

WYE VALLEY FLYERS NEWSLETTER SEPT 04

Incorporating Broadmeadow Flying Club

Editor: Merv Middleton e-mail merv@middletons.flyer.co.uk

8th Edition

Editorial Comment. Hi folks, just got back from the field having had a quick flight, it is quite noticeable that the nights are drawing in. August was not the best of months for flying with more than our fair share of wind and rain, resulting in many amendments to my flying plans. Even so I managed to get to the Isle of Man and up to York for the Elvington Airshow the stories of which I will leave for a rainy day.

As promised last edition and superbly written by El Dragona here is the Part 1 story of our memorable flight last month to Portugal. Obviously the disparaging comments about me are artistic licence – clearly falsehoods, figments of the imagination and without foundation. Probably borne by bitterness over misinterpreted comment over her eating abilities – El Gordo comes to mind. But I will let you make up your own minds...

A Pact With The Devil - By The Sleeping Ballast



The participants in Portugal

Ever so often you do something that creates a memory that stays with you for life, but rarely does one generate so many wonderful memories in such a short period of time. If this trip taught me one thing more than any other it was that you are never too old for a real adventure, and they can happen at anytime.

As the sleeping ballast of the Quik, I had unfortunately missed all the planning meetings and didn't even get to read the e-mail of the suggested itinerary until we got home from the trip. I was aware that the intention was to escort Eddie Clapham to Castelo Branco in Portugal, location of the European Microlight Championship 2004, followed by a gentle meander back while hopefully incorporating some interesting flying. Interesting, was to prove an understatement! Little did I know that in addition to the trip through France, Spain and Portugal, there was an overriding wish to fly over the Pyrenees to Gap in the French Maritime Alpes and maybe whiz around Mont Blanc before heading home. The flying team comprised of Merv Middleton (Eurostar), Graham and Judy Pritchard (Eurostar), Eddie Clapham (Eurostar),

Brian Crocket (Eurostar) John Hunt and Mike Bachelor (Skyranger), Spencer Harvey and Me (Quik).

With only two days to go and John is in despair as his passenger for the trip cancels his seat. Having set a budget of half the travel costs this potentially means he cannot make the trip, step forward a saviour in the form of Brian Crocket who decides to give up the opportunity to undertake the trip at the helm of his own hot ship and join John in the Skyranger.

FRIDAY 23 JULY

At 6.00 am Spencer and I start our pre flight packing; as usual it is quite easy, as little as possible but ensuring inclusion of the cleaning essentials and a soft toilet roll. As we are leaving the house I make a major mistake by asking Spencer to bring my handbag. After some comment about a Russian shot-putter and it not being necessary to take the shot with me, the contents of the said handbag were rudely spilled onto the dining room table. Subsequently, I was denied my knife and fork, bottle opener, pair of scissors, nail file and nail clippers. This was all deemed to be unnecessary weight (how he expected me to open a bottle of wine I don't know) and as he was pilot in command I was apparently not allowed to argue with him. It was a first for the Quik crew who managed to get their act together and were at the airfield on time, packed, engine warm and set to take off for 10am when Graham and Judy were due to buzz overhead. We took-off and headed east and saw John and Brian lining up on their runway below. The formation of two Eurostar's and the Quik were met in the air by John and Brian and the journey commenced toward Stroud, where we were due to be intercepted by Eddie at 10.20am. With a tail wind and no hitches the flying team were together and making their way. Merv had filed and activated the flight plan from Hereford so we could fly direct to Le Touquet, 245 miles away on the other side of the channel. Portugal here we come.

Prior to the trip we had not had time to test our fuel consumption and limits of our range. Spencer had contacted Pegasus to confirm the fuel tank capacity of 47 litres, which meant that the distance would be a comfortable achievement with a projected fuel consumption of 13 litres per hour. As the flight plan had been activated we didn't really want to divert everyone to refuel, so we had decided to sacrifice the kitchen sink for an emergency 5 litres of fuel, which we tucked in the pod under Spencer's legs. This would be a last resort, as it would involve a possibly illegal and definitely precarious in-flight refuel procedure.

