

**LORD OF THE WINGS**  
To reach his goal,  
Michael Combs makes  
up to six stops daily.



INSPIRING PEOPLE

# A Pilot's Passion

A former real-estate agent overcomes a brush with death to pursue a daring dream: flying to all 50 states

● The storm over Maine jolted Michael Combs's small aircraft. Twice he plunged 1,000 feet through black clouds—and twice he fought to steady the plane. Panicked? Not Combs. Diagnosed with a heart murmur at 23, hospitalized twice in his 30s for heart problems, and used to managing ongoing symptoms, the former real-estate agent, now 54, already had a near-death experience in 2003. When he walked into his home after a family gathering, he abruptly passed out. His wife, a hospice worker, checked his pulse. Nothing. He'd struggled for years, and his family resigned themselves to letting him go. But his heart suddenly began beat-

ing again—a life-altering experience that later inspired an ambitious quest: to be the first person to fly a simple-to-operate light aircraft in every state.

Getting into the pilot's seat wasn't easy. After his heart failure and a follow-up stay in the hospital, Combs was left weak, housebound, and struggling with memory loss. "My goal was just to have the strength to walk

outside and see the sun," he recalls. During the next 18 months he underwent oxygen therapy and worked on his memory by reviewing photos and doing puzzles. For fun he read about flying. By 2005 he was no longer dependent on oxygen and took a job as a real-estate consultant near Dallas. Though he enjoyed his work, something was missing. "It's a miracle to

me that people can fly," he says. "I'd always wanted to do it. But I always put it off."

Laid off in late 2008, Combs decided to learn how to operate a light sport aircraft, which has few licensing restrictions, since it's so small. Although he couldn't fly at night and couldn't go very fast, he could fly. And when—on a

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whim—the 50-state idea popped into his head, friends, family, and strangers who heard about the project were moved to donate money to help him. The funds went toward every-

thing from food to fuel. A manufacturer even built a plane with weather radar and Internet access, for free.

Combs took off from Salina, Kansas, on April 8, 2010. Frequently joined by his wife or one of their children, he has since hopscotched across the country and is airborne up to six hours a day. He's soared over Niagara Falls and Key West, and he's crossed the Mississippi River five times, braving rain, snow, and lightning. He's also overcome mechanical mishaps: a flat tire while landing at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, and a loss of navigation systems, which forced him to fly "old-style," with paper charts, for 90 miles, until he picked up new parts in Rogers, Arkansas. Malfunctions aside, Combs hopes to finish his final leg, in Hawaii, by October (at press time he'd visited 47 states). After that, he wants to set world records, including one for flying coast-to-coast. "Even while I was recovering, I *knew* I was a pilot," he says. "It's so beautiful and peaceful to fly. After takeoff, all your worries go away." —*Laura Daily*