

Global Ambition

1963 P35 N9787Y (D-7235)

by Shinji Maeda, Mill Creek, Washington

Why can't a 57-year-old Bonanza fly around the world?



Final configuration Lucy - N9787Y

Without my family's support (left photo) I would not have been able to start this flight.

Landing on Snohomish Harvey Field, my flight school airport, on June 11, 2021 (right).



Back in 2016, I was lying in bed half asleep when I noticed an unread flying magazine on the floor. I was first struck by the image of a guy holding up an American flag in a heroic pose. But what really caught my attention was behind him – a beautiful blue 1962 P35 Bonanza that looked like it had been modified into a rocket ship. Adrian Eichhorn and his Bonanza Gina shocked me that evening, as I read about their flight around the world. “How impossible!” that a more than 50-year-old airplane could accomplish such an amazing flight! Little did I realize that night that I would have my own 1963 P35, *Lucy*, and she would carry me around the world and safely back to my family in 2021.





Gina (in blue) and Lucy staged for my 2021 flight. After Iceland Adrian flew over the North Pole. You can see the difference of tip tank size.

So around the world in an old Bonanza...what motivates some of us to consider it? For me, I founded a US non-profit called the Aero Zypangu Project. The Project's mission, which is my personal life's mission, is to provide opportunities and experiences that inspire hope, strength, and joy in people with disabilities, youngsters, and their families. The Project does this through aviation activities and motivational speaking engagements. I've been speaking in the United States and Japan since 2008. It's the main reason why I decided

to restore a 1963 airplane gifted from my Japanese aviation mentor to The Project in 2017, and to fly it around the world. It was also the fulfillment of a promise I made to my father before he passed away in 2018: to spread inspiration and change people's stories from "Impossible!" to "I'm Possible!"

Let's talk a bit about the path that brought me to the point of flying around the world. I am now a US citizen. I have a degree and an amazing career at a large aircraft company. I am blessed with a very understanding wife, Makiko,

and two rambunctious young children. I am an active CFI and teach flying at Harvey Field (S43). There was a day in my past, though, when all of that would have been "impossible."

That impactful day that set me on my mission was in Japan. I was 18. I ate, breathed, and dreamed of the day when I would become a pilot and work in aviation. But on this day, imagine young Shinji flying through the air, without an airplane, as a result of a traffic accident. The landing was not one of my best, and the impact



Big smile after completing my mission.



Adrian came to Mike's shop. Adrian realized how much I was serious on this mission flight.



crushed the optic nerve in my eye, making me blind. I was significantly injured as well. I died and they brought me back. Culturally in Japan this type of injury is dream-destroying. Sitting in the hospital in Japan, my dream of becoming a pilot or even having any kind of productive life or meaningful employment was impossible.

So my around the world flight in 2021 was different and bittersweet because of that ominous hard landing and injury. I can say with assurance that I am the first one-eyed, Japanese-now-American pilot to

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Original configuration. Starting installation of a new IO-550B.



Longest leg: Thailand to the Philippines. Entry into the South China Sea.

fly around the world and especially over Japan. My hope is that I am not the last.

A Long Journey to Prepare

Let's go back to 2017, the year after I saw Adrian in the magazine. I had decided to inspire others by flying around the world and was excited to fly to Japan as part of the mission. I want to introduce you to the story of the most important member of the team, *Lucy*, a 1963 Bonanza P35, N9787Y, named after a little dog I had with a can-do attitude.

I recall looking at an email from Mike Thompson, Beechcraft wizard extraordinaire at Avstar Aircraft in my now-home state of Washington. I read it with dismay, shaking my head and saying "wow, we have tons of stuff to do" before I could possibly consider our EarthRounder flight.

We had been given *Lucy*, still in its original configuration from almost 54 years ago. It was a time capsule from another era of power, systems, technology, and instruments. It had been well used and loved by generations before coming to The Project. *Lucy* had strong bones and is a classic V-tail Bonanza. To make it the

safest possible travelling machine was going to take significant modifications. This was going to require the best Beechcraft mechanic I could find in the state. Now I am picky, as I work today helping make very large commercial aircraft with the latest technology. All of my research pointed to Mike.

Meeting him at his shop, we shook hands and I felt that feeling of "Yep, Mike will be my mechanic." His hand was big, warm, and strong. I could see the time that he had spent with airplanes in his hands. I grew up on a farm in northern Japan, and his hands were just like my dad's. I introduced myself and discussed the purpose of my flight. I didn't need to add anything because he had already researched me before I showed up. Mike effortlessly anticipates the details like that.

A few days later Mike's "impossible" email came through. It was three pages of precise dissection of needed tasks based on years of experience, and the highest level of care for my safety. Everything he called out in that email in 2017 was absolutely correct for what I needed in 2021. Without his plan, *Lucy* simply would

not have been able to bring me back from the EarthRounder flight. I emphasize to anyone thinking they can survive a flight around the world, or even to the next county, by cheaply cutting corners, if you want to survive, spend money and time on your airplane with a highly experienced mechanic you trust. From Day 1, my focus was on coming back to my family.

