

Journey brings world closer; drives travelers apart

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WORLD FLIGHT

In pursuit of Earhart

For Peggy Dennis, wife of a venture capitalist, it was the realization that she had so much in common with the Polynesian woman sitting cross-legged next to her on the floor, chatting while they waited for dinner on a remote Pacific island.

For Linda Finch, it was an understanding of just how isolated Americans are from the rest of the world.

For Michael Anderson, it was a reaffirmation that people everywhere — African villagers, Brazilian fishermen, schoolchildren in Singapore — really are all the same.

There are some obvious lessons to be learned by flying 26,000 miles around the world. Finch, commemorating the last flight of Amelia Earhart, and a dozen people traveling with her finished their equatorial journey last week in Oakland, Calif.

The 2½-month trip gave them a good

— it quick — taste of life in 19 countries around the globe. Most stops were one or two nights; a handful stretched to six.

"I loved it. I just thought it was wonderful," said Dennis, a passenger on the Grumman Albatross companion plane and wife of pilot Reid Dennis. "Even though it was very brief, it was very exciting to see so many lands, peoples, languages," she said. "It was an extraordinary way to see the world."

For some, though, the opportunity came at a price.

Bob Fodge, who was in charge of the restoration of Finch's 1935 Lockheed Electra and served as her chief mechanic, neglected his San Antonio air-conditioning business and lost his major customers. His 20-year friendship with Finch became strained as they struggled to get the Electra ready for the flight and then around the

Please see Amid, Page A10

A10 THE HARTFORD COURANT: Sunday, June 1, 1997

2nd ed. 1st ed.

Amid occasional conflict, trip brings world closer

Continued from Page 1

world. Bob Bell, the copilot on the Albatross, was removed from that role when he and pilot Reid Dennis disagreed about flying techniques. They had been working together 16 years.

"I really enjoyed rebuilding the airplane. That was a kick," Fodge said. But he added, "There was a lot of tension. That just goes with the intensity of the endeavor."

For Finch, the high-profile flight meant greater publicity when it was disclosed last week that her nursing home company could face heavy fines for problems Texas regulators found at a nursing home she owns there.

The stress of the 73-day trip — constant flying, jumping from culture to culture, sleeping in a different hotel every few nights — was sometimes hard to handle. It aggravated tensions between Finch and Dennis, both of whom were used to having things done their way.

"There weren't a lot of shrinking violets. We had a lot of people who were used to being in charge of things," said Joan Safa of Mill Valley, Calif., who traveled with Finch as a film producer.

"The hardest [part] was dealing with people's frustrations," Bell said. "When you put strong-willed people together it takes an incredible amount of moxie to keep things from falling apart."

Finch blames many of the problems on the way the project mushroomed quickly and became almost unmanageable. She wishes she had hired more people sooner to help cope with the details.

Still, the flight was an overwhelming success.

Finch's Electra performed superbly. The message she wanted to get across to schoolchildren — dare to dream big dreams — was well received by adults as well as kids. Pratt & Whitney, which contributed \$4.5 million to sponsor the flight, got the publicity it was looking for. The weather was nearly perfect, and none of the travelers had significant health problems.

For those who went along as passengers, the biggest frustration was that they saw the world in vignettes, never staying anywhere long enough during their trip to get to know a country or its people.

"I had a great time," said Anderson, the cameraman for a California film crew that's making a documentary about Finch's trip. "But we didn't understand any country that we visited in great depth." His biggest challenge was finding a "plot" for the film as Finch jumped from country to country.

Tony Bacewicz, the Courant photographer on the Albatross, at first was frustrated to not be in control of his own schedule and surroundings. He grew to enjoy the travel, and even the challenge of transmitting photos from countries with poor telephone lines — or even no phones at all and using a satellite phone.

"I don't think I've ever worked so

hard in my life or for so long and got so much satisfaction out of it," said Bacewicz, a news photographer for nearly 25 years.

