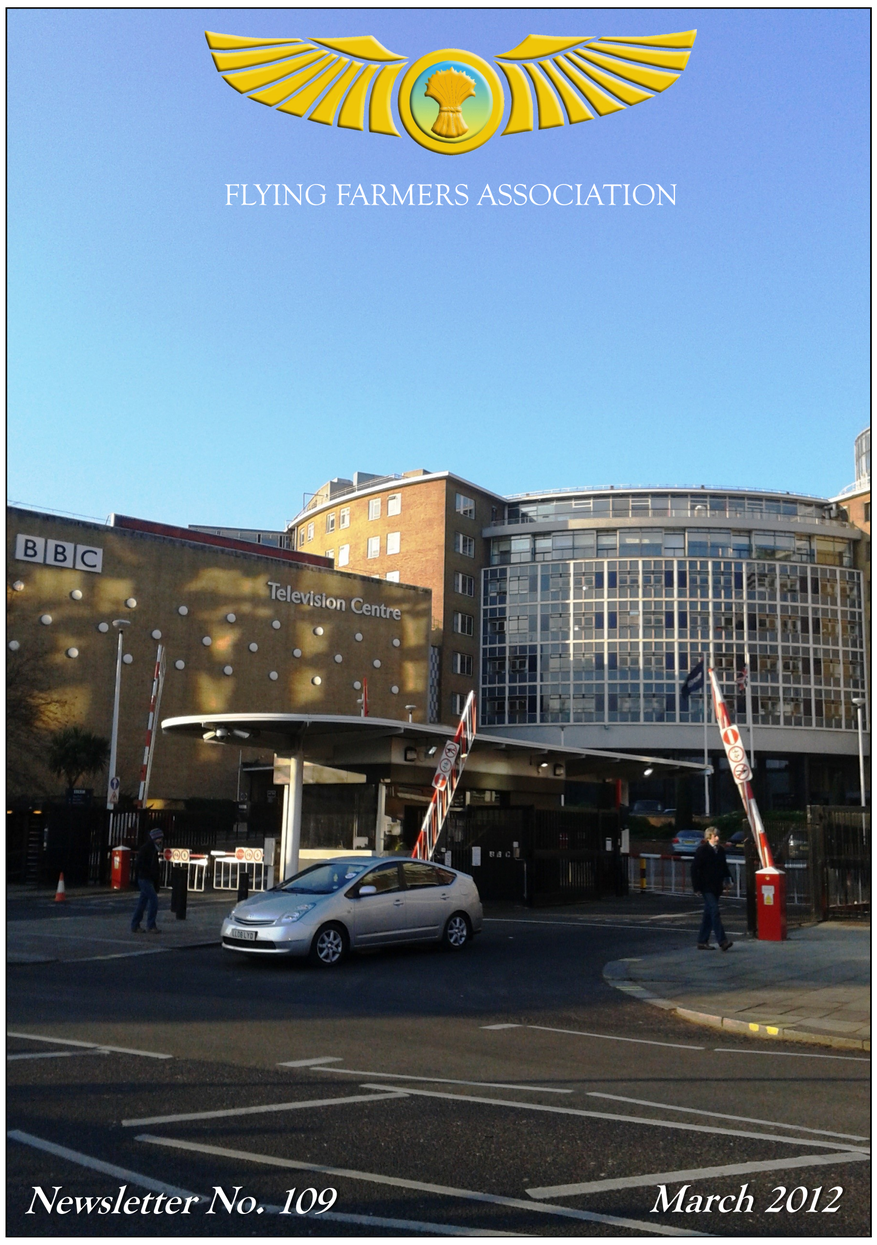
FLYING FARMERS ASSOCIATION



Newsletter No. 109 March 2012

Opening Thoughts

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Cover photograph;

Long winter shadows for the BBC Television Centre Visit
Roz Stephens

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Chairman's Ramblings

Another year, another winter behind us, and another flying season ahead of us. There is always something good to look forward to.

Our first event, as usual a non-flying event in London, has already been and gone, and a very interesting and successful visit to the BBC TV Centre in Shepherds Bush it was too. And now it is only a short 4 weeks until our first flying event to Swanwick, near Southampton, which, despite arranging two consecutive visits to accommodate all the applicants, is well oversubscribed.

Our events secretary Rick is yet again doing a marvellous job of organising a wide variety of events for us to enjoy – make sure you join in if you can. As always, our grateful thanks go to Rick for all his efforts, and not forgetting those members who have arranged meetings themselves or who have given suggestions to Rick for him to follow up.

If there is one thing guaranteed to keep the media happy (apart from the Greek financial fiasco), that is the weather – this winter being no exception. Reporters are sent out all over the country to be seen on the seafront with storm force wind and waves, snowdrifts, Council salt storage depots, half empty reservoirs, parched fields, failing arable crops etc etc, mostly to pontificate on the blindingly obvious. If they really wanted something to make their eyes water, spare a thought for those poor farmers in Eastern Europe.

My share farmer, George, also has an arable/dairy farm in Hungary (and the Ukraine). A few weeks ago the night time temperature was -36C, only rising to -25C in the daytime. It snew and blew to the extent that the private access road to the farm was under 6ft of level blown snow which all had to be cleared by the farm staff before the milk tankers could get there. There was a mile of road to clear and 6ft of snow to put where? – only on top of the existing 6ft of snow already on the verges. The water was frozen solid, the slurry pumps were too – and for all I know, probably the cows udders. Our own winter of 1963 when I was a farm student/relief cowman was enough to put me off having anything to do with cows for the rest of my life – but that was tame compared to Eastern Europe.

Weather seems to be my pet subject in these ramblings too, but I hope for all our sakes we get some significant rain in the next few months to help alleviate the recently declared drought in the UK, but somehow I don't feel it is going to happen, which does not bode well for us farmers, and particularly for those of us on the thinner, lighter soils. At least the corn prices are holding up to reasonable levels at the moment.

Oh well, keep smiling and go flying. I hope to meet up with many of you again during the course of the season.

Martin Gosling

Editors Notes

The FFA enters its 38th year since those 10 Founder members met on the 25th April 1974 at Hockley Heath and the Certificate of Incorporation and the Memorandum of the Association were laid on the table. The Committee was elected before they met with 80 interested in joining the Flying Farmers Association, who had arrived in 28 aeroplanes and cars at the Drainage Event near Coventry. This followed an article in Farmers Weekly initiated by Edward Long (Farmers Weekly editor) and Founder member Tony Poulsom.

The first official FFA meeting was hosted by David Corbett at Shobdon on the 24th September 1974. The guest speaker was Douglas Bader who had a part time job at the CAA at the time. The title of his paper was "The CAA and the FFA" establishing the FFA as a responsible organisation with the CAA.

We now have just short of 400 members and have been at that level for a number of years. We seem to gain and lose about 15 to 20 members per annum keeping a status quo.

Enough history - this edition is dominated by Part 2 of our Chairman's tour of Africa. It was an amazing flight demonstrating what can be achieved in a light aircraft, a lot of determination and a lot of tolerance.

Andrew Cragg attended an Olympic Airspace Briefing. I considered this so important that I held back this newsletter until I received his excellent report (page 4)

Paul Stephens

FFA News

Committee Meeting 1st February 2012

The Committee met after the London BBC visit, at the Farmers Club in Whitehall.

Rick Holt presented the 2012 program of visits which should keep us going for this year. As usual, they will all be very interesting meetings, details of which can be found over the page.

We now have 3 representatives established who attend GAAC (Anthony Kedros), GACC (Peter Kember) and GASCo (Mark Badminton). It was decided that they should receive limited travelling allowances when they go to their meetings as it is important that we are well represented at these various councils so that our strips (which probably constitute the largest gathering of airfields in any organisation) aren't forgotten.

It was also agreed that the present FFA website isn't very interesting and lacks use. The Secretary believes that in the future it will probably become the main means of disseminating FFA news and will be used more if it is kept up to date and has more information.

