Teahen, Ockenfels making final approach to Cedar Rapids after their 90-day Flight to End Polio

Pilots expected to return Sunday to a fundraiser at The Eastern Iowa Airport

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John Ockenfels of Shueyville administers a polio vaccine June 17 in Chennai, on India's eastern coast, while fellow pilot Peter Teahen was ending his hospital stay in Goa, on India's western side. They made several stops in India on their around-the-world Flight to End Polio. (Courtesy of Flight to End Polio)

CEDAR RAPIDS — Globe-trotting pilots Peter Teahen, 70, of Robins, and John Ockenfels, 71, of Shueyville, can't wait to see their family and friends Sunday morning when they're expected to land at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids.

After being gone since May 5, "We told our wives it's going to be a little bit of adjustment, because we've been treated so much like royalty — and they reminded us not to get used to it," Teahen said in a phone interview Sunday from Honolulu.

The royal treatment most likely will continue at least through Sunday, when the public is invited to greet the pilots at a welcome-home pancake breakfast and fundraiser at the airport — similar to the event that helped launch their dual-purpose flight in March 2020, shortly before the pandemic grounded them for three years.

The flying Rotarians are winding down their around-the-world odyssey to land among the 700 pilots who have circumnavigated the globe in a single-engine airplane. And more importantly, to raise money and awareness for Rotary International's polio eradication efforts, currently focusing on vaccinations in the world's final two polio hot spots: Pakistan and Afghanistan.

If you go

What: Pancake breakfast fundraiser to welcome home Flight to End Polio pilots Peter Teahen and John Ockenfels; open to the public

When: 7 to 11 a.m. Sunday; pilots expected to land around 9 a.m.

Where: West side of The Eastern Iowa Airport, 3725 Beech Way SW, Cedar Rapids; follow event parking signs to the location

Cost: $10 ages 13 and up; $5 ages 5 to 12; free ages 4 and under with adult admission

Information: flighttoendpolio.com/

Several times they've spent eight hours or more in the air, but the longest stretch was 16 hours and 48 minutes over the Pacific Ocean, flying Saturday from Pago Pago in American Samoa to Honolulu. Just getting to Pago Pago was mind bending, since they left Fiji about noon Wednesday and arrived in Pago Pago early evening Tuesday.

Crossing the international date line and dealing with so many time zones has been challenging, they said. But that was the least of their worries.

Longest crossing

Early on, it seemed like they might not get enough fuel in Pago Pago to take them to Hawaii. After "wasting several days" to get the fuel barrels they ordered released through Customs, they were able to tank up and be on their way at 5:30 a.m. Saturday and arrived in Hawaii that night — with just two hours of fuel to spare.

Crossing the Pacific felt "really lonely" Teahen said, since they saw only one other plane in the sky — the first one they saw on the entire trip — and no ships in the open water. And they flew 16 hours before they could raise another person from 25 or 30 attempts over various frequencies. Finally hearing a voice as they headed in the inky darkness toward Hawaii was a huge relief, just knowing "now we're on our way in, we're landing, we're going to get there," Ockenfels said.

"But when you look up and all you see is miles and miles and miles of water below you," Teahen said, "and clouds and rain," Ockenfels added, it's pretty desolate. Then the sun went down, plunging them into darkness.

"All of a sudden, the world turned black and we could not see a single thing outside the windshield or the windows of our airplane, because it was pitch black," Ockenfels said. "It was like flying through a darkened coal mine. You can turn the lights on, but that didn't much good, and that's the way we flew for at least four hours."

" ... That's why you have to be an instrument-rated pilot to fly over the water at night, even though it's not required by law,," he said.

The 14 hour, 10 minute flight from Maui, Hawaii, to Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday was much brighter, according to their Facebook post. At 1 p.m. Iowa time: "We are at 11,000 (feet). We are above the clouds and have a beautiful blue sky above."

They stayed the night, and on Wednesday morning, flew 2 1/2 hours to Temecula, Calif., where Teahen's brother and sister-in-law live. From there, the pilots will fly to Colorado before heading home.

Plenty of people have been following their journey on their website, social media and through newsletter updates.

Unscripted moments

Along the way, the duo's best-laid plans didn't always pan out.

The trek has been fraught with downdrafts as well as updrafts, beginning with mechanical issues that sidelined the pilots in New Hampshire for the first week, followed by snow and ice storms that grounded them in Canada the next week. Back in the air, they had to skip a few planned stops and sightseeing destinations in Europe so they could get back on track. That meant appearing at several fundraisers online.

And then, after a highlight for the men where they got to administer polio vaccines in the poorest, most vulnerable parts of Karachi, Pakistan, Teahen fell ill in India with a suspected intestinal parasite he likely picked up in Pakistan. Severe diarrhea and dehydration landed him in the hospital three times: in Goa, India, and in Darwin and Cairns, both in Australia.

Luckily, the bouts hit him on the ground. But spending his 70th birthday June 17 in the hospital in Goa wasn't the party he anticipated in a country where he was told birthdays are celebrated in style. He did receive two small birthday cakes upon his release.

Meanwhile, Ockenfels flew solo, appearing at several events and dealing with plane repairs during Teahen's various hospital stays.

Peter Teahen (center) and John Ockenfels (partially hidden at right) participate in a national news conference June 19 in Columbo, Sri Lanka. The two pilots, who have been circumnavigating the globe since May 5, have attracted media attention all along the way. They expect to return to Cedar Rapids about 9 a.m. Sunday. (Courtesy of Flight to End Polio)

Teahen said he's feeling fine, and even though test results still aren't in from his hospitalizations, the last doctor he saw assured him he's been pumped so full of antibiotics and medication that he won't be bringing home any intestinal hitchhikers.

"He's as contagious as he could be. Nobody can get near him," quipped Ockenfels, who has spent hours sitting barely inches from Teahen in their 1977 Cessna T210M.

"John only has a limited amount of funny jokes, and after the 10th time, they're no longer funny," Teahen retorted.

Trip of a lifetime

Even though the trials they've faced have been no laughing matter, both men said this has been the trip of a lifetime. One that will have taken them more than 25,000 miles in 90 days, with upward of 165 hours in the air.

With a 2-for-1 match from the Gates Foundation, they had raised $1 million before leaving from Cedar Rapids. More money has been donated during the trip, at 24 events.

Teahen said they may never know exactly how much money this journey has raised, since some donations are going straight to Rotary, not necessarily through the Flight to End Polio's portal. But every dollar donated goes to the polio eradication effort. The pilots are footing their own bills, bolstered by some equipment grants.

After mechanical issues delayed the Flight to End Polio for a week shortly after takeoff May 5 from Cedar Rapids, snow in Goose Bay, Newfoundland, in mid-May further delayed the trip in their 1977 Cessna T210M single-engine airplane. (Courtesy of Flight to End Polio)

"I think it's going to take a while to reflect on what we've seen and done," Teahen said. " ... I don't think we ever comprehended how big this thing is, and how life changing it is. For me, it's gone from a trip to a spiritual journey. "

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