Mike's plan didn't fully surprise me. I did my homework. This included speaking with many Bonanza owners. That's how I found Mike and he in turn knew other Bonanza superheroes. It was like Captain America calling, "Avengers Assemble!" as he brought in teams from the Tacoma Avionics shop, CCD, D'Shannon, JPI, Genesis Aero System, BAS, Aircraft Spruce, Aithre, MHoxigen, and many more. I am alive today and playing with my kids in my home with my wife because of Mike and his care.

Acceptance

"How am I going to fly around the world?" is only the first question. I had so many more. The people with the answers were those who had gone before. Fortunately, they have a website:



Headwind was my enemy. I averaged 152 knots groundspeed on the longest flight.

www.earthrounders.com. When you are first starting out the EarthRounders don't take you seriously. I am sure they are constantly contacted by people who want to dream about flying around the world. Even Adrian was curt and guarded until he could clearly see how serious I was. When Adrian came by Mike's shop to see the progress of modifications, he realized *Lucy* was not just another patched-up Bonanza. Seeing my solid commitment, Adrian fully engaged, and coordinated a whole team at AOPA as well. From those beginnings *Lucy* was retrofitted. The culmination of her restoration was Adrian's Gina and my *Lucy* flying off from AOPA headquarters in formation to Iceland in the spring of 2021 on the first leg of different missions. But to get to that day we must talk about headwinds from the FAA and how my EarthRounder flight was different from Adrian's experience in 2016.

Thank You for Making EarthRounder Safer, FAA!

I was mulling over communications and rulings from the FAA in 2019 and shaking my head in disbelief, saying, "Why? Why does the FAA say it is impossible?"

I was planning to put 100-gallon tip tanks on *Lucy* as Adrian had done with his Bonanza...and which are crucial enablers for the planned long legs (1500 nm and more) of the EarthRounder flights. Fewer stops, less hunting for scarce avgas, less stress, big safety margins (not only range, if you ditch it will float like a pontoon boat), around or over COVID-restricting countries. All my plans were gone! The FAA denied my request citing safety considerations.

"Game on!" I thought, and I fell back to the standard of using D'Shannon 20-gallon tip tanks and a ferry tank, a large aluminum tank in the cabin. I took *Lucy* to the bright lights of Las Vegas for ferry tank installation. But three weeks before my EarthRounder takeoff date the FAA informed me that out of an abundance of caution ferry tanks would no longer be allowed for around-the-world circumnavigation. This was based on prior incidents. I was the first EarthRounder pilot the FAA had applied these decisions to, so more firsts for Shinji and this mission!

Were we back to impossible? No! You can still do the EarthRounder with a normal configuration and fly a route with shorter legs. There would be more fuel

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Lucy bobble head and Mike's yellow lucky Ducky.



planning your own EarthRounder, please understand that pilot stress management is critical, and GASE understands this. I also had Mike, our chief mechanic, watching over *Lucy*. Adrian was there, too, with advice and his constant mentoring after completing his own North Pole transit. My flight instructor friends and my wife were always there while I was flying. We chatted a lot and they encouraged me and kept my spirits up.

Before I entered Japanese airspace those words “you cannot be a pilot,” echoed back from 1998. I sent a message to my wife and she said, “Congratulations, take some pictures for me! The world is on your side, and you made it happen!” When I flew back into US airspace over the Bering Sea, Ahmed, my GASE navigator in Egypt, sent me, “You did it, Shinji! You went around the world, you stopped in Japan, you are the first EarthRounder following COVID and all of the flight restrictions.”

This team includes the wonderful Bonanza that carried me around the world. *Lucy's* performance carried me through sandstorms over Saudi Arabia, thunderstorms in Thailand, icing in France

and Alaska, and high density altitude conditions. I am very proud of this team, and of *Lucy*.

What the Flight Taught Me

With the right team, with the right planning, with the right personal preparation, you can fly a new or old Bonanza around the world. You don't need two eyes to do it. Even if you have a 120-gallon configuration, you can still do it with the right math, weather, team, and personal outlook. Training is everything, and frankly training is flying longer distances in the US in your airplane and planning for those longer flights. Go to fly-ins, see sights from the air, plan to safely avoid weather. We in the US are blessed with the best air traffic management system, people, technologies, and rules. Our weather products are amazing. Get used to using them and realize that many parts of the world don't have these amazing things or this wonderful environment for general aviation. Understanding what to do when you don't have these things, and how to fly safely without them, is crucial to being an EarthRounder who gets home.

Get good at managing fuel consumption, gain experience in high density altitudes, get your IFR certification, and collect a trusted team around you so that when you find yourself over the Bay of Okhotsk you truly won't be alone.

Do I recommend an EarthRounder flight to you? My answer is 50/50, because it is just different from the USA and your life will depend on the flight. There were moments that were not easy at all. My EarthRounder flight pushed the limits of everything I had ever done, trained for, or experienced previously. Adrian told me the same thing: “Until you fly around the world, you will not understand what I am talking about” – and he was right. All that said, I can clearly say it wasn't “impossible” for an old aircraft and a one-eyed pilot to circle the earth in 2021. 