One problem with the current membership list is that the minute it is printed, it is out of date as new members are enrolled and members' details change. To overcome this problem, we are going to have a members' area on a completely new website, password protected, which will have the constantly updated membership list on it. Hopefully, it will be interactive and by using Google Earth, the members' strips will be pin pointed and can be zoomed into, revealing the strip details.

The photo album will also be revived within the new website and hopefully members will contribute their photos of events.

The new website will maybe take a couple of months to come online, but you will be informed - if you are on the email list. If not and you want to be included, please drop me an email to chix@farmline.com and I will add you to the list.

Paul Stephens

Royal Aero Club Air Racing DVD

Inside this newsletter you will have found a DVD from the Royal Aero Club promoting handicapped Air Racing in the UK, and, along with many other aviation publications, we have been asked by the RAeC to include in it the DVD.

The purpose of it is to spread the word about handicapped Air Racing, to show what it is about, how it works and to try to encourage many other pilots to enjoy the fun and camaraderie that it can bring, as well as to giving a completely new dimension to one's piloting activities.

We have four Air Racing participants within our Association at the moment; Geoffrey Boot, a very successful racer with a multitude of trophies under his belt and a past Chairman of the Royal Aero Club, Gordon Bellerby who has been racing for the past 5 years, Tim Franklin and myself who took it up a mere 2 years ago, encouraged to do so by Gordon. We can all vouch for the fact that it is fun, safe, very well organised and administered, and although not inexpensive, is an excellent alternative to that £100 cup of coffee (probably £150 now!). It gives a great opportunity to expand your flying horizons, and to meet new pilots in a new environment, and has a great social element at the end of racing.

Other members of the Association have been successful racers in the past, such as Geoffrey Boot who won the Kings Cup (the very pinnacle of Air Racing) in both 1994 and 2003, David Soul who won it in 1995, and John Village (in the pipeline for membership) who won the Schneider Trophy in 2005. There may well be other members who have raced in years gone by, about whom I do not know. So it is not just a distant dream – it could be you!

If, having watched the DVD, anyone wants to expand on any of the information, Geoffrey, Gordon, Tim or myself would be more than happy to talk through any aspect of it and to give our honest opinions about it. In addition to that anyone is free (indeed encouraged) to come to any of the race venues (the airfields in question would only be Notamed closed for the duration of the practice and the race itself, so flying in would be no problem), and then they can see what happens, talk to any of the pilots or ground crew and learn how it all works.

So watch the DVD, ask any of the four of us anything you want to know about it, come to one of the venues of this year's racing and then maybe take part yourself, and you could so easily add some of the silverware on offer at each race to your mantelpiece – but be warned, it is both fun and addictive!!

Martin Gosling

GASCo Report

On 29th February, I attended a Gasco council meeting at RAF Halton (a good excuse to give the Beagle Pup an airing!) This meeting did not have as full an agenda as previous ones, but there were a few points of interest.

Firstly, the proposed change in transition altitude to 18,000ft, which seems to be a done deal, and was generally thought to be a good thing. This led to some discussion on the fact that the CAA seem to be slowly waking up to the fact that UK airspace policy is increasingly over-complicated and leads to infringements. There is some tentative moves afoot to at least partially remedy this by cleaning up incongruous airspace. Also there is a move to begin discussions to abolish Altimeter Setting Regions and have one national setting with aerodrome QNH as standard for circuit traffic. Early days, but the feeling was that anything that simplifies can only aid safety as pressure settings rarely vary much over the UK over the periods of time that GA aircraft fly.

The other major talking point of course was the Olympics, with much concern expressed that an A4 handout you may have received regarding the airspace changes is now superseded by a new one which includes all the minor CTA etc changes in the region as well as the prohibited/restricted zones. These were absent from the original handout and the fear is some pilots may think they have the full picture in error. If in doubt, consult the free half mill map that comes with the current southern half mill (just released). That is the definitive map, period.

My next meeting is at the AAIB at Farnborough in May, but if any members have any safety concerns they would like raising or clarification on in the mean time, please fell free to contact me at thorpefield@hotmail.co.uk

Joined since 15th December 2011

FFA Number		*Strip*
382	William Lowe, Calgary, Canada (rejoined)	
874	Dennis Salt, Ashbourne, Derbyshire	y
875	Bill Smith, Anstruther, Fife	y
876	William Buckley, Stockbridge, Hampshire	y
877	John Village, Dronfield, Derbyshire	y

The total membership is now 392

Olympic Airspace Briefing

Olympic Airspace Briefing at the Institute of Geography 10th March 2012

I thought this would be a restatement of the comprehensive information already available on-line, punctuated by the protestations of angry airfield owners and pilots. It was not. Whilst much of the information is indeed available on-line, there was a lot of practical clarification often resulting from pertinent questions and it is this that I will try to reproduce for you in this report.

The organizers had really pushed the boat out. Everybody was there, from the CAA, NATS, LATCC Mil and the Military coordinators, the Puma and Typhoon pilots who will be intercepting you if you don't read this to the various people like Sky Demon, Pooleys and Airbox selling products to keep you on track. Flyer Magazine was also there with a video camera and various snippets will be available on the website by the time you read this.

Andrew Haines, the Chief Executive of CAA, put the whole thing in perspective. He said that the restrictions came from a firm belief that there was a significant security threat. He acknowledged that the restrictions would affect livelihoods but that as a result of positive consultation with our industry they are much more usable than those first suggested. Working on the principal that we have to work with what we've got, he stressed the need to effectively communicate the regulations and restrictions to avoid the inevitable situation where a good weather pilot comes out of hibernation and falls foul of the same. Realising the negative media consequences of this happening along with the consequences of a major incident at the games, I think most of the delegates were behind him and ready to take the rest of the day on the chin.

Everything you need to know can be found at www.airspacesafety.com/olympics especially the pdf download of the London 2012 Airspace guide, 4th down the list on the downloads page.

In addition to the already familiar Prohibited zone P111 and the Restricted zone R112 around London there are **7 other areas of Temporary Controlled airspace CAS(T)** around Southend, Manston, Farnborough, Solent, Weymouth and Cambridge operating during the main Olympic period only (not the Paraolympics). These are clearly marked in the guide; all of it that will affect us anyway is going to be Class D. Also there will be **7 RAS (T)s 2 nm radius to 2000' active by Notam** around and during specific minor venues such as the football venues. So just a bit of extra prep and radio work so far!

Not so **The Restricted Airspace R112** ...this is based around the "Known Air Environment" principal where anything that is not known will be intercepted. It largely follows the line of the 3500' TMA boundary and was chosen, rather than a possibly smaller or arbitary circle, because **most of us are aware of it already.** To fly in it you will need to file a flight plan (see later). Notification of your flightplan acceptance will be accompanied by an **approval number, without which you will not be allowed in.** The controlling authority will be Atlas Control South 123.225 & Atlas Control North 132.800. These are the old Farnborough N & S frequencies that they have taken over for the duration. These are ICF's Initial Contact Frequencies only. Give them your callsign, your approval number and a request (which will be a minimum of Basic service) only. They will check your approval number. You are allowed 30mins either side of your flightplan time. 31 mins – expect to be turned away. There is insufficient capacity for flexibility. You will then be passed to one of 12 dedicated controllers who will follow you along your prescribed route through the zone and will quiz you if you deviate from it. That's not to say they will not be sympathetic to necessary diversions if you request them nor should you be surprised if you are asked to deviate! The AIC for all this will be published on 17th May.

Flight Plans

These can be submitted by AFTN, AFPEx and SkyDemon (more later). (Not by fax or phone.) between 2 and 24hrs before departure. They will be accepted subject to capacity and as such they will be handled on a first come, first served basis. The response will come back to the originator with the approval number.

Rejected flightplans will give a reason for rejection.

If rejected for capacity then you will be offered an alternative time **which you must cancel if not convenient.**

If you want an AFPEx account then get onto it now since they can take a while to set up. (www.flightplanningonline.co.uk)

There will be ATLAS helpline number; you cannot file but you can ask for help if your FTP keeps getting rejected.

