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In Case You Missed It: Roll Call Highlights Rokita's Volunteer Work, Passion for Flying

Roll Call

Congressman in the Cockpit

By Ivan V. Natividad, Roll Call Staff
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While most teenagers in Munster, Ind., could be found cruising around town in their dad's old Chevy pickup, now-Rep. Todd Rokita was "wheels up" in the sky, flying a high-wing, two-seat Cessna 152 aircraft.

"I've been flying since I was 17," the Indiana Republican told Roll Call in an interview. "It's always been a passion of mine since I was a little boy."

As a teenager, Rokita took pilot courses at an airport in Lansing, Ill., across the state line. It was there that he received his pilot's license, around the same time his fellow classmates were learning to drive a car.

"I also have a commercial rating, but I've never flown for an airline. I got the certificate sort of as an academic proposition. It keeps you sharp," he said.



Courtesy Office of Rep. Todd Rokita

Rep. Todd Rokita (left) and Army Staff Sgt. Tyler Anderson prepare to take off from College Park Airport. Rokita volunteers with the Veterans Airlift Command to transport wounded veterans.

As a senior in high school, Rokita admitted, the offer of a relaxing ride through the clouds helped him in the female department, joking that “Sometimes that was my only shot.”

But flying is more than a leisure activity for Rokita, who said he takes pride in his ability to be a “top-notch pilot,” often logging flight hours with an instructor beyond the pilot quota.

As a member of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, Rokita also stays up to date with the latest in aeronautics equipment.

“The technology we have now, compared to when I first started, is just phenomenal,” he said. “You calculate for things like icing conditions, and with satellite imagery I can get a downlink of the whole U.S. while onboard. Now that’s revolutionary.”

Through the years, Rokita has upgraded his aircraft digs, most recently switching from a low-wing Piper Archer to a twin-engine, six-seat Piper Seneca II with leather interior.

“Planes are like boats,” he said. “You always want a bigger and faster one.”

Regularly flying from Indiana to College Park Airport in Maryland, Rokita offers rides to constituents looking to spend a weekend in the nation’s capital.

“I fly families out and they enjoy the weekend. Some people will have conferences and they’ll fly out with me and take a commercial flight back, or vice versa,” he said.

But passengers looking to bombard the Congressman with questions onboard must take pause, at least until the skies are clear.

“I kind of have them hold all their questions until we’re leveled out and in cruising altitude. Then they usually ask me questions like, ‘Oh what’s that lever do? And, what’s this gauge do?’” he said.

Rokita said passengers have been quite cordial with him, but the fact that he is a Member of the House is not lost on them, as he recalls the last time he flew a family of tea party constituents.

“I said, ‘Hey, do you have any questions?’ and they immediately started asking me about the budget and the Defense Authorization Act, and it turned into a captive two-and-a-half-hour town hall, which I wasn’t prepared for,” he said with a laugh. “I don’t mind a few questions but I was worn out by the time we landed.”

Shuttling Soldiers

Aside from offering recreational flight service to his constituents, Rokita has found a cause that allows him to express his affinity for flying, while helping those who serve our country.

“I’ve flown soldiers with nonemergency medical issues for follow-up medical appointments and their families who couldn’t otherwise go with them because they couldn’t afford plane tickets,” he said.

As a volunteer with Veterans Airlift Command, Rokita provides free air transportation to wounded soldiers, active or retired, for medical or personal purposes.

“I really like this program because we’re doing all of this without the federal government,” he said. “This is people helping people, like our founders intended.”

Founded by Walt Fricke, a Vietnam War veteran, VAC has a collection of volunteer pilots who make it easier for wounded soldiers to travel and receive the treatment they need.

Last month, Rokita flew Army Staff Sgt. Tyler Anderson, 25, who lost a leg in Afghanistan. Anderson said it was “hands down a great flight for injured veterans.”

“It’s kind of a hassle to get through security. To carry all your stuff up there, take your leg off and try to hop into line,” Anderson said of commercial flights. “But with the [VAC] flights, you walk right out to the airplane, and it’s definitely more personable.”

As a VAC pilot, Rokita volunteers a handful of times a year and avoids revealing his status as a lawmaker. He said that makes him more approachable to the soldiers he flies with.

“I’ve met some people who are all about their status in life, and the Congressman was nothing like that,” Army Spc. Aaron Kirschner said. “You would have never known talking to him that he was a Congressman. It was as if I was talking to my next-door neighbor.”

But for Rokita, flying is about more than helping people get from one place to another.

“It takes me out of the office,” he said. “When you’re on a flight deck, it demands your entire attention, and there is a lot of therapeutic value to that because you can’t be on a cellphone, you can’t afford to think of anything else and it’s relieving. So I enjoy that part of it.”