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‘I feel safer flying than driving’ says German physicist on odyssey around the globe US-built Piper Malibu touches down in Colombo during legendary expedition

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Capt. Karl-Heinz Zahorsky (extreme left) and his co-pilot Karl Karbach chats with Dr. Tineke de Silva-Nijkamp, Founder/Principal, Dr. Reijntjes School for the Deaf, during their visit to the facility at Rawatawatte. At extreme right is Susiri de Silva, husband of Dr. Tineke de Silva.



The turbo-charged, single-engine Piper Malibu



Kandyan dancers perform at the ceremony to welcome the two German aviators.

BY SURESH PERERA

The turbo-charged, single-engine Piper Malibu rolled down the runway of Colombo’s Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) that breezy Friday evening on a brief stop-over in a legendary expedition around the world.

In the cockpit of the US-built aircraft were two enterprising Germans, Capt. Karl-Heinz Zahorsky, a physicist and inventor and his co-pilot Capt. Karl Karbach, both seasoned aviators.

Visionary Zahorsky is the founder of LaserSoft Imaging renowned worldwide as a pioneer in the sphere of scanner and digital software. A commercial pilot, he is a professional flyer with numerous trips across the Atlantic in a single engine Mooney and Piper Malibu.

It was 10.00 am on July 28, 2017 when the six-seater aircraft leapt into the open skies from Kiel-Holtenau airport in the capital northern German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein, signaling the momentous 'take off' of a 60-day plus around-the-globe odyssey of historic significance.

In an interview with The Sunday Island at the colonial Galle Face Hotel, where the two daring adventurers stayed during their short stop-over in Colombo, Zahorsky enthused that in piloting a smaller plane "we start seeing the world and its beauty from a different perspective. Flying a such an aircraft around the world, the challenge is to conquer distance".

Introducing Karbach as an "erstwhile friend and experienced pilot with many accomplishments", the renowned scientist, who developed the concept of SilverFast, smiled "it has been a fascinating journey together".

Q: What are global destinations covered so far since the Piper Malibu named 'Spirit of Kiel' took off from the Baltic Sea airport?

Zahorsky: Our first stop-over was in Dubrovnik (Croatia) from where we flew a long leg to Hurgada (Egypt) and from that point across the Arabic desert to Al Ain (UAE), Muscat (Oman) and then to Trivandrum on the tip of India, followed by a one-hour hop to Colombo.

From Sri Lanka, we will be heading to Phuket (Thailand) and then fly across to Singapore, Bali (Indonesia), Darwin (NT Australia), Byron Bay (NSW Australia) and Norfolk Island. From that destination, we take wing to the Pacific on a long flight to Tafuna, American Samoa, Cooks Island and thereafter visit the famous island of Bora Bora in French Polynesia followed by a touch down at Totegegie airport also in French Polynesia.

The take-off from there will translate into a longer journey over Pitcairn Islands (made famous by seafarer Captain Cook) to Easter Island (A Chilean island in the southeastern Pacific Ocean, at the southeastern most point of the Polynesian Triangle in Oceania). The next stop-over will be Robinson Crusoe Island (Chile), which will be followed by a shorter flight to Santiago (Metropolitan Region, Chile), and then move on to Calloa, Cusco and Nazca in Peru and thereon to La Paz (Bolivia), Argentina, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Recife (Brazil), Dakar (Senegal), Spain, Portugal, France and back to Germany.

Q: Is this your first around-the-world trip?

Yes, I am also a flying Rotarian. Both Karbach and I have professional pilot licenses. It has been wonderful to visit some beautiful places and also meet with people, including other flying Rotarians in different countries. I also take the opportunity to meet with customers of my company across Europe, South America and the Americas.

Q: What inspired you to undertake this mission?

I have done many Trans Atlantic flights. I have flown to all the Americas and Caribbean on long flights and I considered it a challenge to fly to the Pacific. So the both of us took up the challenge and embarked on this journey.

Q: Don't you consider flying risky?

I feel safer flying than driving. My biggest fear is that on the way to the airport, somebody driving while high on alcohol or drugs will ram into my car. Flying is, by far, the safest mode of transport.

With sophisticated technology, flying in modern aircraft is very safe today. Aboard our aircraft, we have a satellite phone linked to the weather system, two GPS with access to information even on terrain. While flying low, a mountain may not be visible, but the terrain warning system helps us to climb higher. There was a time when aircraft crashed on to mountains, but with new technology, modern aircraft are now completely safe. While flying, we see the big picture.

There's also a tracking system. We now have an iPad unlike earlier when paper charts had to be removed every 30 days. The extensive map material provides the necessary orientation in the event of a possible failure of the electronic navigation devices. We talk to the Met. Service and update ourselves on weather and wind conditions and we know where the thunderstorms are.

Flying is safe because everything is controlled and checked. Take-off and landing is the critical phase done manually. While cruising, auto flying is switched on. Even with poor visibility in adverse weather conditions, a safe landing can be done as the Instrument Landing System is used to guide aircraft along the axis of the runway. The Piper Malibu is also equipped with a deicing system, as otherwise, the plane will fall off the sky if it picks up too much ice in the clouds.