There are a few must do's for flight plans:-

1. Include Olympic address in addressee EGGOLYMPP
2. For routing, use only ICAO names, lat/longs, beacons, beacon offsets; no VRPs
3. If your strip has no ICAO code use ZZZZ and include in Box 18 dep/stripname0000N00000W
4. If you are not in contact with the originator or you want independent confirmation put rmk/mobile07860300405 in box 18 for a text back
5. You must put an EET to the boundary (in or out) and specify the crossing point which you must define in a standard way. e.g. EET/DET3280110012 (Detling bearing 328 dist 11nm 12 mins)
6. If you're landing away and coming straight back then file both flights together but put RMK/PART ONE OF TWO on the first and RMK/PART TWO OF TWO on the second. They will be treated together for acceptance/rejection purposes.

Before the off there is an initiative for Flight plan checking. If you have a regular route you can send it by email to olympicairspace@caa.co.uk. There will also be another "File a flight plan day" on May 5th and 6th

Irv Lee gave a presentation about filing giving three examples all taking off within the zone. T/O & exit for training, Land away outside the zone and flight entirely within the zone. Each requires a different look at how you file. If you are leaving the zone, ATLAS is not interested where you go outside the zone so long as you clearly define exit and entry points. Landing away may raise the question of whether to leave the zone by the most direct route or go direct. Here you must choose whichever is the most safe and not feel compelled to exit ASAP. Flying within will require careful attention to pinch points and CAS and the clear definition of turning points.

SkyDemon Lite is a free web-based flight planning tool. During the Olympics they are offering free submission of flightplans within the UK to ATLAS based on your planned route and including all of the "musts" mentioned above. In particular it does

the definitions of turning/entry/exit points for you just by clicking your route on the map. Check it out. You can also submit "test" flightplans on the run-up using SkyDemon. Existing subscribers will have this automatically.

Interception

The first you will know about this is a Puma or a Typhoon coming up on your LHS. The Puma will have a "Follow me" sign in the back and the Typhoon will be rocking its wings, if by any chance you hadn't already seen it. There was some hilarity as the inevitable questions were asked: "Have you got a "follow me" sign in Arabic?" and "how do you expect to keep up with my PA28 in a Typhoon?"

Procedure: If you are sufficiently aware of your location to know where London is, turn away from it and rock your wings then follow the interceptor. After that procedures differ from ICAO: simplified, they will get large in your windscreen, deploy flares or, in the case of the Puma, shine a big green torch in your face. They didn't exactly say what would happen if you still didn't respond but the mood was lifted when somebody asked if they needed any practice!

The big message here was, if you are worried that you may have strayed into or are close to R112 then call 121.5 without delay. Their remit is being extended to deal with exactly this eventuality and avoid a disproportionate response. The point was made that, in principal, infringement will be treated as usual i.e. there will be no Olympic Amnesty nor will the policy be any more aggressive.

Airfield Exemptions

Many of you with strips will already have spoken to Wg Cdr Mike Tetlow. Airfields within 3nm of the R112 boundary can seek exemption from some of the rules meaning you can buzz in and out of the zone without a flightplan and do circuits in your own pattern with an airfield specific squawk. There is no blanket exemption and requests must be in by 31st March.

Navigation

Mark Batin from RIN gave a presentation about traditional navigation. Most of us shrugged it off as being the stuff of winning the RIN TOPNAV competition, however the point was well made that if we have GPS failure around one of the many pinch points we should have a backup plan in place!

Finally, Colin Gill from CAA gave a presentation about the knock-on safety effects of the airspace changes.

Most importantly, they produce significant Class G choke points around the periphery. Flights around Shoreham and Goodwood will be affected by gliders being forced south by R112 (Fly over the sea within glide range!) The narrow corridor between Farnborough and new Solent airspace especially around Lasham. Flying around Compton is squeezed down to 3500'. Didcot is already class G choke point - Don't be afraid to cross Benson and Brize who are putting on extra resources to accommodate this. Just to add to the confusion there is the Farnborough Airshow before and the Eastbourne Airshow during the Games. The big messages coming out of this were:-

1. Is your flight necessary?
2. Beware routines. It is easy to drop back into "autopilot" when doing regular trips or exercises and forget the new arrangements
3. Choke points, corridors will limit options for Diversions due to equipment or **weather.**
4. Keep a good lookout especially during aerobatics/flight training. Congestion will be high.
5. Consider flying at random 100ft levels so that not everyone is at the "usual" altitude.
6. Listening codes are suspended for London groups of CAS during the games.

Andrew Cragg

The FFA in association with Hayward Aviation Ltd, have created the **Flying Farmers Association Airfield Owners and Operators Scheme.** The basic policy is available in two parts. The first part covers the premises liability and there are two choices of cover limits available. The premium is determined by estimated third party movements each year and the limit of liability cover chosen.

Annual Movements by Third Party Aircraft	Limit of Liability £500,000	Limit of Liability £1,000,000	Other
Up to 100	£195	£300	To be agreed
Up to 250	£240	£325	To be agreed
Up to 500	£275	£360	To be agreed
Up to 1000	£385	£440	To be agreed
Up to 2000	£440	£495	To be agreed
Over 2000	To be agreed	To be agreed	To be agreed

In addition to premises liability and if hangarage is provided, or if aircraft are kept in your care, custody and control, or where aircraft are moved by you or your employees, then you should include **Hangarkeepers Liability** for an additional £100 for £500,000 any one occurrence, but limited to £50,000 any one aircraft. For £1,000,000 any one occurrence, it would be £200, limited to £50,000 any one aircraft.
Additional premium for Extended Coverage Endorsement (Aviation Liabilities) AVN 52G, 15% of premium charged for Premises and Hangarkeepers Liability.
If you have any queries whatsoever, contact **William Man** at Hayward Aviation on 0207 902 7800 or email wman@haywards.net.
Finally, it is worth noting that the FFA Committee are so concerned about liability claims that the FFA will be unable to organise an event at any strip that does not have this or similar cover, for fear of exposing itself and in turn its members to any liability claim. Under certain circumstances, the FFA will pay a year's premium if a member will allow their strip to be used for an event.

Please quote your Flying Farmers membership number when you call.

Programme 2012

1st February	BBC Television Centre
18th / 25th April	Swanwick
8th May	Bletchley Park, Turweston
23rd May	MG Owners Club
1st - 9th June	FFA Tour to Ireland
20th June	Barbury Castle Estate
4th July	Fonthill & Ballington Estates



Events such as these set above are arranged by FFA members on a voluntary basis. It is accepted by those who participate that nothing undertaken by the FFA collectively or members individually shall be construed as establishing a duty of care nor in any way removing or modifying the duties, responsibilities or obligations of pilots or land owners in relation to any event and attendance thereat. All information provided in these programmes is purely advisory and should ALWAYS be verified from official sources.

Swanwick, Wednesday 18th / 25th April 2012

Rick Holt has arranged a trip to Swanwick air traffic control centre. This is now oversubscribed with a waiting list. Unfortunately it is very restricted to just 16 members each day.

FFA European Tour 2012, 1st - 9th June

Plans are coming together for the FFA Tour to Ireland 2012. Bernard Cullen, one of our three Irish members, is organising the tour starting at Ballyboy. (Ballyboy is Bernard's farm strip and is approximately 30 miles northwest of Dublin.)

Friday 1st June	Arrive at Ballyboy (early afternoon)
Saturday 2nd	Fly south to Kildare, visiting the Irish Stud, Japanese Gardens and Newbridge Silverware.
Sunday 3rd	Ballyboy Fly in and BBQ.
Monday 4th	Fly to Waterford, visit the glass factory, then fly to Kilkenney, staying at Langtons House Hotel.
Tuesday 5th	Fly to Kerry, staying at The Maldron Hotel for two nights. Tours in the area.
Thursday 7th	Fly northwest to Spanish Point/Galway. Staying in the Galway area for two nights.
Saturday 9th	Return to Ballyboy for farewell lunch then depart for home.

We can arrange to clear custom's both inward and outward at Ballyboy, and avgas is available at the field. If anyone has any requests I am sure we can look after their needs.

