it easy a bit, but I still get out on the ranch for light duty," he said in August. Righetti, who turned 75 in July, simply can't stay away from a life profession that he loves so much. And no wonder. He is a fourth-generation Righetti to run the ranch, and the lure of the land draws him deeply. He has absolutely no plans to retire.

Righetti was born in Santa Maria and moved to the family ranch shortly after birth. "It's the only place I've ever lived, and I love it," he says. His great-grandfather came to this country from Switzerland in 1855 and shortly after arriving settled in the Santa Maria area. He got a job milking cows, saved his money and purchased the property where the Righetti ranch has been ever since, about 10 miles southwest of Santa Maria.

"Especially when you live in a rural area, an operation like CALSTAR is extremely important," Righetti says. "Once I was flown from Cottage Hospital in Santa Barbara; the second time I was flown from Marian Medical Center in Santa Maria. Without a doubt, the two rapid transports to UCLA made a huge difference in my outcome."

Righetti says he felt completely comfortable in both flights. "The nurses are highly competent, and they kept a very close watch on me during both trips. They explained everything to me on the flights and, to be honest, I felt as safe with them as if I had been in the medical center," he said. "They're good people."

According to Lisa Abeloe, Central Coast director for CALSTAR, about 65 percent of her base's flights are of the inter-facility type. The remaining 35 percent are used to transport critically ill or injured patients. The base in Santa Maria, known as CALSTAR 7, covers an area including San Luis Obispo County, Santa Barbara County, Western Kern County and South Monterey County.

Abeloe has her own deep roots in the community. She originally came to attend Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and, after completing school, she never left because of the beautiful countryside and the friendly people.

Coincidentally, her father-in-law and Righetti grew up together. They attended the same high school and also participated in 4-H and FFA activities together.

She says CALSTAR is important to the area because it is quite a distance to larger urban areas with larger health care facilities. "Our local hospitals are wonderful, but when someone needs rapid transport to a higher level of care, CALSTAR is critical because we are based on the Central Coast. There is no wait time for a crew and helicopter to arrive in the area because we are already here."

Abeloe added that "It's not at all unusual for us to transport individuals from ranches and the backcountry. I'm talking about individuals who are critically ill or injured during brandings and roundups, and also while they are checking on their cattle and fences and driving vehicles off road."

Righetti believes that individuals – particularly ones in rural areas – should be CALSTAR members. "They can save your life," he said.

CALSTAR offers discounted family memberships to California Farm Bureau Federation members for an annual fee of \$30. A farm bureau member will never have to worry about paying for out-of-pocket costs for air medical services provided by CALSTAR or one of its reciprocal partners. Any portion not picked up by the patient's insurance carrier will be absorbed by CALSTAR. If the patient does not have insurance, he or she will not be billed. For more information, call (888) 207-5433 (LIFE) or visit the company's website at www.calstar.org.