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The keys to success

Huntsville International Airport. 7:38 PM. The rotor blades of a Robinson R44 spin into action, slicing the air in the dusk, as pilot Brian Coshatt is given clearance for take-off.

The helicopter is carrying the most urgent goods: automotive parts including car keys – 600 of them. They are literally the key to keeping the production line moving at a nearby car factory in Alabama, U.S.

The keys arrived at Huntsville International Airport just 30 minutes earlier, having flown in from Luxembourg on Panalpina's own controlled Boeing 747-8F aircraft.

This whole race against time began in Bremen, Germany, where Matthias Biernacki, air freight export team leader, was given a problem to fix.

“When one of the world’s biggest car manufacturers uses words like ‘urgent’, ‘shut down’ and ‘immediately’ – you listen,” explains Matthias after receiving a concerned call from Mercedes-Benz.

The call explained that extremely urgent parts were needed to keep production on track at one of the company’s major U.S. factories.

Matthias got to work – immediately. He contacted the charter & emergencies services department and set the wheels in motion to get the job done.

Working together with Panalpina’s team in Luxembourg, he quickly learned that the scheduled flight on Panalpina’s own 747-8 freighter would be the fastest way to cross the Atlantic to Huntsville.

Once the goods were aboard, the tricky part was arrival at Huntsville, where every minute counted.

After exploring various options, James Beck, gateway manager at Huntsville, contacted a local helicopter pilot.

“He normally flies for the news stations to cover breaking stories, but we needed him to carry several boxes weighing 300 kilograms 130 kilometers,” he says.

With the special helicopter charter booked, James and the team at Huntsville carefully coordinated between the jumbo jet and the four-seat light helicopter to ensure the two arrived at the airport at the exact same time.

Once on the tarmac, James climbed aboard the freighter, clambered among the boxes and found the treasure. He then brought the keys to the chopper by hand.

A little over an hour later and Houston-based Martin Rickenbacher, worldwide charter and emergency services at Panalpina, received a thumbs-

up text message from the customer. The Robinson R44 had landed right on the plant's doorstep.

“We were in touch by cell phone the entire time, giving them updates and reassuring them that all was proceeding as planned,” he says. Once the goods arrived, we got the all-clear on another job well done. The timing of everything was perfect. It was a great day for the team.”

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