If you haven't yet booked in, there may well be a place left or a cancellation, so please email Paul Stephens chix@farmline.com

Bletchley Park, 8th May 2012

Bletchley Park Trust have successfully saved Bletchley Park site, home to some amazing achievements by the code-breakers of World War 2 and the site where the world's first operational computer was built. For those who have visited before, the Trust is now implementing a major refurbishment programme, so some changes will be noticeable since your last visit.

Pilots should arrive at Turweston Airfield by 12noon local time. A concessionary landing fee of £10 per aircraft has been negotiated, but it is also agreed that if the pilot buys 60 litres or more of fuel the landing fee will be waived.

The timetable will then be:-

12 noon:	Coach departs for Bletchley Park
12.45:	Arrival at Bletchley Park and introduction.
1.15:	Lunch
2.15:	Tour of the Bletchley Park exhibits, and a visit to Colossus. The tour will be conducted by Brigadier Tim Pulverman, Bletchley Park's senior guide.
4.15:	Tea
5.15:	Coach leaves Bletchley Park
6pm:	Arrival at Turweston for flight departures

The cost per person will be £36. Please make your cheques payable to C. M. Moore, and send them to C. M. Moore, Thornborough Grounds, Bourton, Buckingham MK18 2AB. Please also state clearly the names of the individuals attending.

The deadline for acceptances is Good Friday, 6th April.


Roche in his Cessna Crusader

MG Owners Club, 23rd May 2012

Landing at Charlie Papworth's strip, Main Hall Farm, Connington at 10.00 am. If the grass strip is unusable we can land at Bourn.

Coach to MGOC for refreshments and a tour followed by a set lunch (roast chicken and apple crumble or similar).

Our member, Roche Bentley runs the MG Owners Club which was formed in 1973 to serve the growing needs of the MG sports car enthusiast. Over the last 39 years the MGOC has concentrated on making it easier, cheaper and more enjoyable to own an MG. Their vast membership base has helped earn them the reputation of being the World's largest single marque car club.

In the afternoon we will be shown an innovative light aircraft production factory back at Main Hall Farm.

Barbury Castle Estate, 20th June 2012

Arrive Draycot Farm Airstrip (5nm south of Swindon). Coach departs 10.30am Returns 4.30pm

Coach, Lunch and afternoon tea with cakes included.

Chris Musgrave is the Managing Director of Musgrave Management Systems. This is an Estate Management Company that Chris set up eight years ago looking after estates in and around the Marlborough area. He will be showing us round the four estates that he manages himself.

He has four main clients: Temple Farming, Barbury Castle Estate, Manton Farming Ltd and Maisey Farm Partners, between them these four estates total around seven and a half thousand acres. They have all diversified away from mainstream agriculture with an emphasis on equine events. Two of his clients have racehorse training yards, with between them nineteen miles of racehorse gallops and around four hundred horses training each day.

Chris is also the Event Director for Barbury Castle Horse Trials, the first ever 3*** CIC Horse Trials to be awarded this status within its inaugural year, thereafter awarded a World Cup qualifier in year two - again a first in the sport.

He is also involved with Musgraves, a family owned International Food Distributor. Chris is Chairman of the Family Education Committee, and sits on the Family Council. Musgraves presently control 24% of the Irish groceries market, as well as owning symbol groups in the UK (Budgens/Londis) and Spain (Dialsur).

Chris has a very strong "ethos" of "Profitable farming with a care for the Environment" and to this extent the outstanding biodiversity on the Downs is a testament to his style of "land management". In fact only recently Caroline Spelman announced that his farms are to be in one of the twelve "Nature Improvement Areas".

He sits on the CLA National Agricultural and Rural Economy Committee, the Game and Wildlife Trust Lowland Steering Committee, Kennett and Lambourne Catchment Steering Group, as well as representing the CLA as one of the Council of Partners for the North Wessex Downs AONB. Chris has recently been appointed to the Board of Governors at the Royal Agricultural College.

Thanks to Peter Gale for organising this very interesting event. Closing date is the 8th May, so please send your reply slips in good time.

Fonthill and Ballington Estates, Wiltshire Wednesday 4th July 2012

John Tremlett has kindly organised a combined visit which will be fantastic. John Milne has offered to sort out the bookings and flying details so that John can concentrate on the day itself.

- 9-10.30 a.m. Fly in to airstrip kindly made available by Aidan Maitland Robinson (FFA Member no. 659).
- 10.30 a.m. Depart for Fonthill Estate, the home of Lord and Lady Margadale, covering 9,000 acres of land, 10 miles southwest of Stonehenge. In the last 15 years guided by the present Lord Margadale, Alastair Morrison and his land agent Simon Fowler, the estate has been transformed from a traditional estate into a vibrant and profitable operation. It comprises large arable and stock enterprises together with a private stud farm, water supply and bottling business and a thriving rental portfolio of over 150 properties, residential, office and business units. New projects include power production both solar and water. The whole estate is in a model condition and all improvements have been financed from earned income. It is a "Must View". Lunch will be included at the newly developed shoot lodge.
- 4 p.m. Following tea at Ballington Manor, home of John and Pauline Tremlett, there will be a further optional tour of Ballington Farm, winner of the Silver Lapwing Conservation Award in 2002. (1100 acres and a shoot where the average returns are 70% partridge and 60% pheasants).

Please send reply slips to John Milne by 31st May. Details of Aidan's strip can be found in the membership list and it also shows well on Google Earth by putting in the postcode BA12 0QD. NB Because of the proximity of the strip to Boscombe Down MATZ and Salisbury Plain Danger Atrea D123, there will be a NOTAM published on the day.

1st February 2012

46 members met at the BBC Television Centre in Shepherds Bush, London for a guided tour of this amazing building (see the front cover).

It was opened on the 29th June 1960. The area it stands on is a strange shape and covers 13 acres. The designer of the building, Graham Dawbarn CBE was reputed to have been extremely challenged with the shape of the plot and simply put a question mark on his scrap of paper that he was playing about with when it suddenly dawned on him that that was the exact shape of a building that would fit the plot. That scrap of paper is still held in the BBC archives.

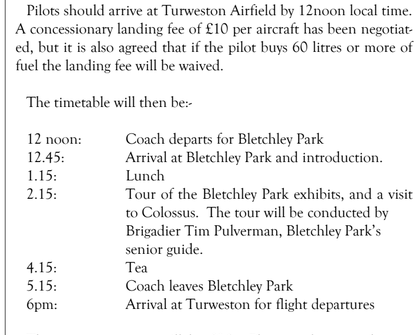
We all met in the reception centre and were split into two groups. We entered the Centre through a security building next to the main gates - which is the iconic view that is seen so many times as the backdrop for news reports. It was like going through airport security with the x-rays and scanners. The building is huge and is in fact still one of the largest such facilities in the world.

It was explained that the BBC are moving out of the Centre and the building is up for sale for a reputed £300 million. The staff aren't that happy with these financial cut backs as some will have to move to the frozen north to far away places like Salford and Manchester.

Our first stop of the tour was to a glass sided boardroom which looks out onto the huge newsroom. Of the 5000 staff in the Centre, over 1000 are involved in the news. As well as the BBC1 news programmes there is the BBC World News, the 24 hour BBC News, BBC2 News even BBC Arabic News etc, etc, with desk after desk of reporters all busy away at their computers.

We moved on through this rabbit warren of a building to Studio 6. The studios are names Studio 0 through to Studio 12 plus N1 through to N12. Studio 6 is one of the larger studios famed for the making of Fawlty Towers amongst other programmes. The most striking thing when you walk into these studios is the total silence - despite potential noise from traffic, the underground, aircraft plus the rest of the building, there was absolutely no noise interference.

There were 400 very powerful lights in the roof and a black drape that is pulled round the outside to give a feeling of infinity on film. All the scenery for the sets is hung from the roof as the floor is perfectly smooth with no bolt holes or any means of fixing the scenery because the cameras have to glide across without any shaking.



