

Mike Rounds

South Dakota's Aviation-loving Governor Serves Best Via the Air

Between Custer and Hill City, South Dakota, not far from majestic Mt. Rushmore, Crazy Horse astride a horse emerges from the towering granite of Thunderhead Mountain. When the project begun in 1948 is complete, the Oglala Sioux Native American Chief will be the world's largest sculpture. The presidential heads of Mt. Rushmore seem dwarfed at a height of merely 60 feet with this, the massive 641-ft wide, 563-ft high honor to the vision, strength and warrior spirit of the Battle of Little Big Horn victor who once walked tall and proud through the beautiful, sacred Black Hills.

Mike Rounds can relate. As governor of South Dakota, the avid aviator shares something of Crazy Horse's spirit: A love of the land, a concern for the people who live there, and a vision for its future. "I always knew that (serving as governor) was the one job I'd like to have the opportunity to work at," he says. "And it is everything I hoped it would be. But I tell you, I certainly couldn't do what I do if I didn't have an aircraft always available." Intense 60-hour workweeks with stops around the state may be a great excuse to pilot something exciting in South Dakota's fleet, whether



King Air 200 or Seneca, but Rounds, age 50, also possesses a more personal agenda:

"As a kid all I wanted when I grew up was to be a pilot," says the 2,000-hour commercial- and multi-rated flyer who earned his private license at 17 and today relaxes – when he can – by reading aviation books and magazines. Says Rounds: "Even back in seventh grade when I'd check books out of the Jr. High library on how a wing works, it was all so fascinating!" Back then the passionate Civil Air Patrol cadet also was absorbing an

awe for politics that was learned partly at the knee of his father, Don, who served in a variety of South Dakota government positions, among them Director of Highway Safety. But the oldest of Don Rounds's 11 children living with the family in Pierre, the state capital, distinguished himself again and again as he grew – especially when after a successful insurance career (Rounds is founding direc-

tor of Fischer Rounds and Associates, Inc.) his own political ambitions took off. Consider his wins: First, in 1990, to the South Dakota state legislature; then, re-elections in 1992, 1994, 1996, and 1998; finally, in 2002, there was the Republican Gubernatorial Primary victory – said to be "one of South Dakota's greatest political upsets" – that led him to become the state's 31st governor. This was quite a thrill for the 1977 graduate of South Dakota State University who enjoys, according to a Survey

USA poll, the second highest approval rating of the nation's 50 governors, second only to John Hoeven of North Dakota.

"I didn't bad mouth anyone" in any campaign, explains Rounds of his favor with voters. My style always has been "a matter of sticking to the issues and talking the challenges we have, the things I want to do." Like the warrior Crazy Horse, whose vision – and war parties – were committed to preserving the traditions and values of the Lakota (though in 1876 it cost General George A. Custer's entire 7th Cavalry, down to the last soldier), Rounds wants to do a lot on behalf of South Dakotans. Not through war parties, of course, but through hard work. Through fun. Through flying? You bet!

Never mind his desire to make South Dakota's air fields super user-friendly, GPS-approach equipped and the like. Focus less on his enthusiasm for excellent air access to South Dakota's 100-plus premier hunting and wilderness lodges. Think instead that Rounds, a devoted husband and father of four whose eldest son, Chris, has upheld family tradition by earning his pilot's license, is jazzed by the job he has of bringing to bear upon the state the aviation passions that dwell so nearly and dearly to his heart.

"We have saved (the state) \$780,000 in travel time, expenses and overtime just by 'airplane pooling' and having staff replace driving with flying," Rounds says. Among the government craft he pilots himself as often as possible are two King Airs (200 and 90), a Navajo and a Seneca. "Keeping employees out of cars is so efficient!" Keeping himself airborne virtually every other day also pays off on the happy domestic front. "It is very, very important



to me to have a home life, a family life," says Rounds, who is a member of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church as well as a number of community service organizations such as The Elks and the Exchange Club. "I gotta tell you, getting home is truly appreciated after a 60-hour week. It is nice to see (wife) Jean every night and the kids early the next morning. Without an aircraft I would have to spend much more time away from my family but this way..." Well, this way Rounds has more off-duty time, too, to indulge his passion for that South Dakota stunner, Custer State Park.

"It is such a beautiful, gentle place, and I love it!" he says of the spectacular 71,000-acre Black Hills wilderness area where Custer in 1874 first found gold. "It has the largest public buffalo herd in the world and in spring and fall the colors are fabulous – just gorgeous." An avid pheasant hunter, Rounds also escapes now and then to one of South Dakota's equally gorgeous preserves where the game lodge pampers him to happiness. "The third Saturday of October, on opening day of hunting season, you can't find a ramp available in the state," he says of the lodges' popularity. This is a situation that pleases the politician in him with its inflow

of tourism dollars. The sportsman in him jumps for joy as well. "I love the season after Thanksgiving when the weather is fabulous, the birds are wily and the shooting is the best," he says. And what of fishing the marvelous Missouri River, which bisects South Dakota into the sweet grass prairie and livestock lands of "East River" and the dramatic Black Hills of "West River"? "For walleye there is nothing better," says Rounds, who also is something of an enthusiastic fixture around the new Sutton Place Golf Club on beautiful Lake Oahe in Agar, SD.

The good life of the hard-working governor has a lot to do with the once upon a time boy within who long before public service entertained a fascination. From the earliest time, "if I could take a toy airplane and find a way to make it fly, with a rubber band or whatever," he says. "I always loved aviation." Now the boy grown is in a position to make larger, more weighty and worldly things fly – an adequate state infrastructure for emergency air services, for instance. But he has not lost any of the thrill or the wonder or the fun of those rubber band years. "To get up there in a quick, sleek Mooney or a Seneca and feel free? Oh," he says, "There is nothing better." Nothing better at all. ✕

Tailwinds toward a job well done, Mr. Governor: Rounds at work in the cockpit (above) and at leisure (below)

