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Global Flyer Completes Record Nonstop, Round-The-World Flight

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Aviator Steve Fossett became the first person to fly solo non-stop around the world without refueling when he landed the Global Flyer experimental plane in Salina, Kansas Thursday.

Thousands of spectators at the Salina airport cheered as Steve Fossett emerged from the cramped cockpit of the Global Flyer and waved.

Moments later, he was greeted by Sir Richard Branson, chairman of Virgin Atlantic Airways, which had sponsored the flight. "He is the first person in the world to go around it solo" said Mr. Branson.

Then Mr. Fossett addressed the crowd and those listening to live broadcasts of the event worldwide. "That was something I wanted to do for a long time, a major ambition. I had the good fortune of having the right people associated with it," he said.

The Global Flyer is constructed of carbon fiber material, which makes it light and flexible, but also capable of carrying the fuel, the engine, the instruments and the pilot at high altitudes.

The plane took off from the Salina airport Monday and made it more than half way around the world before mission controllers began to worry about the rate of fuel consumption being registered by on-board fuel gages. On Wednesday, as he flew near Hawaii, Mr. Fossett decided to continue on, using abundant tail winds to boost his speed and save fuel.

When the plane landed, it had fuel to spare, but the aircraft's designers say it would not have made it all the way without the help of the winds. The official time for the flight was 67 hours, two minutes and 38 seconds.

Although the flight established a milestone in aviation history, it is also considered important for having tested some of the innovations built into the craft and its flight operations.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, known as NASA, has expressed interest in using the Global Flyer to test new communication systems. The company that built the aircraft, California-based Scaled Composites, also built the SpaceShipOne craft, which last year won the X-Prize for carrying a pilot and load briefly out of earth's atmosphere.