Weather presenter Robert Laming

If you remember in Fawlty Towers, it appears that there are carpets on the floor, but this is an illusion as you can hear Basil Fawlty's foot stamping on the hard floor when he was ranting.

Probably a fact that not many realise is that these studios are hired out for all sorts of TV productions including ITV and Channel 4, at a rate of £35,000 per day.

There are a lot more outside broadcasts and sets done nowadays as the camera equipment is so much lighter and more portable.

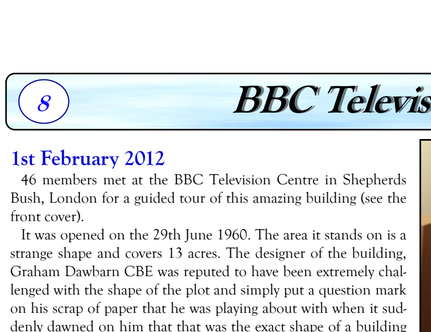
We moved onto a demonstration of the 'green' or 'blue' background (called chroma keying) used for the weather maps. By this means, the weather images are projected on any parts of the image which are blue but not onto the presenter - unless he was wearing blue clothes. It was demonstrated by throwing a blue cloth over our Chairman to cover his body so that it appeared that it was just his head moving about in front of the weather map. This technique is used in special affects filming as well.

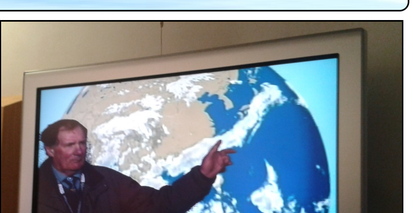
Into another room which was set up for demonstrating the use of autocue. A short production was done with Martin Gosling and Laura Holt reading the news using autocue, which they did extremely well. Then we had a short 'Name That Tune' quiz on another set with Karen Goddard, Ray Friedlander and Paul Stephens being the contestants.

The last area we visited were some of the dressing rooms. The guide told us that some of the celebrities are very demanding - such as Jennifer Lopez who even insisted on bringing her own sofa with her from abroad, to sit on for the half hour she was there. Maria Carey demanded a box full of puppies to entertain her whilst in the green room.

The visit was extremely interesting, and like a lot of our visits is probably something that you wouldn't normally do as an individual. Thanks to Rick and Laura Holt for organising it.

Paul Stephens


Studio 6


Newsreaders Martin Gosling and Laura Holt

February/March 2011

Our southbound epic was completed by arriving at Stellenbosch on March 2nd after 65 flying hours, but feeling rather less than well having eaten something that didn't agree with me in Port Alfred the day before. Those last 4 flying hours were rather an ordeal, but the determination to get to Stellenbosch was strong so that we could relax, recover and recharge our batteries on our own for a fortnight before setting off northbound.

The plan was for Annette and myself to 'do our own thing' in and around Cape Town for those two weeks, and that was the basis of it, with us having a four day stint in a nice hotel in the Hermanus area, and at the end, a three day stay in the Simonstown area. We had pre-booked a hotel in each place from the UK, with the Hermanus one being excellent but the one in Simonstown being very third rate which was a great disappointment to us both. Between these two venues we had a three day stay in Sanbona, a luxurious game park an hour's flying to the east of Stellenbosch, kindly arranged by Derek and Bernhard in the Mooney, who joined us there for the three days. These parks are

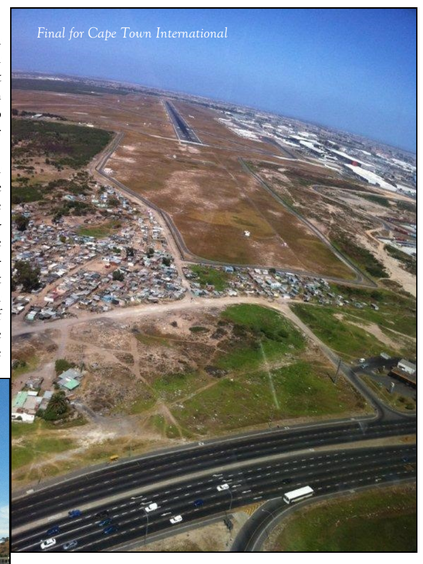

Final for Cape Town International


Table Mountain with usual veil of cloud

generally of superb quality (and with a price to match!), never less than 5* and Sanbona was certainly no exception. We had a great 3 days, guided by an extremely knowledgeable and personable ranger, seeing all manner of wildlife, including the famous white lions of Sanbona which are exclusive (in the wild) to that game park.

With our two weeks relaxation over, the four aircraft and their crews which had been parked in Stellenbosch were repositioned to Cape Town International (requiring a total of 17 orbits between the four of us before we were all on the ground) for the evening of March 14th ready for our departure northbound, and then we all went out for a nice meal on the Waterfront with a backdrop of Table Mountain topped with its customary veil of cloud.

There was a logistical problem northbound because William in the Egg Whisk had never intended to fly the northbound leg and instead planned to dismantle his helicopter and crate it home by sea. Sam, who had been his co-pilot southbound, was planning to accompany David and Angela in their Crusader on the return



Cape of Good Hope


Vicious currents at Cape Point

north, but that aircraft had come to grief early on in the Sudan, and there were no spare seats in any other aircraft except the Cessna 206 with Helmut – but he had become uneasy about being used as a cargo plane on the southbound trip and being taken for granted that he would just automatically scoop up Sam as just another passenger going northbound. He threatened not to continue North with us, and it needed lots of diplomacy from Sam (and I suspect a financial incentive) to make him change his mind. That problem solved, all the aircraft remaining, which were now six, and Sam who had returned to Belgium to confirm the northbound arrangements, planned to regroup from their various areas and meet up once again in Swakopmund in Namibia. We had heard that Alain in his Archer had finally got himself out of Mozambique after 6 days with the help of his South African pilot friend and a safety pilot, and would have another previously arranged safety pilot – Joe from France, who spoke little English – to accompany him going north.

Tuesday March 15th

We needed an early departure from Cape Town to fly the four hours to Keetmanshoop, our entry point to Namibia, and then a further 2½ hours on to Swakopmund where we were to join up with the other aircraft and also Sam, newly returned from Belgium. This would mean our group was once again all together, save for William in the Egg Whisk who was never planning to be on the northbound adventure with us.

We arrived early at our handling agents, Signature, who guided us through all the formalities which, as is the case at many large airfields, was long and protracted and involved much form filling, and then bade us farewell. The Mooney departed first with me second, followed by the remaining two aircraft. As I concluded my power checks at the holding point, I noticed my oil pressure gauge needle sitting on the join of the red and yellow segments on the lower end of the scale. The two other aircraft were just behind me at the hold. As I stared at it in disbelief for a good few seconds, my mind raced through all the options. Should I shut down and call for engineering (unlikely to be available to me at 7 am), or should I take off and see how it went? I was acutely aware that if I went and there was a failure in an hour or two into the flight, I would be far away from any engineering help – my two best options being either to stay in Cape Town, or probably better still go back to Stellenbosch a mere 15 minutes away. The two airfields we were going to that day were very unlikely to have any engineering facilities and I could be stuck for days. I didn't want to be separated from the others, and yet I was aware of the implications of going. It is amazing how much goes through your


The Orange River, Namibia

mind in a very short time when faced with an unusual situation, and in this case, I rapidly remembered that this aircraft had suffered an oil pressure zero indication across the Mediterranean several years earlier before my ownership, and a similar Robin had also had had an identical problem a few years later. Both instances were caused by a bad earth between the sender unit and the firewall to which it was bolted – and it was the memory of this that encouraged me to take the decision to continue my departure in the knowledge that all the other engine indications were both normal and stable. Annette was, I believe, blissfully unaware of my mental turmoil, rather she was busy looking out to try to spot Robbin Island where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated for so long, as we passed by - and I was particularly careful not to start tapping the face of the dial to see if I could get it to wake up, which would have been Not A Good Thing for her peace of mind!

