

# Christmas Epaulets made in Chetek spread cheer at home and abroad

BY RYAN URBAN

If you're flying this holiday season, pay attention to the pilot's epaulets.

Epaulets are the stripes on a pilot's shoulders, and if those stripes are red and green, those epaulets probably came from Chetek.

More importantly, the sale of those epaulets is raising money for the Chetek-Weyerhaeuser Scholarship Foundation.

Since 2008, when Mary Knutson sewed the first pair of epaulets and son Tim sold them to fellow pilots, Christmas Epaulets have raised nearly \$20,000 for the scholarship foundation.

"It brings money from around the world into Chetek," said Tim, adding that the epaulets, which are made at Core Products in Chetek, are worn by hundreds of pilots during the holiday season.

The Knutsons came up with the idea in 2008 when Tim, an American Airlines pilot, bought a pair of epaulets from another pilot.

"I showed them to my mom, who is a very artsy-craftsy producer person," said Tim. "She said, 'I could make those.'"

Mary made 12 pairs, which Tim soon sold to other pilots for \$10 apiece.

"I came home with \$120 no problem," he said.

Instead of keeping the money, they decided to donate the \$120 to the Chetek-Weyerhaeuser Scholarship Foundation in memory of John H. Knutson, Mary's late husband and a pilot himself, who

died in 1997 at age 56 of stomach cancer.

Mary kept making the epaulets and Tim kept selling them.

The epaulets brought in \$200 that year and \$230 in 2009. But in 2010, sales jumped to \$2,230 and then to \$4,630 last year.

But this year's sales are almost triple the last four years combined, bringing the total close to \$20,000 for the scholarship foundation.

Word about the epaulets spread through Tim's pilot friends, pilot unions and websites.

As demand grew, Tim's wife Dawn developed a website to refer pilots to instead of taking constant emails and phone calls. Christmas Epaulets also has a Facebook page.

Tim said, last year, the CEO of American Airlines saw a pair of Christmas Epaulets on the American Airlines chief pilot's desk and inquired about them. After hearing the story, the CEO, Tom Horton, said that all of the airline's pilots should wear them. Now, Christmas Epaulets are sold in all American Airlines pilot base offices across the country.

Tim, who is also president of the scholarship foundation, said he believes every pair bought leads to another two pairs bought by other pilots.

"People joked that if they became any more popular we'd have to have them made in China," said Tim.

Mary sewed nearly nonstop through September last year in order to prepare for the demand. The Knutsons began to joke that



Mary Knutson sews epaulets in her home. She sewed hundreds of epaulets from 2007 to 2011, before Core Products of Chetek took over due to demand.



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Tim Knutson, a pilot from Chetek, wears a pair of Christmas Epaulets, a project started by Tim and family to raise money for the Chetek-Weyerhaeuser Scholarship Foundation in memory of Tim's father John H. Knutson.

her small sewing machine would blow up.

So the family started looking at other options for epaulet production to take the burden off Mary and her sewing machine.

A friend recommended asking Core Products in Chetek.

Core Products, with 70 employees in Chetek, produces various

therapeutic products like pillows and braces, so it was well-equipped to sew together epaulets.

"I'm a pilot, so I thought it was a nice idea," said Phil Mattison, Core Products president. "I'm glad we can do something to impact our community."

The company, which is based in Osceola, even donates a portion of



the materials.

Tim said he was happy that the epaulets could help a local manufacturer as well as Chetek students.

"There's a lot of beauty in the whole thing," said Tim.

He said he put the epaulets work out for bid for the sake of curiosity and got responses from producers in other countries. But Core Products still offered the best profit margin.

"The people at Core Products have been wonderful to work with," said Tim.

All proceeds from the sale of epaulets have gone to the scholarship foundation, which gave out \$18,000 last year to Chetek graduates from various funding sources.

"The true profitters in this are the students at C-WHS," said Tim.

C-WHS students have a hand in the project, packaging the epaulets that come from Core Products before they are mailed out.

Tim said the Knutson family feels blessed that they can honor his father's memory through something so beneficial to Chetek, where John spent his whole life farming and being involved in the community when he wasn't piloting.

"We're just lucky this does what it does," said Tim. "It's strictly by accident that we came by this."

Tim said they expect the project to keep growing, especially since every co-pilot that has a three-stripe pair will likely buy a four-stripe pair when they become a captain.

Orders are still coming in all the time on the web site.

"It's exciting every time you get that 'ping' sound of an order," said Dawn.

"I have yet to see a downside to the whole thing," said Tim. "They represent Chetek and promote the spirit of Christmas."