

## Flight to End Polio ends at Cedar Rapids airport

Pilots return after 90 days flying around the world in a single-engine airplane



**Diana Nollen**

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Janet Teahen becomes emotional as she hugs her husband Peter Teahen after he landed at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids on Sunday morning after completing a 90-day journey around the globe to raise money to eradicate polio. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

CEDAR RAPIDS — Tears, cheers and applause erupted for a family reunion 90 days and 25,323 miles in the making, when pilots Peter Teahen of Robins and John Ockenfels of Shueyville returned to The Eastern Iowa Airport around 9 a.m. Sunday.

In a flight around the world fraught with delays, they were right on time to make good on their goal of returning to their wives — and raising more than \$1 million and awareness for Rotary International's [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#).

When the flight was germinating way back in 2019, Teahen said they thought they might be able to raise \$10,000. Thanks to a 2-for-1 match from the Gates Foundation, they had hit the million-dollar mark by the time they [took off from The Eastern Iowa Airport](#) on May 5.

 **Related article:** [A flight around the world to end polio](#)

Teahen then was hopeful they might reach the \$2 million mark by the time they attended 24 fundraisers in Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Hawaii, California, Colorado and back home. Final tallies may never be known, he said in a July 23 phone interview with *The Gazette*, since some donations may have gone directly to Rotary International, bypassing the various [Flight to End Polio](#) portals.

But checkbooks were open Sunday, and dollars piled up in the donation box at the ticket table for the homecoming pancake breakfast. The ticket-sellers estimated 350 to 400 people came to the fundraising event, staged outside the airport's FedEx shipping center.

### **'A good landing'**

Everyone had a ringside spot to see the tiny Cessna T210M single-engine airplane taxi to a halt. Everyone except Ockenfels' wife, Deb, who was standing too far away to see over the sea of well-wishers. She quickly made her way to the pilot's side of the aircraft to greet her husband with a big hug and kiss — and then she cried tears of happiness and relief.

Even without seeing it, she said she "knew it was gonna be a good landing. He's done good landings the whole way."



Deb Ockenfels, left, and her son Dan Ockenfels watch as John Ockenfels hugs his daughter, Kris Ockenfels after John landed at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids on Sunday after completing a flight around the globe in a single-engine plane. (Savannah Blake/*The Gazette*)

The welcome was "outstanding," John Ockenfels said. "When the (air traffic) controller said, 'Welcome home,' it was really the final of everything. And then, of course, getting out and seeing this crowd — how do you top that?"

Teahen emerged from the co-pilot's seat and into the arms of his wife, Janet, for hugs, kisses and sobs. Even their dog Bentley, a trained therapy dog for Teahen Funeral Home, trotted right over for a smooch, tail a-wagging all the way.

"It's unbelievable," Janet Teahen said even before the plane came into view. "(The time) really, truly flew by."

Still, the wait was stressful, she said, especially with [the mechanical issues](#) that cropped up from the first landing in New Hampshire, and kept cropping up all the way through the South Pacific. And then, of course, [her husband's three hospitalizations](#), including a quarantine in Australia, added to her worries.

"There's not enough hair coloring in the world," she said, "and a couple more wrinkles. My stomach's done probably more turns and flips in the last three months than ever."

While she wanted to fly to Australia to be at her husband's side, the quarantine meant she wouldn't be able to see him, so she decided to instead surprise him by showing up in Temecula, Calif.

"California was fabulous. I think I pulled it off," she said of the surprise visit. "As soon as I saw his foot come out of the airplane, I just lost it. Just to see him come out — both of them — it was a dream come true."



Rotary Club members John Bender, left, and Erik Miles look at the single-engine plane the Flying Rotarians spent flying around the world at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids on Sunday. Peter Teahen of Robins and John Ockenfels of Shueyville flew around the world to raise money to eradicate polio. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

"It was a tremendous surprise," her husband said. "Everybody knew except me."

### **Happy homecoming**

After the couples enjoyed their initial embraces Sunday morning, their kids and grandkids queued up, followed by more family and friends, including Rotarians from near and as far as California, offering their homecoming hugs handshakes.