The flight to Keetmanshoop was a very long four hours indeed with the oil pressure needle staying doggedly near the bottom of the dial, but it was the fact that it never wavered, and all the other dials, particularly the oil temperature, were exactly where I would have expected them to be, and the engine was running as sweet as a nut, that continually endorsed my view that it was a gauge fault rather than an engine fault. Nonetheless it was a stressful 4 hours with a continual lookout for any potential forced landing sites, constant button pushing of the 'nearest airfield' on the GPS, and trying not to show anything unusual in my demeanour that may have alerted Annette to the situation. I think I was successful in that respect! The flight itself was over many miles of barren sandy land, with the Orange River and its brown waters appearing suddenly flowing through a twisting ravine set in black crumpled hills.

Keetmanshoop was a sad place – devoid of almost any facilities except to our great surprise, our pre-ordered fuel supplies. There was no food and the water container had no plastic cups, and so having had nothing to eat at all yet on this long day, we would have to wait until we arrived at our next stop, Swakopmund, before that pleasure awaited us. The local Customs lady was summoned from the nearby town, and was disappointed that we had nothing to declare, and then there was another hour to wait for the immigration lady to arrive to stamp our passports. Obviously the fact that we came with a flight plan that would announce our arrival did nothing to pre-warn them that they might be needed to look after us. The refuelling itself was efficient from a tractor-drawn bowser, but then we had to walk a couple of hundred yards to a hot, airless and dilapidated room with a credit card machine that wouldn't work because all the local phone lines were down. The refueller just shrugged and said he didn't know when we would be able to complete payment, and obviously he


Flooded Namibian landscape

couldn't phone his boss in town. We offered him a choice of half a dozen mobile phones to phone his boss which rather threw him as it meant he would now actually have to do something, but his boss said, via our phones, that the phone lines were down in town also. At this point we told him that we had the fuel and we were going to depart anyway and we would give him a list of our credit card numbers to charge when the lines were up and running again. How curious then that by the time we were taxiing out for departure, it was announced that all our fuel payments had gone through!

After three boring and hungry hours we set off for Swakopmund where we would finally meet up again with Sam and the other Foxes. With Keetmanshoop devoid of any facilities normally available to aviators, we set off with neither flight plans, weather reports nor any sort of briefing. To my immense relief my oil pressure gauge immediately registered normal values, thus mitigating my decision to depart Cape Town. It can probably be construed as poor airmanship, but the decision was made with some knowledge of previous history and was not entirely 'get-home-itis'.

The two and a half hour flight to Swakopmund was particularly picturesque across the Namib Desert. Recent rains had given the rolling mountains a sage green hue contrasting to the darker colour of the jagged ravines, and leaving the higher ground behind, the flat plains were embroidered with soft green growth interspersed with seaweed patterns of bright orange sand.

Approaching our destination, Walvis Bay controllers gave us all a dressing down one by one for not contacting Windhoek control for permission to fly above 1500' - an immediate result from our failure to obtain any briefing from Keetmanshoop. Swakopmund was not an easy airfield to find, having a sand runway in the midst of a vast desert. Local knowledge over the radio came to the rescue with advice to fly over the greeny bits of the golf course on the edge of town and then turn right at the road bridge to get lined up for finals Runway 35. In conjunction with our GPS's, we all found the threshold in time and landed to become reunited with Fox 3 and Fox 6 for the first time since Mozambique three weeks earlier. We all settled into the well appointed Hansa Hotel in town quickly making up for the lack of breakfast and lunch, and also meeting up with the new safety pilot for Alain in Fox 6, Joe Gemin, a Frenchman with very limited English who immediately started querying the fuel figures and requested supplies of drum fuel for the remainder of the trip for their aircraft!

Wednesday March 16th

We left Swakopmund after an early breakfast to fly to Mokuti Lodge airstrip which serves the Etosha Game Reserve and its several lodges. The flight was pretty to start with, but the weather deteriorated after an hour or so with cloud down to 5500' and the land rising to 4000' – not a massive problem except visibility became extremely murky to boot. Fortunately it lasted only about 50 miles and then cleared to unlimited visibility. We were staying at the Mushara Lodge, where we were the first guests after its recent restoration. Lunch on arrival was followed by a game drive for those that wanted it, but it was of lesser enjoyment than the one at the camp we stayed in in South Africa (where we tracked some Rhinos and Cheetahs on foot) because the general public were allowed there in their cars and everyone had to stay on the road and await the game coming to you. Storms were brewing in the area and there were some great developing CB photo opportunities.

Returning to the Lodge there was a flurry of activity in the garden to try to capture and relocate a spitting cobra – in my imagination a snake the size of a substantial piece of downpipe, but in reality one the size of a short length of ½" hosepipe!! It was successfully moved out of the garden to an area which was just behind our own personal chalet – which worried me as to what its nocturnal movements might be. Dinner was supplemented by the waitresses and kitchen staff, still in their working uniforms, treating us to dancing and singing native songs – a special and memorable experience. During the night the afternoon's CB's vent their anger in the area with substantial rain.

Thursday March 17th

The heavy rain during the night was still falling at breakfast, but subsided soon after, causing concern to the pilots for their take-off. The strip was long, but 2/3rds of it was of sand that now had substantial puddles in it. There was a 500 yard starter strip of concrete that was downwind, but everyone elected for that option and all managed to become airborne before running out of concrete onto the wet sand. We had a shortish flight to Ondangwa initially flying through a heavy band of rain, probably the one that was over the camp at breakfast, where we were to clear Customs and Immigration out of Namibia into Angola – and to top up our tanks for the last time from a fixed installation until we reached Algiers. We passed the Etosha Salt Pans on the way – a vast dry lake bed of pure white salt onto which one could certainly execute a painless forced landing if necessary. The countryside was extensively flooded, not just because of the rains of the previous night, but because of a very extensive and unusual pattern of rainfall for the last three months.

We were probably to be the only light aircraft flying in the whole of Angolan airspace that day, but we were given a clearance number suggesting the airspace was full of aircraft; ours was DIR5189OVLP/AIS-AIL/EM/2001.MAR.16 (which actually suggested in the 'date' field that we still in the year 2001)!

The flight to Lubango in Angola was one of contrasting countryside. Namibia was extremely wet with the field extensively flooded from the continual rains. We made a small dog-leg as we approached the Namibia/Angola border where the Kunene River tumbled over the Ruacana Falls. The faster aircraft had missed seeing the falls as a big black cloud obstinately hung over the area as they arrived. This cloud obligingly moved away as ourselves and Fox 7 approached, to give us a view of the falls in full spate. An awesome sight with some great photo opportunities - photos and video clips that we were able to smugly show to the other aircraft later. After the border the land rose slowly and continuously with craggy boulder-strewn hills and ravines that would have given no opportunity for a forced landing, until we arrived at Lubango which sat on an extensive plateau at 5750'. For those that wanted, Sam had arranged a bus to look at two particularly interesting sights in the area around Lubango. In the event it was


Ruacana Falls in spate - namibian border



Angolan 4x4 safari

only Sam, Annette and myself that took up the offer, the remainder choosing to rest up in the hotel. It was a most interesting time – for the first visit we drove out of town on 'roads' that were mostly clay and sand with varying surfaces from recently graded to virtually impassable. Our driver, with a Toyota two-wheel drive people carrier, was not an expert on these surfaces and at one point he lost grip and said he could go no further. We were not about to let that happen and despite his protest that it would not be possible we cajoled him to back up and take a run at it, shouting encouragement as the sand flew and we slithered from rutted track to rutted track. On the third attempt we were successful, and were rewarded by arriving at the very top of the escarpment with the clean hotel bus now spattered orange all over. We were now standing on the highest point in Angola and there was a completely vertical drop down to the valley below of perhaps 4000'. The cloud had been swirling all around the tops as we approached, as it so often does, but then as if by Royal Command, it obligingly swept aside leaving a clear view for 30 miles. In 1996 when the Angolan rebels were so active, they used to bring their prisoners to the point at which we were now standing and simply throw them over the edge of the sheer drop – a particularly unattractive way to die. Photo shoot now over Sam wanted us to see the other interesting sight – the most famous road in Angola. We drove to the other side of the escarpment, maybe about 25 miles, and there was a road which climbed (or descended) that same 4000' to the valley floor. Imagine a couple of hairpin bends, and then multiply that by fifty or sixty. These were serious hairpins, clinging on to the side of the escarpment that just went on and on as far as the eye could see to the valley in the distance below with little mechanical maggots crawling up them bringing food, fuel and essential goods to this fairly substantial city which had to be kept supplied year round. The trucks didn't seem to be in the best state of health and they wheezed and roared their way exceedingly slowly around the tortuous route. The toll on the engines in the climb, and the brakes on the descent must have been enormous and it was not a road that would easily forgive any mechanical failure.

