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The power of dreams for the energy of tomorrow

Bertrand Piccard, the Swiss mastermind behind Solar Impulse, has harnessed his pioneering spirit and thirst for exploration for a global cause: the quality of life for future generations. Fuel-free perpetual flight in a solar aircraft represents more than just a technological feat – it is a symbol of what each and every one of us can achieve if we challenge ourselves and believe in the impossible.

A family of humanist adventurers

"I decided to become an explorer in July 1969," explains Bertrand Piccard. "I remember the moment exactly – I was 11 years old and my father had just begun his voyage in the Ben Franklin mesoscaphe, the vessel he had designed to study the Gulf Stream." While Apollo 11 was taking off for the Moon, Piccard junior was rubbing shoulders with astronauts, physicists, scholars and explorers, devouring every word they said. Dreams and reality merged, the line between them becoming blurred. From then on, Piccard wanted to emulate his father and grandfather in applying his imagination to environmental and humanist causes.

Pioneering spirit

In Bertrand Piccard's view, exploration begins in the mind. What he refers to as 'pioneering spirit' involves "going beyond the obvious, entering the unknown and calling conventional wisdom into question". As a professional psychiatrist and an expert in hypnotherapy, Piccard is, in the course of his adventures, able to drop the ballast, rise above it all and surpass himself by turning his doubts into fuel, both literally and figuratively. In 1999, Piccard and Briton Brian Jones became the first aviators to circumnavigate the world non-stop in a balloon – a mission that relied on both wind and propane. In light of society's dependence on fossil energy sources, the vision of a solar aircraft flying day and night without a drop of fuel seemed an obvious next step to Piccard.

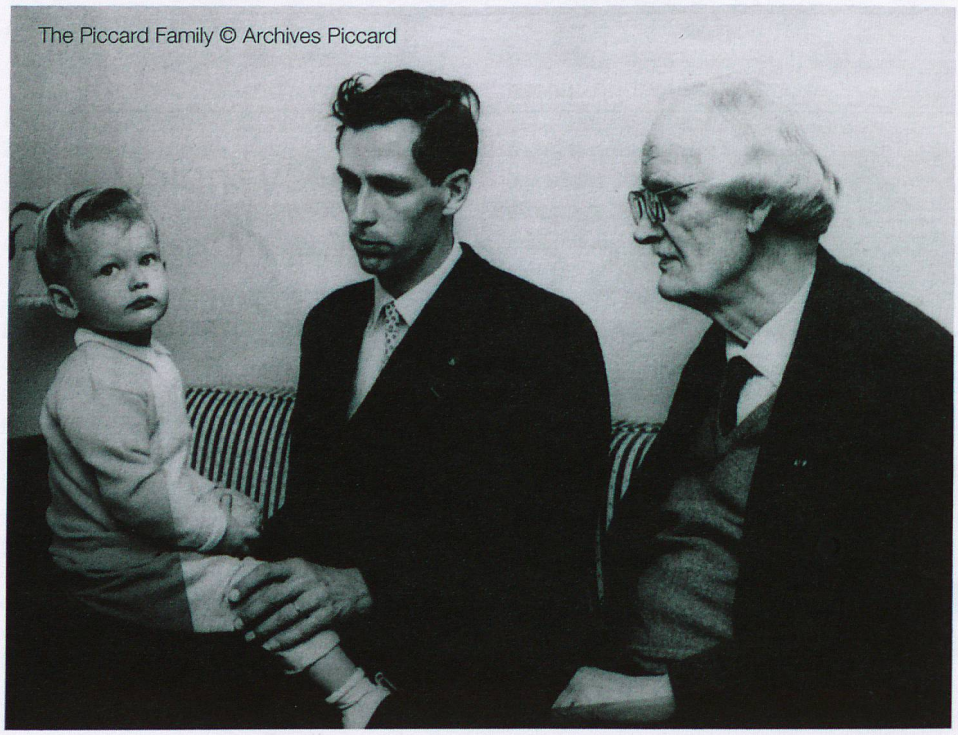
The 'mission impossible' of perpetual flight in a solar aircraft

"If everyone says you can do it, then you're not dreaming big enough." Certainly, no one believed Bertrand Piccard when he began to talk about turning his dream of solar-powered perpetual flight into reality. Or barely anyone, that is, apart from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL). The EPFL came round to the idea fairly quickly, conducting a feasibility study in the process. Piccard's meeting with André Borschberg also played a key role. While Borschberg headed the technical team, Piccard managed to rally the support of major companies whose role was to develop the necessary innovative technology and fund the project. Notably, most of these businesses had no experience in aeronautics. Backing from the Swiss Confederation (e.g. the Swiss Armed Forces, the Swiss Federal Office of Energy and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), input from the numerous brilliant minds that were involved in building the aircraft, and the unexpected synergies that arose from working on the project over a number of years were all factors in making the impossible possible. There are not many other countries in which two committed, if slightly mad enthusiasts can call on such a diverse range of expertise.

