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Two Men, a Single-Engine Plane and a 20,000-Mile Mission to Fight Polio

DIANA NOLLEN DECEMBER 27, 2019

THE GAZETTE, CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA (TNS)

CEDAR RAPIDS – While Peter Teahen and John Ockenfels aren't Santa, they are flying around the world to give the gift of crucial vaccines to the most vulnerable children.

Their goal is to fly eastward this spring from Cedar Rapids, raising money and awareness around the globe to eradicate polio through Rotary International and a 2-for-1 dollar match from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. With the match in place, Teahen is optimistic \$1 million can be raised.

For about seven weeks – March 24 to May 13 – pilot Teahen, 66, of Cedar Rapids, and co-pilot Ockenfels, 67, of Shueyville, will fold into Teahen's six-cylinder, 300-horsepower single-engine airplane.

Cruising speed of the six-passenger Piper Lance II will be 150 knots, or 171 mph. The plane will burn 16 1/2 gallons of fuel each hour. Besides 94 gallons held in the wings, the seats behind the front row will be removed to make way for a 165-gallon reserve tank, as well as luggage and supplies.

Navigational and communication equipment will be onboard not only for safety's sake, but also to enable people – including school students – to follow the progress on a five-minute delay.

"You'll be able to see where we were five minutes ago," Teahen said.

All of this gear will be packed into tight quarters, along with the men, who will sit side-by-side with less room between them than in a car – and with less headroom, too.

They plan to drink just enough to stay hydrated, and eat very few solids, to keep their in-flight, in-place toilet needs to a minimum, relying on disposable, environmentally correct bags in their confined space.

That's the least of their worries.

Safety concerns

The weather is unpredictable that far in advance, and they will be flying over open water and mountains, occasionally through unfriendly skies – taking myriad safety precautions along their estimated 19,601-mile route and 135 in-flight hours.

Their longest flight is nearly 10 hours – about twice the duration Teahen has ever piloted a plane on a trip – from Newfoundland over the Atlantic Ocean, landing on Portugal's Azores islands March 27.

The Pacific crossing on the way back to the United States will be much shorter, from the northeastern tip of Russia to Nome, Ala.

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. They'll also have a life raft on board to slide into the water, if need be.

Each day's flight will end at an airport that allows them to refuel and leave the craft overnight. Finding those airports has been no easy feat, since most outside of the United States close overnight, Teahen said.

Changing time zones also have to be taken into consideration. They had intended to land in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, but that airport will close before their projected arrival. Instead, they will fly from Nagpur, India, into Chittagong, Bangladesh, in mid-April, then continue on to Bangkok, Thailand.

"I'm spending three, four hours a day just on logistics things," Teahen said.

Handlers in England, Japan and Moscow have been helping them navigate the complexities of landing sites, time zones, fuel transport, visas for 13 countries, customs regulations and flight permits. Other handlers will meet them on the ground, and arrange for any repairs that Ockenfels can't make.

"That's the backroom part of what we're doing," Teahen said. "The exciting part is what we're doing in partnership with Rotary."

Giving back for good

The daunting logistics – not to mention the risk – lead to an obvious question: Why would the two take on this odyssey?

Teahen is pretty fearless, after spending his adult life as a funeral director, author and mental health professional.

He's served as a disaster responder since 1989 and a national spokesman for the Red Cross since 1999.

He's taken leadership roles on 65 major disasters around the globe, from the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, to the ongoing genocide in Sudan's Darfur region, the 2004 Indonesian tsunami, 2005's Hurricane Katrina in the United States and the 2010 Haiti earthquake.

"I've been held twice at gunpoint by terrorist groups, buildings have collapsed on me," he said. "I've been blessed (and) I keep wanting to give back."

Ockenfels also lives by that philosophy. An Air Force veteran and retired chief executive officer of City Carton Recycling, he has been on the front lines of administering polio vaccines through Rotary.

Both men are members of the International Fellowship of Flying Rotarians, and said the choice was clear to them to use a global flight as a fundraiser for Rotary International's three-decade quest to finally eradicate polio.

Ockenfels in June attended a Rotary International Conference in Hamburg, Germany, presenting the plan for a polio fundraising component to the flight.

“Rotary was very excited about it,” Teahen said. “We’re now an official fundraising project for Rotary International, and they’ll help promote it. We’ll have help from Rotarians around the world when we’re on the ground.”

The public can make donations online or download a donation form at Flighttoendpolio.com/contact-us.