Among them was Scott Olson, a Cedar Rapids City Council member and 50-year Rotarian.



A crowd cheers as Peter Teahen and John Ockenfels land their single-engine Cessna at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids on Sunday. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

"I've known Peter, especially, over the years. And so when he said he was gonna do it, I told him, 'You got to be kidding me, with a single-engine plane?' But what a statement he made, both for fighting polio and the Rotarians.

"And then secondly, he's a Cedar Rapiidian. ... So few people have circled the world, and we have one that lives here and has been successful and a great citizen doing all the things he does with the Red Cross. I couldn't be prouder," Olson said. "That's why I'm here."

Kids from both sides are proud of their dads and their accomplishments, too.

"He's the reason I got my pilot's license at 18," daughter Kris Ockenfels of Amana said. But she's not planning to ever follow in his circumnavigating footsteps.

"Nope. It's much more fun to fly with him," she said. "But it just kind of reinforced (that) I love traveling. It's so much fun. People just jumped in and helped them throughout the trip," she added, by lending them vehicles so they wouldn't have to rent a car. Rotarians also were at Teahen's side in the various hospitals.



People wait for the arrival of the Polio Flight at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids on Sunday. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

"People just jumped in and helped so many different times in so many different ways."

The separation was especially tough for Teahen's daughter, Laura Murray of Cedar Rapids.

"My dad and I are really close, so it was really, really hard," she said. She's been used to calling him whenever she's having a bad day. "I'd call him and talk to him, and he always made me feel better."

But during the trip, she didn't want to bother him. She just wanted "to be happy for him. This is what he's wanted to do."

Sister Beth Teahen of Cedar Rapids knew their dad would come through this trip with flying colors, just like all the other trips he's taken in his role with Red Cross disaster relief and other missions.



Peter Teahen watches the crowd as he retrieves a card for a friend by the plane he and his co-pilot John Ockenfels flew around the world at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids on Sunday. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

"Sometimes I think people don't realize all the things that he's done in his life, and all of the things that we have seen him do," she said. "So for me, it wasn't that stressful, because I think of other situations that he's been through and he's come out just fine."

Still, "It was a relief to see him get off the plane," Murray added.

Both pilots were determined to lose weight before and during their around-the-world odyssey, to free up more space and weight for fuel. Ockenfels, 71, has lost about 50 pounds. Teahen, 70, took an even harder route to losing about 75 pounds. He landed in the hospital in India and twice in Australia, with severe diarrhea and dehydration.

Teahen says he feels fine, but his wife is taking him to the doctor Monday to make sure he's really OK.

Test results aren't back from his hospital stays, but it's thought he picked up an intestinal parasite in Karachi, Pakistan, where the men went into the poorest slums to administer polio vaccines, as well as at the borders where refugees from Afghanistan were entering Pakistan. Those two countries are the remaining polio hot spots in the world.

### **From hope to belief**

Even though the initial idea for the trip lands them among the 700 people who have flown around the world in a single-engine airplane, the polio mission became even more important to them.

When asked at a Karachi news conference if they hope to see polio eradicated, Teahen paused and said no, much to everyone's astonishment.



Peter Teahen (center) and John Ockenfels (partially hidden at right) participate in a national news conference June 19 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The two pilots, who spent 90 days been circumnavigating the globe, attracted media attention all along the way. They returned to Cedar Rapids on Sunday. (Courtesy of Flight to End Polio)

"I said, 'I don't have hope — I believe. Believing that we're ending polio is far more powerful than hope. ... We now can start believing we're going to see the end of polio in the world.'"

Suddenly, they had a new catchphrase.

"For the next several countries we were going to, we were greeted with 'We believe.' It just spread from country to country," Teahen said, "and it just blew everybody — and blew me — away."

"One of the successes of the trip is the mindset," Ockenfels added. "Like so many other things, it wasn't scripted. It was something just off the cuff, and we worked it into the program."



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)

"No matter what happens," Ockenfels said, "I'm gonna walk away from this trip knowing that it was a highlight of a flying career that I've done many interesting things in. ... This is absolutely the caper of my career."

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