



Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest
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Biographical Sketch: Zachary Jake VanderGriend

A gift from God born to us on June 1, 1983, Zachary flew into the arms of Jesus on September 1, 2008, during takeoff aboard a Neptune P2V-7 fire Tanker 09 at Stead Airport in Nevada. He and his fellow crew members were on their way to drop retardant on a fire in another location. Zach was living his dream, he loved his job as Assistant Crew Chief, was passionate about serving and helping people, and he loved his new family at Neptune Aviation.

Zach loved life and was passionate about his faith in Jesus Christ. He loved his family and adored his little sister, Andriana. He enjoyed working, whether it was restoring a car or an airplane, Zach loved to 'turn wrenches' and get his hands dirty. He loved to travel, fish, hunt, read, ski, and he always enjoyed a good laugh. He also played piano and acted in local church productions. He was a joy to be with and his smile could light up a room. He loved to fly because it was there he felt closest to God. Zach was compassionate and generous to a fault. He was loyal, energetic, and he was loved.

Zachary was born in Sunnyside, Washington, moved to Lynden, Washington, for a short time, and his family then relocated to Yakima, Washington, where Zach attended WestSide Christian School through 5th grade. Zach wanted to fly and become a Missionary Pilot, and expressed his desire at the age of two. God put Zachary in locations where the right people were in place to mentor him and help with his dream of flight. Early on, Zach learned how to handle tools from his "PopPop" Jake.

During 5th grade, his family again moved, this time to Aurora, Illinois. After moving to Illinois, Zach was involved in museum work as a docent, detailer, and aircraft restorer. His love of old warbirds and radial engines truly grew in this special place. Zach then became acquainted with Experimental Aviation Association 579 (EAA 579) and their Young Eagle program. Zach never missed a 'free flight' day, spent many hours volunteering, and began giving Young Eagle rides as soon as he obtained his license. The people at 579 made it possible for Zach to earn his pilot's license.

Zachary attended Aurora Christian School through his sophomore year; he then received his education through Christian Liberty Academy in Arlington Heights, Illinois. At the same time, he was earning his private pilot's license, and attending Waubensee Community College. He was accomplishing all of these goals while simultaneously working for Shodeen Flight Department and Dick Hansen as an aircraft detailer and for Lumanair as a lineman, all at Aurora Airport.

Zach attended Moody Bible Institute and was accepted into their flight program in Tennessee. The school was moved to Spokane, Washington, and partnered with Spokane Community College. It was there and at Blue Sky Arrow in Morris, Illinois, that Zach received his Airframe and Powerplant (A&P) mechanic's license. He worked as a lineman at Felts Field in Spokane during his time there. Zach then moved to Omaha, Nebraska, where he attended Grace University. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in the Aviation Pilot/Business Program.

During summer breaks, Zach worked at Blue Sky Arrow in Morris, Illinois, and at Lumanair in Aurora as an A&P mechanic. After receiving his degree, Zach worked for a short time at the Tacoma Narrows Airport as an A&P mechanic for Associated Aviation. He moved to Missoula, Montana, on May 26, 2008, to begin his dream job with Neptune Aviation.

Zach was awarded a scholarship to attend the EAA's Air Academy in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He was also awarded the Presidential Youth Service Award. He received this prestigious award in part for helping restore a F4F-3 Wildcat at the unveiling of the Butch O'Hare memorial at O'Hare Airport. He was given the first ever Eagle award by EAA 579.

Beloved Family Members and Friends: Zachary is survived by his parents, Steve and Marci of Gig Harbor, his very special friend and sister, Andriana of Gig Harbor, his sweetheart, Ashley Hutton of Spokane, WA. His 'Nan' Grace Gortsema of Sunnyside, WA, and his grandparents, Mick and LenaMarie VanderGriend of Lynden, WA. Also many aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and the people he called family: Dick and RuthAnn Miller, Steve and Linda Valentine, and Joe Cassidy, all of Aurora, IL, as well as Heather and Melody of Fresno, CA, and his family at Neptune Aviation, and his Crew Chief Robert. He was preceded in death by his Grandfather, Jake Gortsema.

Donations: A memorial fund for short-term missions is being set up in Zachary's name; donations may be sent to the above funeral home's address. Tributes may be viewed at Neptune Aviation's website, in addition to this website.