A first in aviation and energy history

Consequently, Solar Impulse is a whole lot more than just an aircraft – thanks to a strong team, partners from a wide range of disciplines, Switzerland's innovation-friendly environment, a clear vision and a healthy dose of imagination, it is a symbol of what you can achieve if you believe in the impossible. This is because, in Bertrand Piccard's words: "Adventure in the 21st century consists of applying human creativity and the pioneering spirit to develop a quality of life that future generations have a right to expect." It is no longer about travelling to space, nor is it about breaking records. As such, Solar Impulse is a Swiss first – not only in the history of aviation, but in energy history too. "The aim is not to fly as far as possible using solar power, but to encourage as many people as possible to deploy solutions for energy efficiency in their everyday lives," he adds. How we apply these solutions is up to us – because, according to Piccard, our innate potential and passion as human beings are what constitute our most powerful renewable energy source. Exploration does truly begin in the mind. It allows us to take a step back and change our habits for the greater good.

http://www.houseofswitzerland.org/swissstories/environment/bertrand-piccard-power-dreams-energy-tomorrow



The Piccard Family © Archives Piccard

Did you know?

Bertrand Piccard's Grandfather Auguste became the first person to reach the earth's stratosphere. To reach such great heights, Auguste first created the pressurized cabin, an invention that, along with a stratospheric hot air balloon, afforded him the opportunity to be the first person to see the curvature of the earth, plotting a course for modern aviation.At the twilight of his career, Auguste adapted his designs for his pressurized cabins and turned his attention from the heights of the sky to the depths of the sea. Bertrand's father Jacques picked up where his father left off–venturing deeper into the ocean than anyone before him. His submarine, the Bathyscaphe Trieste, settled on the ocean floor of the Marianas Trench, nearly 11,000 meters under the water's surface, setting a sea diving record of 35,813 feet.

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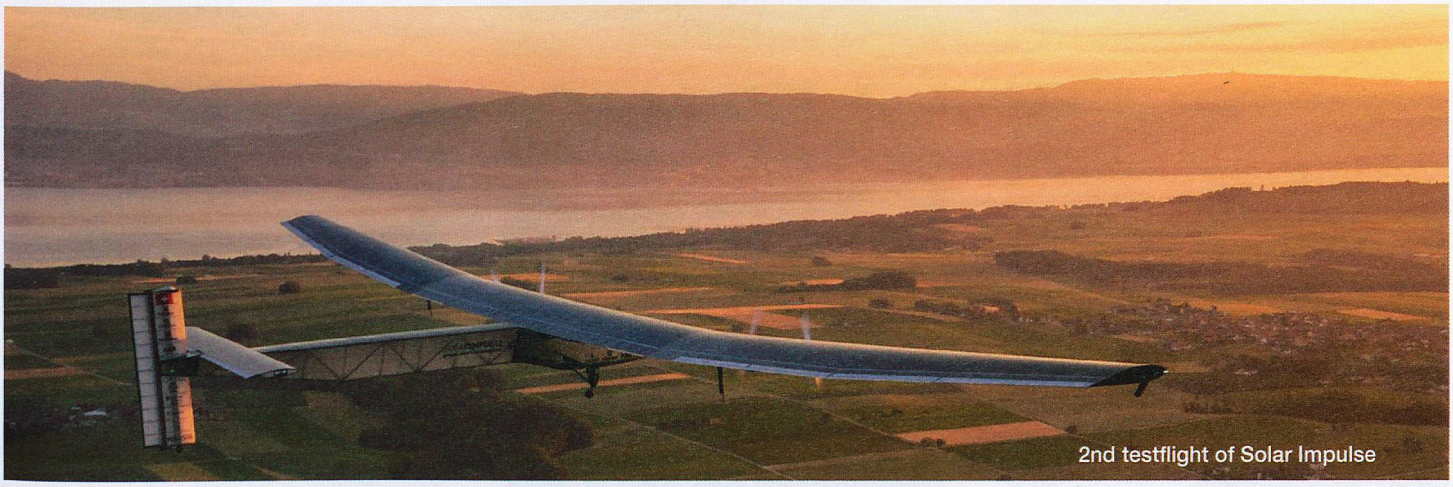
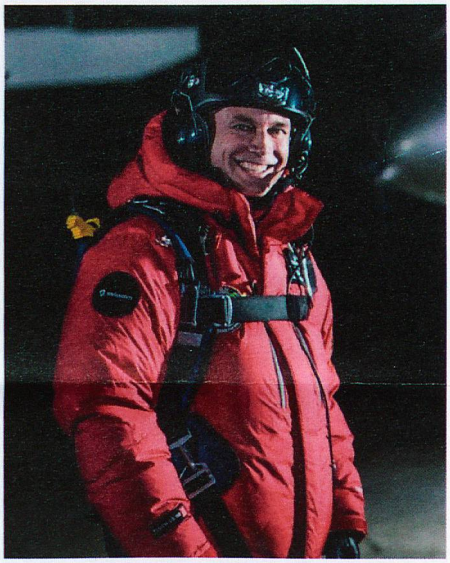
Bertrand Piccard



2nd testflight of Solar Impulse

Flight_Nanjing_to_Nagoya_landing



Bertrand Piccard and Brian Jones © Solar Impulsephoto with balloon