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Making History With Flight to Once-Secret Area : Aviation: Local contingent will be first civilians to fly to Kamchatka. The peninsula was once off-limits to everything but Soviet military aircraft.

BY BILL BLUTER
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TIMES STAFF WRITER

Rolling Hills Councilman Tom Heinsheimer, his wife and two other South Bay residents are on the threshold of becoming aviation pioneers.

Along with an Irvine resident, the four will fly Saturday from Orange County's John Wayne Airport to explore little-known, once top-secret areas of the former Soviet Union.

"We've been invited to come to Kamchatka by the Russian Institute of Space Research," said Heinsheimer, a space scientist and vice president of a Newport Beach firm. "I think this is very definitely the Russians' way of saying they want to open up this area."

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The flight will be an aviation first, according to the pilot, Steven Myers of Irvine. "This flight is a historical aviation achievement and will document air routes and territory never before flown by civilian aviators," Myers said.

He said that in the recent past, this type of flight would be folly, and possibly disastrous. In 1983, a Korean Air Lines passenger plane was shot down by a Soviet fighter after venturing into the same Kamchatka Peninsula airspace, killing all 269 people on board.

But Saturday's historic flight of five American civilians underscores the incredible change in U.S.-Russian relations. Myers and his business-scientist colleagues have been invited by the Russian Institute of Space Research to fly into the area that was once off-limits to everything except Soviet military aircraft.

"Our flight there in a private plane is not just for adventure," said Heinsheimer, who has been a Rolling Hills councilman since 1972. "(The flight) is a symbol of serious commitment to open Kamchatka for major business development. The location of this area on the Pacific Rim provides enormous potential for business opportunities with Japan, Canada and the U.S.A. There is also potential for tourism. . . ."

Myers, 45, who is financing the flight, is president and chief executive officer of a Newport Beach-based systems engineering company, Steven Myers and Associates. Heinsheimer, 52, is vice president of the firm.

Others on the flight will be Heinsheimer's wife, Julie, who is a specialist in Russian cultural affairs; Ed Beall, 58, a Torrance architect and urban planner, and Mike Stoner, 31, of Palos Verdes, a cameraman and film producer who will shoot a documentary about the flight.

The group will fly aboard a Turbo Commander 690 B prop-jet owned by Steven Myers and Associates.

"We're going to be the first non-Russians allowed to fly a plane into Kamchatka," said Myers. "It's a real thrill, and I'm honored to do so."

Myers said among the reasons the Russians invited the Americans to Kamchatka is his company's expertise in space-related projects. Heinsheimer, an astrophysicist, had previously been consulting with the Russians about their plan to send an unmanned space vehicle to Mars later this decade.

"While we're there, there will be a technical meeting in Kamchatka about the Mars mission," Myers said.

But he said another reason the Russians invited them is that "they're quite anxious to open (the Kamchatka Peninsula) area to American small business. It's really small business that is going to make Russia a success."

The five Southern Californians are scheduled to leave at 9 a.m. from Martin Aviation at John Wayne Airport.

"It's 4,200 miles, one way (to Kamchatka), and we're going to make seven stops on our trip there," Myers said. After a stop in Nome, Alaska, the Californians will land in Provinya, in Russia's Siberia area, where they will pick up a Russian scientist who is coordinating the trip. Also joining them at Provinya will be a Russian navigator and radio operator.

The flight will continue to Petropavlovsk, the main city on the Kamchatka Peninsula.

"We'll arrive there on July 10, but it'll be July 9 back here in America because of the international date line," Myers said. The group will stay five days and return to Orange County on July 19, he said.

Although well-known to the Russians, who made the Kamchatka their military bastion on the Pacific Ocean, the remote peninsula is hardly known to people of other nations.

"It's a place that's been sealed off since czarist times," Heinsheimer said. "Even today there is no land link by road or train."

The former Soviet Union feverishly guarded the Kamchatka area because of its military secrets. The peninsula was home for the Soviet Pacific submarine fleet and other military bases.

Some American private planes have been allowed to fly into parts of Siberia near Alaska since the old Soviet Union collapsed last year. But Myers said no Americans have been allowed to fly into Kamchatka airspace.

Heinsheimer said the trip is the beginning of a California-Kamchatka connection in international business and trade.

"Kamchatka is the missing link of the Pacific Rim," Heinsheimer said. "It's very close to (the western United States), just a little farther than flying to Montreal. And Kamchatka is not far from Tokyo.

"It's a fabulous area of geysers, hot springs and good harbors. I think it has many attractions for tourists."

"My interest (as an architect and city planner) is in this area as a potential ski resort destination for people from Japan," Beall said. There are five mountains very near Petropavlovsk that are 15,000 feet or higher. It's a fabulous area, with a bay like San Francisco's and the equivalent of the Rocky Mountains only 15 minutes away."

Heinsheimer and Myers said the opening up of Kamchatka's resources will mark a new chapter in Pacific trade.

For the United States in general, and California in particular, the emergence of the resource-rich area is an "incredible opportunity," Heinsheimer said.

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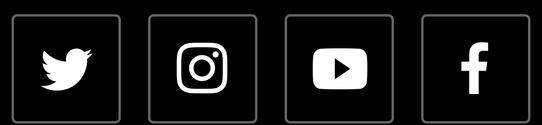

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