We were cruising at 80miles per hour on fast trim while the other four aircraft sat at a comfortable slow cruise. We passed through Lyneham's airspace, Merv having obtained the necessary permission on the phone (under NOTAM due to Fairford Airshow preparation) before leaving and then speaking to them from the air, and

headed towards Popham, which we were using as a waypoint to avoid Farnborough (another NOTAM) because of their airshow. Then we were going to go south of Gatwick CTA and onto Dover where we were coasting out to Cap Gris-Nez en-route to Le Touquet. Before we had even reached Popham our fuel gauge was indicating a half tank used, this was not what the planning had dictated. We informed the rest of the team, and decided to refuel and monitor the gauge reading before we made any alternative plans. We slowed while I was given pilot duties via the training bars, and Spencer undertook the in-flight refuel. This involved draping his legs over the side of the pod to allow the extraction of the fuel container from under the keel in the pod, removing the fuel tank cap which was left to flap in the wind, screwing the spout on the fuel container and sticking the spout into the tank while tightly holding the fuel container in the slip stream to prevent it from travelling through our prop. Challenging and nerve-racking at the same time. The gauge went back to full and we were back on target to meet the morning's objectives. Needless to say this was a relief, which was relayed to the rest of the team; Merv reflected our own feelings when he replied that we should take our fuel gauge reading with a pinch of salt.

With two Eurostars ahead, one on our left wing tip and a Skyranger slightly behind and below we headed towards Dover. Dover appeared and positioned itself on our left as we turned towards France, which was visible ahead. A smooth and uneventful crossing ensued at 4500ft in roughly the same formation, except John looked to be water skiing at quite some distance below. Merv undertook the radio calls to London Information and then Le Touquet. We coasted in just south of Cap Gris-Nez, bonjour France. It was slightly hazy but the weather looked great as we landed Merv (G-CBIY) first then Graham (G-CCBK), Eddie (G-RMPY), Us (G-CCSH) and finally John (G-CCRR). Immediately on landing shorts and 'T' shirts became the order of the day, it was hot. Once Merv had closed the flight plan and we had refuelled and paid our landing fee we all selected a hire bike for a trip into town for lunch. Merv, who had previously done this had already picked the best bike while we were not looking, Val was pleased that they all had baskets on the front just in case she saw something worth buying and Eddie, who was obviously an experienced circus performer or just plain mad, entertained us with some impressive stunt riding. Once everyone was acquainted with their respective machines we started a leisurely ride into town. This is a highly recommended practice; the town of Le Touquet was busy and pretty. The beachfront was very tempting but we were all fairly famished and keen to sit down after the onset of saddle rash. We found a wonderful restaurant and the food, when it arrived was absolutely wonderful. Tummies full, we went to retrieve our bikes and cycled back to the airfield via an ice cream stop, which Spence seemed to insist on.



El Dragona and Quik

The last leg of the day was from Le Touquet to La Fleche. We took off at 1800hrs feeling more confident of the fuel consumption (we had put 35 litres in to refill), 220miles didn't seem so pressurised and besides I had had a lovely afternoon lunch and I was feeling confident of an afternoon snooze during this leg. France looked familiar and flat but contained copious numbers of emergency landing fields. Graced by another tailwind no sooner had we taken off and I awoke to hear us approaching Le Fleche, 2010hrs. I told Spence off for not waking me when we crossed the Loire River. He told me it looked lovely and he had tried to get a response from me without success. Reg Whittle was notified of our arrival, and before we had managed to secure our planes for the evening he arrived to collect us with the aid of a student who was spending the week with him during his training. This proved to be another highly recommended stop; accommodation is wonderful with big airy rooms and a very powerful shower. Reg had laid on an excellent barbeque with a table spread that would have not been out of place at the Ritz. The wine flowed, the food was devoured and two completely mental dogs kept us entertained late into the evening. As we had a slightly more relaxed leg the following day only a mere 364 miles to Aire Sur L'Adour, our intended night stop before crossing the Pyrenees, the wake-up alarms were switched off.

Saturday 24 July

After a wholesome sleep a wholesome breakfast was presented, during which time a lot of flying theories were expounded, mostly to do with sleekness of craft making the passage of flight faster. Spencer seemed to think that the experts have got it all wrong and threatened to write a book of his own theories of flight.