Darkness was now approaching and we needed to get back to the hotel for dinner with the others, and our driver, as well as having no off-road driving skills, seemed also to be completely devoid of a night rating. We were pleased to get back to the hotel unscathed.

Friday March 18th

Rested overnight, we planned to leave at eight o'clock but more rain with low overcast skies delayed our departure until nine thirty. More irritating security checks and passport examination followed despite today's flight being within Angola, but finally we got away en route to Sumbe, two and a half hours to the North. We flew at FL085 over fluffy cumulus clouds, and then as we move westwards toward the coast, we descended to around 2000' to enjoy flying along the shoreline. Sumbe was a small coastal airfield and was protected at its eastern end by some hills not far back from the threshold. The wind was strong and the hill caused a lot of irregular currents that caused three of our six aircraft to have a missed approach and the Mooney to stop with locked wheels less than ten yards from the sand dunes at the end. Not one of our best group landings!

Despite six flight plans having been submitted four hours earlier, and the airfield having been in the planning loop for six months, and our fuel supplies ready and waiting for us in the hangar, our arrival took them completely by surprise. Men and women with all manner of forms appeared from everywhere to see what was going on and demanded every conceivable piece of personal and aircraft information, and when we had completed them all and were on our way to the hotel, they thought of something else to check and called us back to the airfield to re-open our aircraft which we had just so carefully finished securing and covering. Finally they could think of nothing else to check and we set off for our hotel. We all relaxed for the afternoon and got together again for a meal in a beach-side restaurant opposite the hotel.

Saturday March 19th

Today we spent the day exploring Angola with Mario in his 4 x 4 vehicles. He was a white Angolan who spoke fluent English and was an excellent guide. Our first stop was at a river crossing that was once used as an embarkation point for slaves captured in the interior and loaded onto ships bound for Portugal or Brazil. Nowadays it is used as a site for washing clothes and drying them in the sun. The washing site was busy with twenty or thirty women scrubbing and beating the clothes, wringing them and chattering to catch up on the local news.

We moved on to a small village by the sea where the sun was used to dry fish caught by the local fishermen, on long wooden racks. With no refrigerated lorries in this part of the world, drying fish was an important preservation method, and the dried fish could then be transported to land-locked Zaire and Zambia. We then moved inland stopping at a roadside market of which there were many along the roads, and bought bananas, pineapples, tomatoes and melon for our lunch – and then on to a large waterfall flowing under a bridge which was a replacement for one which had been blown up during the Angolan Civil War, and whose destroyed carcass remained as some evidence of those twenty seven years.

For lunchtime we visited Boa Entrada, a small town that was abandoned when the Civil War began. The town was built for


Drying fish - Angola


Roadside market stall - Angola

the managers and workers of the estate which was the largest coffee plantation in the country – Angola being the largest coffee producer in the world at that time. Suddenly, from being the largest coffee estate, it was abandoned almost overnight because of the actions of the rebels. It was a ghostly place but its obvious prosperity was still there amidst the decaying structures of the colonial style houses, the school, the church, the hospital, the library, the swimming pool, the theatre and even the overgrown airfield. Sam started pacing out the dimensions of the airfield with an eye to the possibility of flying in a bulldozer and resurrecting it, perhaps for future tours that he might arrange!

After lunch we drove to various other points of interest over road of varying quality – mostly pretty poor – before returning to our hotels at dusk. Wherever we went, be it on the main roads or the most out of the way tracks through the bush, there seemed to be a never ending stream of women of all ages with supplies balanced on their heads just walking to goodness knows where, and equally, from goodness knows where. Apart from the elders, they had, almost without exception, children walking alongside them, strapped to their backs or were just heavily pregnant. The women do all the hard work in Angola (and indeed in most of Africa) while the men and boys do no work at all, the older ones drinking beer and the younger ones riding around on their motor bikes or watching football on TV – and all the time making babies. No wonder the population of Africa is alarming and growing at such a rate, with food shortages a real problem.

Whenever we came across a group of children Mario would take a couple of balloons from a bag he carried with him, inflate them and let them go to whizz around over their heads causing much excitement and gleeful chasing. Simple, cheap and very effective diplomacy.

Before dinner we had an extensive briefing on the complications of our flight tomorrow to the Congo. First we had to fly to Cabinda as our exit point which was a piece of Angolan land surrounded by Congo. To the South was the DRC – The Democratic Republic of Congo – which was anything but democratic and was to be avoided at all costs. A forced landing there would be a Very Bad Thing. To the North was the Republic of Congo – previously the French Congo and was the friendly one, with Brazzaville as its capital. Our final destination for the day was to be Pointe Noire.

Sunday March 20th

There was more heavy rain overnight, and the streets, which had no discernable drainage system, had lakes of water lying in them, and the people unconcerned at having to slosh through all

the water. The airfield was not affected and we set about refuelling the aircraft from barrels. During the refuelling, Bernhard was doing the walk-around of the Mooney and noticed something unfamiliar with the undercarriage doors. One of them was hanging down when it should have been closed. Closer inspection revealed that a linkage that completed the door closing sequence had sheared. With no engineering facilities at Sumbe, the decision was made to fly with the gear down for the 350 mile leg to Cabinda, which reduced the cruising speed by 50 knots to 105 knots and increased the time for the leg from two hours twenty to three and a half hours – with a corresponding increase in fuel used. Starting with less than full fuel for departure at Sumbe because of the short runway, this now meant that Fox 2 would not have enough fuel to get to Pointe Noire as they had not pre-ordered fuel to await them at Cabinda. In the true spirit of aviation brotherhood, all the other aircraft (except one) were prepared to pare down their uptake at Cabinda, and between then conjured up 86 litres to give to Fox 2 to get to Pointe Noire. There was no fuel available at Pointe Noire, so this sacrifice by the other Foxes had to take into account the subsequent flight onwards to Port Gentil, our next refuelling stop.

Cabinda to Pointe Noire was just a fifty mile hop and Fox 5 and ourselves, who had a very similar cruising speed, arrived at the reporting point for Pointe Noire on a converging course, with Fox 5 getting there just in front of me. With 12 miles to go to the airfield, I opened the throttle and surged ahead to the enragement of Alistair in Fox 5, who cast aspersion on both my ancestry and my air racing background over the radio. He was no less polite on the ground and he complained bitterly to Sam, lodging an official complaint about my airmanship. Sam merely replied that as it was in the open FIR well away from the airfield, speed control was entirely up to the captain of the aircraft. We held an uneasy silence for a couple of days!

We were welcomed by the President of the Aero Club Pointe Noire with a large beer for all (and a Coke for me). Bernhard and Derek decided that a solution to the landing gear doors had to be found before departure, because there would simply not be enough fuel pre-ordered for them to continue the journey at the reduced speed and with the extra drag with the wheels down. Helmut from Fox 3 searched around the airfield and found a strip of aluminium and with a few tools loaned from the aero club, cut the strip to length and drilled a hole in each end. This was fitted in place of the broken rod. It was now dusk and everyone gathered in the clubhouse for a party of pizza and wine laid on for us by the members of the Flying Club. The socialising continued for a couple of hours and then we were all given a souvenir Flying Club shirt of either Red, Yellow or White, before we retired to the well appointed Elias hotel.