Gates involvement

They also have a huge helping hand from the Gates’ foundation, which is donating \$2 for each \$1 pledged through the flight.

“Polio is a terrible disease,” Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates said in an [online video](#). “And as our foundation was getting involved in global help, we saw that Rotary, CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), UNICEF, WHO (World Health Organization) had partnered together back in 1988, and getting rid of the disease is kind of the ultimate goal for all these infectious diseases.”

So the foundation decided to join the fight.

Teahen and Ockenfels are paying their own way around the world, estimated at \$60,000 to \$70,000, offset by some grants and high-tech equipment donations.

“And so 100 percent of the money that we raise will go to Rotary International,” Teahen said. “And 100 percent of the money that goes to Rotary International goes to eradicate polio.”

Rotary polio initiative

As a founding partner of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, Rotary International has contributed nearly \$2 billion toward stopping the debilitating, paralyzing disease, reducing cases 99.9 percent since first vaccinating children in the Philippines in 1979.

While Rotary [lists three countries where polio remains active](#), Ockenfels said Nigeria recently has come off that list, being polio-free for three years after suffering a relapse. That leaves Afghanistan and Pakistan as countries where polio is endemic.

“Pakistan is finally onboard with making it happen,” Ockenfels said. “Afghanistan still is fighting it politically. We’re now over 100 cases this year between those two countries, and we were down to 30 some cases a couple of years ago worldwide.”

Polio is not a 20th-century disease, although that’s when outbreaks hit the hardest in the United States.

“They’ve done research going back hundreds and hundreds of years to the time of the pharaohs, and they have absolutely found polio, going all the way back. It’s not a new disease,” Ockenfels said.

So the struggle continues, using a newer style of vaccine that doesn’t rely on a live virus.

Global implications

“There were three types of polio,” Ockenfels said. “They have eliminated two of them officially. As of a couple months ago, the second one was eliminated. We’re down to one type of polio left in the world. As a result of that, they can change the formulation of the polio vaccine. They’re moving away from the live

virus. The newer style of vaccine does not have nearly the capability to cause the polio. So that's one of the biggest issues.

"The other thing is, even though we've got all these countries that are polio-free, they have to keep vaccinating all of the kids that are born for years to come to ensure that it remains that way.

"After they're positive that it's dead across the world and has been for a few years, then they can start worrying about some other issues. They will declare it as being gone. It would be only the second time in world history they've eliminated a disease from the Earth. Many of us in this country can remember what the first one was: It was smallpox. Smallpox has officially been eliminated.

"So that's why we're still fighting this fight with polio immunizations. People in the United States have been polio free for many, many years."

But that also makes unvaccinated people vulnerable to a resurgence.

"Rotary has always said, polio is only one flight away," Teahen added. If a person carrying the disease is on an aircraft and doesn't develop symptoms until after arriving, the disease could return to where it had been eradicated.

Teahen noted, though, that Rotary's effort is "bigger than the polio vaccine."

"When they're out giving kids polio vaccines, they're also giving them multiple other vaccines that children need for positive, strong health that they've never (been given) before," he said.

"It's all contained in the same vial," Ockenfels explained. "And literally the process is two drops that are squeezed out of a bottle onto the tongue of the children that just got these multiple vaccines. Two drops – it cost less than a buck apiece."

"And so we're talking about vaccinating a lot of children that are going to be healthier in the long run," Teahen said. "But for those who've been afflicted by the polio virus, they're disabled."

He has seen firsthand the horrors befalling people with disabilities in Third World countries.

"After the Indonesian tsunami, I led mental health teams from seven countries into Sri Lanka. One of our teams was out and found a warehouse down along the shoreline, and it was full of dead people. They were all disabled people who had been chained to their beds, because that's how they dealt with the disabled – they were chained to their beds in warehouse fashion. And all these people in the warehouse died because the tsunami came and overtook the warehouse. It was a horrific thing, but it's hard for Americans to think that that's how disabled folks are (treated)."

"That's more than normal around the world," Ockenfels added.

Rotary's efforts reach farther, establishing educational initiatives in vulnerable countries; providing mosquito netting, since polio can be transmitted by mosquitoes; testing water to see where polio might be carried; sending teams to those regions to stave off a polio outbreak; and helping to create jobs for people with disabilities.

"It's more than just one vaccine," Teahen said. "It's multiple attacks on solving the problem (and) helping people."

Flight details

- Go to Flighttoendpolio.com for information on the Flight to End Polio, the pilots, ways to donate to the cause, watch the flight progress, and have the pilots speak to your group.

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