

Flight to End Polio begins May 5 from Cedar Rapids



After 3 pandemic pauses, team ready to fly around the world for good

Diana Nollen

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Peter Teahen (left) of Robins, and John Ockenfels of Shueyville, with the Cessna 210 Turbo Centurion airplane that they will fly around the world at the Iowa City Municipal Airport in Iowa City on March 27.

Teahen and Ockenfels are taking off May 5 to fly around the world and raise money and awareness to help eradicate polio. The flight is aiming to raise \$1 million for Rotary International's campaign to end polio. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)
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Even though Peter Teahen and John Ockenfels will be sitting closer together, they'll be seeing less of each other when their Flight to End Polio heads east on its around-the-world mission May 5.

Both men are on diets to decrease their mass in order to add more fuel for the flight that will take them to Maine, Newfoundland, Greenland, Iceland, Europe, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia, Australia, the South Pacific, Hawaii, California and Denver, before returning to Cedar Rapids around mid-July.

"For every six pounds we lose, we get to take another gallon of gas — gas weighs six pounds a gallon," Teahen said. "I think between us, by the time we take off on May 5, we'll probably have lost 50 pounds or so combined. And we'll keep the diet going all the way through the flight."

This twofold journey, leaving at 9 a.m. May 5 from The Eastern Iowa Airport, intends to raise awareness and \$1 million for Rotary International's three-decade quest to eradicate polio. The Gates Foundation is adding a 2-for-1 dollar match toward reaching that goal. The two pilots are paying for the flight out of their own pockets and have some equipment grants, so all money donated by the public will go to the Rotary's international polio initiative.

At a glance

What: Around the World: Flight to End Polio

Departure: 9 a.m. May 5, from The Eastern Iowa Airport, 2121 Arthur Collins Pkwy. SW, Cedar Rapids; returning in mid-July

Pilots: Peter Teahen of Robins and John Ockenfels of Shueyville

Goal: Raise \$1 million for Rotary International's campaign to end polio, aided by a 2:1 dollar match from the Gates Foundation

Donations: Accepted by mail, online at flighttoendpolio.com or gofund.me/92e969b5; make checks payable to The Rotary Foundation, and send to

Rotary District 6000 HEF P.O. Box 5774, Coralville, IA 52241-5774

By the numbers: 2 pilots, 1 plane with 1 engine; 25,323 miles; more than 165 hours in the air; 33 landings in 25 countries over 90 days

Details: flighttoendpolio.com

Teahen, 69, of Robins, and Ockenfels, 70, of Shueyville, also will join the roster of the 700 pilots who have flown around the world in a single-engine plane. Of those daring pilots since the beginning of aviation, 300 are alive today. Teahen and Ockenfels, who are cousins by marriage, intend to make that 302.

"Our number one goal in this flight is to come home alive to our wives," Teahen said. "Everything else is secondary, or below that."

Members of the International Fellowship of Flying Rotarians, both are experienced pilots. Teahen has been flying small aircraft for 47 years, and Ockenfels for more than 43 years. Ockenfels also served in the U.S. Air Force from 1972 to 1976, including two years on the crew of an AC-130 flying gunship in Thailand.

"(This) airplane is insured," Ockenfels noted. "I learned a very long time ago that I'll sacrifice the airplane in a hurry, if it means I get to live."

Pandemic pause

The flight around the world was slated to begin March 24, 2020, but was put on hold three times until COVID-19 loosened its global grip.

And now with Russian airspace closed to NATO aircraft, which includes U.S.-registered planes, Teahen and Ockenfels not only had to change their flight path, but also buy a larger plane to hold enough fuel to fly from Australia to California, with just five refueling stops in between, including the 14- to 16-hour long haul from Honolulu to Southern California.

The previous plan would have taken them up the China coast to Russia, with just a short hop across the Pacific to Alaska.

"It's sad that we're still in that state," Teahen said, noting that likewise, Russian aircraft have to avoid Europe and other NATO sites, "because they're not welcome there."

“I have no desire to test how strong their (anti-aircraft) defense missile system is,” Ockenfels added. “I’m just gonna stay away.”

Changing planes

In 2020, the men were going to pilot Teahen’s six-passenger Piper Lance II, which had a cruising speed of 150 knots, or 171 mph. That plane would burn 16 1/2 gallons of fuel each hour, with 94 gallons held in the wings. Removing the passenger seats behind the two front seats created room for a 165-gallon reserve fuel tank, as well as luggage and supplies.

The extra fuel bladder is seen in the passenger compartment of the Cessna 210 Turbo Centurion airplane that Peter Teahen and John Ockenfels will fly around the world at the Iowa City Municipal Airport in Iowa City on Monday, March 27, 2023. Teahen and Ockenfels are taking off May 5 to fly around the world and raise money and awareness to help eradicate polio. The flight is aiming to raise \$1 million for Rotary International's campaign to end polio. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

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They were to travel an estimated 19,601-mile route, with 135 in-flight hours. The longest stretch would have been 10 hours over the Atlantic, from Newfoundland to Portugal’s Azores islands. Maximum altitude was 13,000 feet.

For the 2023 flight, estimated at 25,323 miles and more than 165 hours in the air, the Lance couldn’t handle the job. So Teahen and Ockenfels each sold one of their own planes, and pooled their money to buy a 1977 Cessna T210M single-engine airplane. Ockenfels has owned an identical Cessna, logging 2,500 flight hours over 28 years in that model.

