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Pilot who delivers mail to wilderness locations in Idaho grounded temporarily after heart surgery

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Longtime Idaho backcountry pilot Ray Arnold expected to have surgeries on both of his knees when he went to Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise March 1.

The triple bypass surgery he had a couple days later was a surprise.

"I have to look at it as, you know, one of those blessings you could have done without – but it's a good thing in a way," said Arnold, a 73-year-old pilot who has been flying mail to remote locations in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness for the past 35 years.

Last year, the United States Postal Service announced a plan to end its contract with Arnold's business, Arnold Aviation, due to budget shortfalls. After public outcry over the plan to cut the service, the USPS renewed the contract.

Arnold says the FAA won't allow him to fly for six months after his surgery, so another pilot on Arnold Aviation's roster, Mike Dorris of Sawtooth Aviation, is filling in for him now. Also, pilot Walt Smith, will be back from aircraft mechanic school in June to help out.

Arnold has to pass a medical exam every year in order to fly, and tests done before the knee surgery showed nothing amiss.

While still in the hospital recovering from the knee surgeries, Arnold's heart began to show irregularities.

"His heart went into fibrillation – his heart was racing and his blood pressure was low," said Carol Arnold, his ex-wife and business partner said. "They took him down to CCU to find out what was happening."

Doctors told Arnold they didn't want to discharge him until they knew what had caused the fibrillation. An angiogram to revealed that he had three partial blockages in his heart, and surgery was scheduled for March 16.

"We're happy," said Carol Arnold, who is Ray's ex-wife and business partner in Arnold Aviation in Cascade. "We're not happy he had to have it, but we're happy that he was where he was – instant care prevented anything major from happening. Nobody got hurt."

"Ray did not have a heart attack, so there were no heart damage," she added. Arnold was released from the hospital March 24, and he's now on recuperating at his home in Cascade.

"I'm sitting here, and I have no pain – just when I have to do some certain bends with the physical therapist," said Arnold, who can walk with the help of a walker or cane but can't yet drive.

"Carol has really stepped up. I can't ask for any more," he said of her help in preparing meals and getting around. "We're a lot closer right now than we have been for a long time."

While at the hospital, Arnold averaged about 10 visitors a day. He said friends are now regularly stopping by his house to talk to him and take him out to eat.

As manager of the Cascade Airport, Ray Arnold has some things he can work on while grounded. The airport hopes to get some federal stimulus money to runway improvements.

He's also planning on going to his 55th class reunion of Osseo High School in Minnesota in August.

"I'm looking forward to getting back to it (mail delivery) ... But I have six months, I might as well sit back and relax, and do a few things I wanted to do," Arnold said.

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