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LIFE & STYLE

Cancer survivor plans fund-raising flight

Cross-country trip begin in early April

By J.W. Campbell
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With the first blush of spring not too far away, Brian Kissinger said he's getting excited about his upcoming tour of the United States.



J.W. Campbell photo Brian Kissinger holds a bumper sticker promoting his upcoming flight to raise money for cancer research.

It's a journey, however, that isn't designed to satisfy a raging case of wanderlust, nor is it simply an excuse to indulge Kissinger's passion for flying.

The tour serves a higher purpose: raising money to help in the fight against cancer.

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Approximately three years ago, the former Air Force navigator and commercial pilot discovered he had a malignant brain tumor. After a successful operation and months of chemotherapy, Kissinger's cancer is in remission.

Kissinger, whose tumor was in an operative position and responsive to treatment, considers himself a lucky man.

"I had some issues," he said. "I had to have chemo for a couple of months, but I got better. Some people who have the same sort of tumor end up paralyzed or have to re-learn how to

walk and talk. I didn't have any of those things. I was fortunate."

As a result, Kissinger feels compelled to not only publicize the plight of brain cancer victims, but also raise funds for cancer research. His goal is to raise \$100,000 through his journey around the country.

As of Feb. 2, Kissinger has raised more than \$14,000 for brain tumor and cancer research.

Originally, Kissinger was planning on piloting a Zenith kit plane on his month-long trek around the U.S. That changed, however, when sponsorship for the kit plane did not emerge. Instead, he bought a part interest in a vintage L-4 Piper aircraft for his journey.

The L-4 is a World War II Piper Cub that was used by the army as an observation and training plane.

"The old yellow Piper Cub trained more pilots before the 70s than any other airplane in the world," said Kissinger. "This is just a military version of that. There was something like 6,000 of them sold to the Army Air Corps in World War II. They were like the old the Timex in the old commercials - they take a licking and keep on ticking."

While reading up on the L-4, Kissinger discovered a historic piece of trivia.

"The L-4 took part in the last air-to-air combat in Europe," he said. "The Americans pulled

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up beside a similar German plane and pointed their pistols at the German pilot. They forced him to land in a field and surrender. That was the last air-to-air combat over Germany."

Although sturdy, the L-4 is not known for its speed. With a reasonable cruising speed of 85 miles an hour and a range of about 500 miles, the L-4 will provide Kissinger with a leisurely tour of the U.S.

"There's no better way to see the country than low and slow," said Kissinger.

Currently, Kissinger's L-4 is being restored at an airport in Sparta. When the restoration is complete, it should be in top condition for the flight. It will sport stenciling and an Army Air Corps paint scheme from 1942.

The plane is expected to be ready for trial flights in March.

According to Kissinger, fate played a part in making his planned journey possible. About the time he had his operation, a new classification of pilot rating was created - sport pilot.

While airline pilots, commercial pilots and private pilots need varying degrees of medical certification that require stringent medical exams, the sport pilot rating allows people to fly as long as they can maintain a valid driver's license.

"With the sport pilot rating, you can only have two people in the airplane, a pilot and a passenger," explained Kissinger. "It has to be under a certain weight, 1320 pounds, and you can only go a certain speed. The plane has to have fixed gears, so it's not a real complicated airplane. Flying is limited to daytime only. There are all these other rules, but until they came out with the sport rating, I thought I was done flying. I said 'thank God.' About the time I was getting better, it became a legal rating. It was beautiful."

Tentatively, Kissinger plans on beginning his flight on April 1 or 2, taking off from St. Louis Downtown Airport in Cahokia. The first leg of the journey will take him to Morehead, Ky., Kissinger's hometown. While there, he will participate in a benefit for cancer research. From Morehead, the O'Fallon resident will fly eastward to Virginia and North Carolina. The journey will continue through Georgia, South Carolina and Florida.

While in Florida, Kissinger will take part in an air show at Eglin Air Force Base and another one at Lakeland.

His flight then winds through Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana before crossing the American Southwest.

Several stops are planned in California. In San Francisco, the headquarters of the National Brain Tumor Foundation, Kissinger will be featured at a fund-raiser. He is scheduled to take part in another benefit in Oregon before turning eastward for his return trip to St. Louis.

One of the stops on the way back will be at Fort Sill, Okla., where Kissinger's plane was used as an observation aircraft for the artillery school there during World War II.

Anyone wishing to make a donation to Kissinger's flight can do so by visiting Brainsflight.com or by making a direct donation to the National Brain Tumor Foundation. Phone pledges will be accepted by the NBTf at 1-800-934-2873 between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Pacific time Monday through Friday. Those making a donation via a credit card are asked to make a minimum pledge of \$25 and earmark the funds for Brain's Flight.

Donations sent through the mail can be addressed to the NBTf at 22 Battery Street, Suite 612, San Francisco, Calif. 94111-5520. Checks should be payable to the NBTf but the memo line should include the notation, "Brain's Flight."

Kissinger said he's appreciative of any gift, no matter what the amount.

"It's not about a few giving a thousand, it's about a thousand giving a few," Kissinger told Harry Hamm during a recent radio interview on KMOX. "If everyone listening tonight gave a dollar, we could probably fund another research grant that might find a cure."

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