The body is narrower than the Lance, so the men won’t have as much shoulder room.

“But the big advantage of it is that it carries a lot more weight, so we can get the extra fuel that we need to come across the Pacific,” Ockenfels said. “It’s also faster and it climbs higher because it’s turbocharged.

“It’s not pressurized, so we won’t be going over 12,000 feet. But at 12,000 feet, it generates just as much power as it does almost at ground level. If it wasn’t turbocharged, you’d be losing about a third of its horsepower at that altitude, so we’ll be able to maintain speed,” he said. “As a matter of fact, it goes faster the higher you go.”

Safety remains an overarching factor, and the Cessna’s upgrades enhance that in several ways. This model has more instrumentation; a more modern aviation panel; a door on both sides, to facilitate an emergency evacuation; heated propellers to melt any ice they may run into; and side heaters to help de-ice the windshield.

As noted with the first flight, any time they’re flying over water, they’ll wear a special kind of wet suit that will keep them warm in case of an emergency water landing. Those still fit, Teahen said. They also will have inflatable life vests onboard.

Going over their checklist, they discovered the life raft donated by the Collins Aerospace Winslow Life Raft division in 2020 had expired. With a quick call to Winslow in Fort Myers, Fla., a new raft was shipped. Had that not been replaced, custom agents or inspectors along the route could have halted the flight.



Peter Teahen (left) and John Ockenfels turn in their seats for a photo in the cockpit of the Cessna 210 Turbo Centurion airplane that they will fly around the world at the Iowa City Municipal Airport in Iowa City on March 27. The fuel bladder (bottom of the frame) when filled will come up to the lower edge of the side windows. Teahen and Ockenfels are taking off May 5 to fly around the world and raise money and awareness to help eradicate polio. The flight is aiming to raise \$1 million for Rotary International's campaign to end polio. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)
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“That’s why we keep going over list after list and just checking (and) double checking to make sure everything is in compliance,” Teahen said.

Travel considerations

With 33 landings in 25 countries, they’ll have access to clean rooms, water and food every night, so they won’t have to pack much in the way of personal supplies. They’ll take lightweight clothes that are easy to wash in a sink and dry, and since most flights will last about four hours, they may pack a few snacks.

“By intent, we probably won’t be eating very much at all, because we’re going to continue to lose some weight along the route,” Ockenfels said. “And I’m sure that will be a massive challenge with some of the places we’re gonna go to. That doesn’t necessarily mean that we’ll be successful, because we’re still doing this for fun. We’re still taking part in tourist activities.”



John Ockenfels (left) of Shueyville, and Peter Teahen of Robins, in the cockpit of the Cessna 210 Turbo Centurion airplane that they will fly around the world at the Iowa City Municipal Airport on March 27.

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Limiting their food and fluid intake in the air also will mean fewer trips to the plane's non-existent bathroom. When nature calls, they'll answer by urinating in plastic packs containing a gel that solidifies liquids, so nothing will leak before they land.

They'll also take a bedpan with plastic liners, just in case. Whoever needs to use it is on his own for cleansing himself, rolling up the liner, placing it inside another bag, and stowing it for disposal when they land. Nothing goes out the window over land or water.

On the lighter side, Teahen is looking forward to the experiences on dry land.

"I love seeing different cultures and different countries and meeting people — I've always found that very intriguing," he said.

The flight path also will take them over the area in France where he was a foreign exchange student.

"John and I have said from Day One, we're going to stop and see Normandy Beach — the D-Day zone where our troops came ashore. We committed ourselves for taking a day and just visiting those sacred sites and cemetery," Teahen said.

"I've never been to Pakistan and the Middle East, other than landing in an airport," he said. "Never been to Australia. I've been to Hawaii and New Zealand, but these other areas, a lot of them are going to be new. I love trying new food and experiencing cultures and meeting people."

For Ockenfels, "The concept of flying the airplane that far, that long is kind of intriguing," he said. "... I think we both are going to have been on all the continents by the time we come back from this, with a few that we've already been on. So I may have to get a new passport."

Funding

Teahen, president of Teahen Funeral Home in Cedar Rapids, and Ockenfels, retired CEO of City Carton Recycling in Iowa City, declined to say how much they are investing in the flight and its related expenses, but said if they had to scrap the trip, they would lose about three-fourths of their investment, including the cost of modifications to the plane.

"We're still paying 100 percent of the cost of this ourselves," Ockenfels said. "This is not being funded at all by Rotary."

They have had technical assistance, which will increase their safety factor. In addition to providing the life raft, Collins Aerospace also is helping with the in-flight planning and weather tracking and briefings.

"They're a big, big supporter," Ockenfels said, "but there's nobody that's paying our bills."

The pilots, however, are continuing to raise funds for Rotary. While their focus is on getting the plane ready for takeoff, they are talking about having events among the local Rotary clubs. They may also invite the public to see the plane the day before they take off.



John Ockenfels and Peter Teahen each sold one of their airplanes so they could buy this Cessna 210 Turbo Centurion airplane to fly it around the world. The larger plane was necessary because the pilots will have to fly a greater distance to avoid Russian airspace, which is closed to NATO aircraft.

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“We're really not throwing out a big invite for everybody to come watch us leave. They're welcome to if they want — it's a public airport,” Ockenfels said. “But we're going to be busy getting the airplane ready, getting us ready, getting in the right frame of mind.”

However, anyone anywhere in the world can follow the flight path via three links on the homepage at flighttoendpolio.com.

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