Q:Your aircraft is a six-seater. Are you permitted to carry any passengers?

We can carry, may be a family member, but nobody can be accommodated on a commercial basis. The weight of the passengers is offset for fuel. The aircraft has three fuel tanks to ensure capacity during long flight distances. For small and remote airports, aviation fuel is ordered extra and early because it is not on stock there. A fuel tester provided by Anton Paar for this expedition ensures the quality of the fuel, which, at times, could be contaminated.

Q:Why did you opt for a US-made Piper Malibu for this expedition around the globe?

This model is very well suited for the world rounding trip due to its very low fuel consumption as the aircraft has a lean engine.

Q: Hitting birds in flight is a threat aircraft encounter....

Yes, especially during take-off or landing I remember my aircraft hitting a seagull at one point, but the bird just slid off the windscreen without incident. Smaller planes fly at a relatively low altitude than commercial aircraft, which at times, fly at an altitude of about 40,000 feet. At that altitude, the air is thinner and they save on fuel as a result.

On this tour, we have a tail wind with the wind predominantly blowing from the west. This makes the aircraft lighter and there is less fuel consumption. On long legs, we sometimes encounter a "point of no return". There are wind changes and an unexpected headwind would make us decide whether to continue or return.

Q: Is there any special significance in launching this trip around the world from the Baltic city of Kiel?

That was where I was born and bred. My company LaserSoft Imaging's headquarters is also situated there, which is the capital of the most northern German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein. Kiel is also known as the European sailing city with international annual sailing events.

Q: How would you describe immigration clearance on arrival in Sri Lanka?

It was smooth and easy. The immigration was fast and there we were sitting in the taxi on our way to the hotel in no time. Unlike in Trivandrum, we felt the atmosphere in Sri Lanka was smoother. India has one of the most extensive bureaucracies in the world. Five years ago, I was in Allahabad and Chennai, where the bureaucracy was outrageous.

Q: What are your impressions of Sri Lanka?

This is my fifth visit to this amazing country. The last time I was here was 10 years ago. It is also important that I place on record my support with a donation call on Dr. Reijntje's School for the Deaf at Rawatawatte, Moratuwa, which has been very dear to me since my first visit to Sri Lanka. The school makes a valuable contribution and deserves full support. It ensures that deaf young women get an education that makes it possible for them to earn their livelihood. In the past, I donated a scanner and software to the School.

Q: After all the strenuous work, what makes you relax?

Meditation. It helps us to use our full potential. I have been a teacher of meditation for many years. I am also trained in yoga. The future focus is on brain technology – working with computers, instruments and equipment using the brain. Meditation helps us to stay calm and as a result we become more efficient and make less mistakes.

In his blog (<http://www.zahorsky.net>), Zahorsky says on the eve of his departure from Colombo: Finally, the tanks are full and we can enter the aircraft. I ask for the start-up clearance and we can switch on climate control. The flight plan is an easy one: departure over Runway 22 and a left turn towards Airway L645 which then leads us straight ahead from the west to the east coast of Sri Lanka and over the open sea directly towards Phuket, Thailand.

After the flight was airborne, he notes: "We climb to our travel altitude 19,000ft, but have a rather low travel speed (Groundspeed) of 150 knots due to a bit of headwind. After one hour of flight, I see the temperature of cylinder 6 rising towards 400 degree Fahrenheit. By changing the performance and the lean, i.e. by making the mix leaner, I can keep temperature below 400 degree. This leads to less performance and less groundspeed, which I don't like at all. I discuss the question whether we should return to Colombo with my co-pilot Karl, who convinces me to settle down since everything is within the limits. In the course of the flight, the temperature of cylinder 6 gets more stable and we even have a better groundspeed of 150-160 knots.

"We have to announce our position every now and then - no problem as long as we are in radio range. Later, we use our satellite phone with Chennai Radio. I suddenly see that ice is starting to cover our front shield and that the Airspeed is going down. All of a sudden, the propeller starts to make rhythmic sounds. After being puzzled for a short moment - "what's that?". We switch off the auto pilot and Karl takes over hand control. A look back reveals that the short wave antenna is icy and vibrates strongly.

"I start the propeller heating and the hubbub is over quickly. Our performance stays mediocre nonetheless. We go into descent without informing ATC - we can't make contact - and dive past some cumulus storms down to 15,000ft and the situation eases. The ice melts. Now we can get a relay to ATC through an airliner that flies at an altitude of 36,000ft above us and can report that we had to go down to 15,000ft due to icing.

"The rest of the flight runs smoothly and we pass the Andaman Isles where we can make contact with LUMPUR ATC. In the meantime, the sun has set and it is dark. We approach Phuket and we hear on ATIS that Runway 22 with ILS is operative and soon we see the lights of Thailand coast

appear ahead of us. The sweet, friendly voice of an ATC controller announces that we have come to Thailand!

"Having made it to the ground, we roll along the landing strip and, after leaving it, are passed to Ground which guides us to a Marshaller and our parking position. We'll have cylinder six checked and the oil changed before we start for Singapore".

The next stop-over of the Piper Malibu, which touched down in Singapore, will be Bali, Indonesia.