

Pilot helps boy breathe easier

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. — If you ask **Blake Henderson**, a young boy from nearby Niceville, to tell you who **Capt. James Dykas** is, he'll most likely reply, "My pilot," with a look of ownership and pride.

Blake, who had to undergo heart surgery after birth for congenital defects, is now battling lung disease. He needs a lung transplant, but health experts say the surgery is too risky right now because he's too young. As part of his treatment, he takes four nebulizer treatments a day — treatments he didn't want to take, that is until he was given a photo of Captain Dykas.

The nebulizer is a device used to send medicine in the form of a fine spray directly to the lungs by breathing through the mouth or nose. The treatments became a problem when Blake wouldn't stay still to hold the plastic applicator in his mouth.

"We got a mask to hold the mouth piece and free his hands, but with everything he's been through, the mask was scary for him," said **Rae Garmon**, Blake's step-grandmother. "He'd cry and resist every time we'd give him a treatment."

Losing hope, his grandparents looked for something, anything, to get Blake to accept the treatments without a struggle. The B-1 Lancer pilot from the 37th Bomb Squadron at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D., turned out to be the ammo they needed.

Captain Dykas' mother, **Lina**, kept a picture on her desk of him sitting in the cockpit wearing his helmet and oxygen mask. Blake's grandmother, who works with Lina, saw the picture and noticed how much his oxygen mask resembled Blake's nebulizer mask. She took the photo home, and explained to Blake that "Captain James" was a real pilot who wore his mask to breathe better. In what seemed like an instant to his grandparents, who had faced months of combat, Blake accepted the treatments.

"Blake thrived on the fact that 'Captain James' was a real person. It was like he had his own personal pilot to be proud of," Mrs. Garmon said. "Every time he had a treatment, he'd get the picture of his pilot."

At the time, the captain was serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom unaware of the impact he was having on the home front. He eventually received word of Blake from his mother.

"When my mom sent me the picture of Blake with his nebulizer on, holding the picture of me [in] his lap, it was one of the most moving things I'd ever seen," he said. "I had no idea that any of this was going on, and it was incredible to think that a simple picture could make a difference."

When Captain James, as Blake calls

him, returned from overseas, he decided to pay Blake a visit — one that has added a new dimension to the officer's job.

"I'm learning that the things you do, no matter how small they may

seem at the time, can help in more ways than you can ever consider," he said. "I'm humbled that someone like Blake, who has been through more adversity in his life than I've ever known, admires me."

With his picture of

hope, Blake has settled into a good routine with his treatments and is showing great signs of stability, according to his grandparents.

"When you look at him, he's just a regular child who loves to play and have fun," Mrs. Garmon said. "I've almost forgotten how hard things were."

— Doris Johnson

Air Armament Center Public Affairs

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— **Capt. James Dykas**

courtesy photo



Blake Henderson, 4, shares his photo of Capt. James Dykas during a treatment. The picture of the B-1 Lancer pilot helped Blake accept wearing the mask he needs to take nebulizer treatments.