Banquet at La Fleche

Reg arrived to rescue the situation and we were all whisked off back to the airfield to commence the journey to Libourne, our stop-off rest point en-route to Aire Sur L'Adour. We departed from Le fleche at 1110 hrs and arrived at a sensible lunchtime 1325 hrs. This flight had been predominantly over flat land at about 6000ft to avoid the turbulence being generated by the fantastic weather. It is worth while mentioning at this time that the temperature had increased dramatically, and whilst I loved every minute of the flying experience in the Quik, the process of suiting up and sitting on the ground prior to take-off in temperatures that demanded a bikini rather than a sweat-suit was not fun. We had also been graced during this leg with the radio presence of the members of the British team who were also making their way to Portugal. However, they were going to cross the Pyrenees that day, Saturday evening. Despite a tempting invitation to join them, we were content with our original intentions and continued on our way. We left Libourne at 1515hrs, 85 miles to Aire Sur L,Adour. We followed the Eurostars and continued to climb to a similar height. Two other things had also now become apparent; during mid-day flying we were going to fly at considerable altitudes to get above the inversion and cheat the thermals, while the second was that during flight the Eurostars take on stealth like appearance and become all but invisible to the naked eye. Luckily the Skyranger was as large as life and could be seen from considerable distances. We arrived at 16.30 having reached 6500ft en-route. Our average ground speed so far had been 90mph.

This was our first, and as it turned out our only evening of camping. We were greeted with a friendly welcome and great weather. Once we had all settled our planes in for the evening we erected the tents. Merv was relieved to see the extra weight he had carried for Graham & Judy being brought to use, as their tent was more like a marquee. We did contemplate ditching our tents, as theirs seemed fine enough to house us all. We managed to secure the shower room keys for the evening and took advantage of the good facilities, even catching up on some washing at the same time. It was noticed that Merv preferred to shower alone rather than with the rest on the boys, which prompted speculation from John that he had something to hide.

Clean and fresh, we walked into town. After a little walk around to work up an appetite, we arrived at the chosen spot, a pleasant little Pizza joint, having found most eateries not serving food for the night. We presumed this might be due to the apparent festival that was being prepared, including outside catering, a stage and a bar. On the journey back we were entertained by an otter that was feeding quite contently in the river in the centre of town. We discussed an early start as we were hoping to cross the Pyrenees before the cloud build or thermals had formed. Merv and John fondly remembered previous journeys through Aire Sur L'Adour including being grounded for a day while waiting for the right conditions to allow the crossing of the Pyrenees. Before we retired to the tents I was volunteered as breakfast runner to fetch fresh croissant from town in the morning. Earlier in the evening John had mentioned that the French liked to eat late and party to the early hours, this was confirmed, as I lay awake listening to the distant music until 4am. My sleeplessness was mainly due to eagerly awaiting the next day's journey; I had no idea

what it would be like and this made it even more exiting.

Sunday 25 July

Sadly as dawn grew closer it was obvious that there were low clouds and even a hint of rain. I was disappointed and daunted by the thought of being stuck in the foothills for days waiting to cross over to Spain. However, more intrepid flyers than I seemed to be optimistic and took the delay as a prime opportunity to fiddle with their engines. During this time the late night party people started to appear and one such person informed us that the cloud burns off around ten, so off into town we all strolled to fetch the breakfast that I had failed to provide. Several pain au chocolat and pain au raisins later we returned in dramatically changing conditions, a mountain crossing beckoned. Fortunately we had broken camp, packed our planes and even programmed the GPS before breakfast, so it was merely a matter of suiting up, waiting for engines to warm and take off, you could feel the excitement in the camp. I think it was also at this point in time that a nickname was introduced that was to remain with us for the rest of the trip. While approaching his plane, Merv was expounding the virtues of his beautiful aircraft and its subtle lines, and in retaliation for the shower dig from John, said that the three Ferrari like Eurostars were made even more beautiful by being parked next to a transit van, namely the Skyranger. Hereafter the Skyranger was known as the transit van; at this point in time my little flexwing escaped abuse so I kept quiet. We departed at 10.45 and arrived at Santa Cilia de Jaca at 12.02pm, the shortest journey of the entire trip so far and at that point in time the most exciting and exhilarating flight. The approach from the French side was covered in broken cloud. We climbed to 8000 ft before fully breaking the fluffy stuff and continued to climb. Large gaps in the cloud allowed us to remain in contact with the ground as we climbed initially to 9500ft.



