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**Plummeting to earth in a plane;
*Just another day at work for two pilots***



Aerobatic pilots Paul Schulten and Clemens Kuhlrig are in great spirits minutes before their show begins at the Cross City Airport. They are standing between their airplanes. Kuhlrig's airplane is in front of them. Schulten's in back.



Clemens Kuhlrig roars across the Cross City Airport flying sideways as he prepares to make a loop.

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Paul Schulten begins an inverted flat spin that sends his aircraft toward the ground with smoke trailing behind him.

Story and Photos

By Terry Witt, Senior Reporter © April 16, 2017 at 3:07 p.m.

CROSS CITY AIRPORT -- Aerobatic Pilots Paul Schulten and Clemens Kuhlig gave spectators a few thrills and chills Saturday when they flew their aircraft upside down, sideways and straight toward the earth at times over the Cross City Airport on Saturday (April 15).

The two pilots were the entertainment everyone was waiting for at the Cross City Airport Fly-In and Expo.

They don't deny their sport is dangerous. At times they flew their planes straight toward the sky until those airborne vehicles ran out of power, and they allowed the aircraft to fall tail-first toward the ground.

But then gravity grabbed the heaviest part of the airplanes – the engine located up front – and forced the aircraft to fly nose-first toward the ground. The pilots, performing separately, safely pulled their aircraft out of the dive at the last second and flew close to the ground with smoke trailing from below the tail.

Both pilots are experienced aerobatic pilots with the highest level of training. They possess surface level waivers, a designation allowing them to do whatever they please in a show. Pilots with surface level waivers must have a minimum of 52 performances under their belt to qualify.

Schulten said they map out the flight in their head before the show begins.

“We love flying but what you see out there are carefully orchestrated and planned maneuvers. It is dangerous. We go forward, backwards and sometimes end over end,” said Schulten, an experienced Southwest Airlines pilot.

Kuhlig said he became familiar with the Cross City Airport as a stopover to buy fuel. He left a business card at the airport one day and got a call asking if he would perform at the airport.

Dana Sheffield, a regular visitor to the airport, said the airport received a radio message one day from a pilot 36,000 feet above the Cross City Airport. They scratched their heads at first. Turns out it was Schulten flying over in a Southwest Airlines jet. He radioed a friendly “Hello.”

Neither of the pilots complained about the stiff wind blowing across the airport at Saturday's show. The wind grew stronger as the day progressed. They said they factored the wind into their performance.

“Everything seems so obviously dangerous, but everything has been worked out and planned out, so if the engine quits you have a way to get back on the runway,” said Kuhlig, a professional airplane mechanic and chef. “The real challenge is adapting to the conditions at the site.”