Anderson was frustrated that the most interesting thing on the trip — the interpersonal relationships — couldn't be filmed.

"They were off limits. Either people wouldn't perform or would say, 'Turn the camera off,'" he said. Anderson fretted that he was missing the real drama, but every once in a while got a telling snippet on tape.

He had heard Finch, for example, tell children a dozen times that she accomplished big tasks by breaking them down into small jobs. She liked to cite her own flight as an example, saying it was one big journey but really only 36 small trips. It was a commendable message, but Anderson knew that after hearing it so many times, his seat mates on the Albatross were getting tired of it. He puzzled over how to get that weariness on tape.

Finally, on the tiny island nation of Nauru, he was filming Dennis and Finch in a perfunctory conversation with the chief pilot of the national airline in the lobby of their hotel. Pratt & Whitney photographer Nancy Moran, Albatross mechanic Andy Macfie and Electra copilot Peter Cousins walked in, dripping with sweat and clearly exhausted. They announced they had just "run" around the island, a distance of about 12 miles.

Dennis, amazed, asked how they managed that. Moran, who had her own frustrations on the trip, looked squarely at Finch.

"We broke it down into pieces and ran one little piece at a time," she said with a wicked grin.

Finch had to laugh. Later the trio admitted they'd hadn't run; they walked.

The simple thrill of seeing a new culture, new landscapes, new continents, made it all worthwhile, most agreed.

On Kanton island in the Pacific, Peggy Dennis found herself chatting with a native woman about her children as though she were a next-door neighbor.

"People seemed to respond to the same stimuli no matter where you were," she said.

Reid Dennis enjoyed seeing the world from 3,500 feet in a plane that travels only 140 mph — less than a third the speed of a jet.

"I really liked seeing how big the world is. The world seems awfully small when you travel 600 miles per hour," he said. "We saw the world sort of up close and personal, which was fun."

"The constant highlight was being able to view the world from that vantage point," agreed Safa, the film producer.

But it was agony to see from the air some places the crew couldn't stop.

"To fly over Bali and see it down there and know I couldn't get out of the plane..." Safa said, her voice trailing off.

She had to visit several stops to prepare for Finch before the pilot's



■ The participants in the World Flight Journey, above, posing for a portrait before leaving Christmas Island May 21, from left, Tony Bacewicz, Courant photographer; Nancy Moran, a Dallas photographer shooting the flight for Pratt & Whitney; Albatross owner and pilot Reid Dennis; his wife, Peggy Dennis; Linda Finch; Peter Cousins, ferry pilot; Barbara Nagy, Courant reporter; Bob Bell, Albatross co-pilot; Michael Anderson, documentary filmmaker; and Andy Macfie, Albatross mechanic.

■ After the trip, the World Flight Lockheed Electra, at left, was moved to a hangar once used by Amelia Earhart at the Oakland International Airport.

Tony Bacewicz / The Hartford Courant

arrival.

"It gives you an entree into people's lives and people's homes that you don't have when you're a tourist," she said. Safa's favorite place was the South American nation of Suriname, with its colorful and lively mix of cultures and ethnic groups. She also was struck by a long conversation with a profes-

sional woman in India who expected to enter an arranged marriage.

"They look at the divorce statistics in the United States and say, 'It's not like you have any great answers,'" Safa said.

Most gratifying for Finch were the thousands of e-mail messages, letters and phone calls she got from people who had heard her message

and said it had made a difference in their lives.

When times got tough, those who were flying with Finch and Dennis tried to remember that that was the point of the flight: to get the "you can soar" message out, especially to kids.

"Thousands of children got im-

pacted in a positive way," said Fred Patterson, who sold Finch the Electra and was her copilot on several legs across Asia.

"If some kids were inspired by it, everything was worth it," Fodge agreed. "Linda really does care. She really does care about the kids and wanted to do some good with them."