Crossing the Pyrenees

Why do you feel so small at this sort of height? At 10500ft the first mountain peak appeared in our 10 o'clock. Within minutes we were surrounded by mountains. Suddenly mid Pyrenees the cloud vanishes and below and as far as you can see is just this expanse of mountain peaks and valleys with no suitable landing sites, but at this point I am feeling so incredibly in awe that any danger becomes secondary. The engine sounded sweet and the gauges read what they were supposed to as we broke 11000ft.



11000ft in the Pyrenees

Conditions were so good that we enjoyed a brief play around amongst the peaks, while constantly being aware of any rotor from the tail wind that we were once again enjoying. We decided to start our descent into Santa Cillia de Jaca, only to be struck by sudden turbulence. I have sat through a lot and landed in some pretty unfortunate circumstances during my short microlighting life, and one aspect of the Quik that I am very impressed with is the fact the small wing seems to cut turbulence with exceptional ease. So I sat glued to my seat, praying that my pilot would get us safely through this sticky patch. In the middle of a very barren section of land the gliding club and landing strip became visible. It was hot, windy and definitely a little oasis in the desert. Once on the ground a very elated team indulged in excited chatter about the previous hour's experience, and I agreed that the build up had been well worth it. After undressing from my now sweat soaked flying suit and refuelling we took refuge from the searing heat in the bar. It was only at this stage that I remembered that we were now in Spain!

Merv had booked us in for lunch at 2pm, and with 35mph winds and only a relatively short hop to Burgos it was obvious that we were here for the best part of the day. The use of a swimming pool helped pass the time and Merv, Eddie, John and Spencer decided to cool off before lunch.



The pool and the 2 large exhibitionists!

While others practiced more modesty in changing into their trunks, Eddie dropped his trousers where he stood and I was confronted by a nice white bottom as I came out of the bar. Unlike Merv he obviously has nothing to be ashamed of. We were kept entertained by the gliders, parachutists, route planning, GPS plotting and rescuing the Quik from the deceptive wind. After an afternoon nap the wind had dropped slightly. We were suited and

ready to roll by 1715hrs and were in the air heading toward Burgos 10 minutes later. Burgos was 149 miles away to the west and slightly further south, and for the first time I was convinced that we would have a head wind because we took off into a healthy westerly. No, I was wrong, little if virtually no headwind, unbelievable. John was reminded of the time he spent several hours dismantling and putting a Rotax 462 engine back together as we passed over Sanguesa. He didn't sound to fond of the place and I was glad we were not due to land there. The turbulence and ground height meant we flew at heights of above 6000ft once again. The landscape flattened the further we got from the Pyrenees, and the huge number of wind-farms diminished. At 1915hrs we are all safe and sound at Burgos. During the pre trip preparation we had all been advised to find ourselves strong long pegs to secure the aircraft with. At Burgos it was obvious why, and Merv's 10 ton hammer was essential in penetrating the rock hard soil. Once we were all satisfied with the planes and transit van's security, we went to negotiate with the airfield staff about getting into town. A very attractive and fortunately very fluent controller organised our taxis and recommended the nights accommodation. While waiting for our transport Merv practiced his very good Spanish and the other five men vied for the attention of our attractive Spanish helper. We booked into a lovely hotel and arranged to meet in the lobby in half an hour for a little site seeing and food. Merv informing us that on Sunday's the Spanish in this part of the country all put on their Sunday best and stroll around town; this is something Spencer must have read up on as he graced the Spanish girls with a clean-shaven face and a white cotton shirt. He looked very handsome and I felt lucky to be by his side (Spence wrote this bit and refuses to let me delete it). For the uneducated, me being one of them, Burgos is home to one of the Roman Catholic churches, which are part of the annual pilgrimage. We visited this impressive and very large church during a stroll around a very lovely town centre. We eventually found an eatery and partook of our worst meal so far. This was the last time I chose the restaurant. Graham had ordered soup but was mistakenly bought used washing-up water, John decided he liked washing-up water and drunk the lot. We were all keen to get to bed early as tomorrow was the longest single leg of the trip, 272 miles from Burgos to Castello Branco.

