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Brainstorming against cancer

Pilot restoring vintage WWII plane for national tour

BY WALLY SPIERS
 News-Democrat

A few years ago, marathon runner and pilot Brian "Brain" Kissinger couldn't even be sure he would live after doctors found a cancerous brain tumor the size of a baseball.

But today he is healthy and planning to barnstorm the country in a World War II scout plane to raise money and awareness for less fortunate brain tumor victims.

Kissinger, 39, plans to take off June 1 from St. Louis Downtown Airport in Cahokia and spend about three weeks flying around the country on Brain's Flight in a restored World War II-era airplane. He hopes to raise \$100,000 for the National Brain Tumor Association. His larger goal is to eventually raise \$1 million for the group.



Derik Holtmann/News-Democrat

Brian Kissinger next to the 1942 Piper L-4 "Grasshopper" that he and a group of friends are restoring. Brian will use the World War II era airplane to raise money for the National Brain Tumor Association.

[About "Brain's" Flight](#)

It is called Brain's Flight, not because Kissinger is particularly brilliant. He's smart, sure, but it wasn't brainstorming or even brain problems that produced his nickname.

While he was serving as a major in the U.S. Air Force, he was in Okinawa and everyone in his outfit got a hat with the individual's name stitched on. Only Brian's hat said "Brain" and naturally, the misspelling stuck.

Kissinger transferred to the U.S. Air Force Reserve and had a civilian job but was called to active duty at Scott Air Force Base after Sept. 11, 2001. He was playing tennis in 2003 when he collapsed. He is a marathon runner and was in excellent shape. He couldn't imagine he had any health problems.

He was diagnosed with oligodendroglioma.

After an operation and 20 months of chemotherapy, he is in remission and determined to help others who are similarly afflicted.

Kissinger lives in O'Fallon with his wife, Priscilla, and three daughters, Alexa, Gabriella and Isabella. During the week he works for the health care branch of General Electric.

But he spends most of his Saturdays at Hunter Field in Sparta, restoring his airplane, a 1942 Piper L-4 Grasshopper. He found the damaged plane in a hangar at the airport. It was undergoing renovation but the process had just started.

He bought a share of the plane along with Marvin Campbell, the owner and operator of the fixed-base operation at the airport.

"It needs a lot more work," Kissinger said.

His airplane is a model that was used for artillery spotting and reconnaissance during World War II. This plane apparently spent the war in Oklahoma, later going to the Civil Air Patrol in South Carolina and then was retired.

Kissinger originally thought he might be in the air by now, but restoring an airplane is an exacting process. It is more important to be right than quick.

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"There are a couple more things on the airplane that have to be perfect," Kissinger said. "An inspector came by the other day and gave me more items."

That pushed his planned take-off date back a few weeks. The point is to raise as much awareness for his cause as possible, so he has a route mapped out all around the country.

"I want to cover as much territory as I can," he said. "When people found out about this, they sent me invitations to stop at different places. I'm planning on visiting the Tri-State Warbirds Museum in Ohio, and of course, Kitty Hawk, and Florida where I grew up."

"A lot of people have been helping out," he said. "I couldn't do it by myself."

He is particularly grateful to Jennifer Neale of the brain tumor association, who is helping set up the scheduled stops and the publicity; his brother Scott Kissinger, who maintains the Web site; Todd Drenkhahn, an aircraft systems technology instructor at Boeing; and Ken Chornopyski, an Internet guru who bought an aircraft from Kissinger and volunteered to help even though they have never met in person.

For more information or to donate to "Brain" Kissinger's cause, you can visit his Web site at: www.brainsflight.com.

Contact reporter Wally Spiers at wspiers@bnd.com or 239-2506.



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