Monday 26 July

Like clockwork the team were in the lobby and set to go. True to form the refuelling man arrived at 0900, and by the time he had done all his checks prior to allowing us to fuel up we had packed up and were ready for flight. This delay had also provided Merv and John with time to process individual flight plans for everyone, which the airport had insisted on. This was only the second time the Quik was ready and waiting for the hot ships rather than the other way around. By now I had learnt how to reduce body heat after the suit had been put on by keeping any movement to a minimum until airborne. I waited 20 minutes while the pilots settled fuel bills and landing fees and we snuck another 5 litres on board in the usual location. Another fact that was now clearly apparent was that Quiks have a passion for fuel like Sven Goran Eriksson has for woman. The three fixed wings lined up in front of us in an offset grid positioning and proceeded to execute a formation take-off, which was spoiled a little

by the Transit Van being cut up by a zigzagging Eurostar.

Spencer's interjection – It was about this part of the journey that I started to question the reason for our good fortune. Exceptional weather, no problems, but more unnerving, a persistent tail wind that remained regardless of which direction we flew. The only difference from previous long trips that John, Brian, Graham, Judy, Eddie and Merv had undertaken was Val's and my participation. Could we be the cause? Now, while I'm a good God fearing catholic boy I have always been too unlucky to be lucky. However, I'd never seen Val go to church, she likes to eat raw meat and is of low moral disposition. Suddenly realisation descended on me like a darkening cloud. Val must have made a packed with the devil! I informed the other members of our team about my suspicions and they all agreed that she was a bit weird and it explained a lot; especially her ability to drink large quantities of alcohol with little effect. I received no denial from the back seat. Oh well, riding with the devils best mate for the rest of the trip was a small price to pay for great flying conditions. Merv informed us that El Dragona was the Spanish for devil and so a nickname was born. To play safe we all decided to keep on the right side of her.

Departure from Burgos was at 10.30hrs. Initially the landscape, even though over 2000ft amsl, was flat with mostly harvested fields and little livestock. The huge expanses of land resembled patchwork consisting of amazing shades of orange and brown segments.



Ferrari of the air?

With about 110miles to Castelo Branco the landscape changed considerably. The mountains got higher and any previous small amounts of grass were replaced with dust and olive trees. Small villages with orange pantiled roofs nestled in valleys between hostile rocky peaks. Periodically, individual dwellings occupied these desolate hilltops and I wondered why anyone would want to live in such a seemingly desolate location. What did people do to earn a living here? The charts we were using had indicated a mountainous area, but I was surprised at the severity. There was absolutely nowhere to land and the Transit Van had momentarily joined the Eurostars in stealth mode. We were very alone, at 7000ft and for the first time in a microlight I felt decidedly nervous. Friendlier terrain appeared with 20 miles to go and we started to descend. At 3500ft the turbulence got lively and the temperature was noticeably hotter. By 2500ft I was actually sweating from the heat. I heard on the radio that Merv, Graham, Judy and Eddie had the field in site and were organising an approach. I saw John and Brian

ahead and we followed them in, somehow landing in front of Graham. All executed good landing, which was just as well because some of the competing pilots were watching. We had conquered our first main objective. It was 13.30hrs, Castelo Branco in Portugal. It was 39 deg C in a dusty old field in the middle of nowhere and it felt wonderful.



Brit team HQ - 39C

Told you it was a good story. Hopefully we will get the next phase of the journey in time for the October edition.

Dean and his Air Creation Kiss 450kg is now flying, nice registration G - KIZZ congratulations are in order. Feel sorry for John flying around in his old plane G - DEAN having to explain his name is not Dean!

I am away on work for the last 2 weeks in Sept, back for a few days and then away from 05 Oct until the end of Nov. I will try to get the Oct edition out and then the next one will be in Dec.

Please keeping mind your contributions are vital, with out your support – no newsletter. Spence and Val are significant contributors what have you done?

Regards Merv.