Monday March 21st

Helmut and Bernhard were up early for a test flight of the new gear linkage. The flight was initially a success with the gear retracting and the warning lights extinguishing, but on selecting gear down again for the landing, the new link failed. A satisfactory solution had to be found or Fox 2 would be going no further. Helmut and I went to an adjacent helicopter organisation on the airfield which was back at work, as it was Monday. We found a piece of steel that seemed the right thickness and got the engineers to cut and drill it. Meanwhile Bernhard went in a taxi to find a welder amongst the huts alongside the dirt road, where a large flat stone was being used as his workbench. The man knew his trade and he made a successful weld. Two large hydraulic aircraft jacks were borrowed from the helicopter company, and they were used to lift the aircraft off the taxiway where she was



Siphoning out Avgas to share around

parked, with a large concrete block tied to the tail to keep the nose off the ground. Much grunting and heaving ensued as we replaced the newly welded rod, keeping the steel one as a future back-up if needed, and having to improvise with half a split pin in place of the original wire-locking. Bernhard eased himself into the seat and powered up the electrics, gingerly moving the undercarriage lever while we all held our breath. Four times he retracted and extended the wheels and each time the doors operated as they should. Fox 2 was declared airworthy.

Whilst all this was going on Derek had been doing the fuel calculations for Fox 2 and came up with the decision that they needed at least 100 litres extra to get to Port Gentil in the Gabon. The Mooney, with her turbocharged engine was simply unable to use any mogas in her engine. Again the other Foxes were consulted and again we came up with a solution. Fox 5 with her Rotax engine actually preferred mogas, and so drained all of his remaining avgas and replaced it with mogas. I had a spare 25 litre can full on the back seat, and was able to half drain my two wing tanks of avgas, another 45 litres, and replace it with mogas making a 50/50 mix. The Grumman had no spare to give away and the one other remaining aircraft refused to give up any at all (remember Quelimane in Mozambique on the Southbound leg.....?). All this engineering work, gear testing and fuel draining and replacing had taken all morning. It was hot and sweaty work in the hot and humid air, but finally we were done, we had a well deserved wash and were ready to go.

The 300 mile leg to Gabon was predominantly along the coastline, which was as well, for big thunderstorms were brewing inland. There were said to be elephants along the beach and we were all sharp-eyed as we passed along. A few were spotted, although they were mostly in the small clearings dotted amongst the scrubland a little way inland, and their presence was announced for the benefit of the following aircraft. It was after 3pm when we flew over the offshore rigs and landed at Port Gentil – a finger of land stretching out into the South Atlantic Ocean that was surrounded by marshland and rivers across which no road or bridges existed, and into which everything had to be transported by plane or boat. Our fuel should have been waiting for us, but it was said still to be on the high seas and would be with us by 9am. (Now tell me, have we heard that somewhere before?).

We had early evening drinks in a restaurant by the water's edge looking out to the illuminated oil platforms, and returned to our rather stark hotel where the owner was keen to entertain us, and had laid on a meal of grilled fish with cold chips, and then organised a floor show of native Gabon dancing with scantily clad and lithesome young women, who did their best to entice us all to join in the dancing. British reticence prevailed until Sam made a spirited attempt to avoid an international incident by joining in the eroticism with some limited success. It was during the evening that we heard via text messages from home that an Antonov cargo plane had crashed into the suburbs of Pointe Noire while on final approach to land. This was within just half an hour of us leaving that airfield to make our way to Port Gentil – a sobering incident indeed and one that was all the more dramatic as we watched footage of the plane's last moments via YouTube.

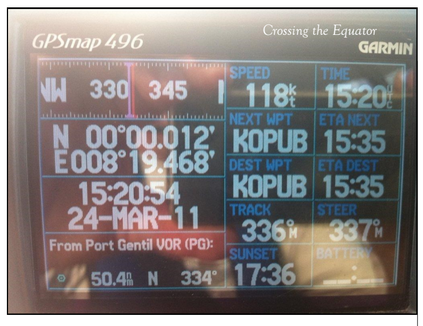
Tuesday March 22nd

In the knowledge that our Avgas would be arriving by 9am, Sam decided to send Helmut and Adam in the Turbine Cessna, and Alistair and Charlie in their Rotax-powered MCR4, on their way to our next stop, the resort island of Principe which lay 165 miles out to sea off the North West coast of Gabon. Sam wanted to stay behind with the other aircraft to coordinate the refuelling, and then we would follow on later in the morning to catch up. I selflessly allowed Annette to go in the Cessna so that Sam would have a seat in my plane. As Sam had a large and heavy rucksack for which I would have had no room, I suggested that Annette also took our luggage with her in the Cessna. This was a Silly Idea – not to let Annette go off to some exotic island with four loose men of varying nationalities, but to allow her to take every item of our luggage with her.... The fuel did not arrive by 9am – indeed no one really knew where it was. Apparently somewhere in deepest Gabon being driven to Libreville where it would be put on an overnight cargo boat for shipping to Port Gentil.

Wednesday March 23rd

It didn't arrive the next day either; the latest information was that the three drums which had to be brought in from Cameroon by road were now stuck at the border because the Cameroon driver had no visa. Good forward thinking that by the driver. So now a lorry had to be sent from Libreville to the Cameroon border, an eight hour journey each way, to transfer the fuel from the Cameroon lorry to the Gabon lorry and bring it back to Libreville – except that it was now dark and the driver with his precious fuel was not allowed to travel overnight with a dangerous cargo.....! So another day without much progress, and when it did finally get to Libreville in the early evening, a speedboat was chartered to get it to us by morning of what was now the third day of waiting – but strangely the boat driver said that he didn't have enough fuel for the journey and no money to pay for any either. Good forward thinking there, again. Somehow Sam was able to get some funds wired to the driver in Libreville to refuel his boat


Togo fishermen in Gabon



and get him on his way overnight – a small, open speedboat with three valuable drums of fuel to beat it's way for 80 miles across the open sea, in the dark – who knows, maybe never to be seen again, with Annette stuck on a paradise island with four loose men and me stuck with the other nine blokes with no means of ever seeing her again – and no clean clothes, razor, toothbrush or hairbrush. But it surely did arrive the next morning, an impossibly small boat for such a precious cargo, and with no way of getting the drums out of it. The decision was made to tip them over the side into the sea and float them to shore. The hope was that Avgas being lighter than water, they would float – otherwise we really would be in trouble. They did.

These three frustrating days were spent with a minibus seeing the sights of Port Gentil, which were few and sparse. The roads were in a poor state which was all the more surprising as Gabon was a thriving oil producing area with a lot of industry. We visited the local golf club where it was too hot and humid to play golf, and had a drink there and looked at faded photos of young elephants being used as golf caddies. We visited a disused metal column lighthouse, said to have been designed by Eiffel just standing there rusting away, and then walked along the beach and visited the nearby fishing community of around 400 fishermen and their families from Togo. These people had migrated to this coast to run a fishing business because the Gabonese couldn't be bothered to do so. We were welcomed by the village elders, sitting under the umbrella canopy of a Banyan tree sipping our drinks. The restaurant had an open kitchen with wood fires cooking various stews that bubbled brown with enticing aromas, but the food was not for us as visitors but for the men folk of the fishing community. We spent afternoons sitting watching enormous rafts of logs being shepherded about by tugboats in and around the harbour – timber being a large part of the Gabon economy – and evenings at differing restaurants of varying qualities. We changed hotels to one of slightly greater comfort with more services, but an unfortunate smell of sewage down the corridors. Wi-Fi was an important consideration in changing hotels as Sam was spending much time away from us chasing the whereabouts of the fuel, and we needed to know of its progress. We definitely didn't want to be caught seeing the dubious sights of Gabon with our fuel sitting waiting for us at the airfield.

Thursday March 24th

All of the previous three days had the familiar ring of Addis Ababa about it, and frustrating it certainly was – but finally the email from Sam to say the fuel would be arriving mid morning at the port, and we were to get ourselves to the airfield by midday.

Now at last I may get to see Annette again and have a change of clothes and a shave!

Around 3 pm, with all aircraft refuelled, the Mooney back tracked the very long runway with us at the hold, and Sam suggested we call up to depart before the Mooney from the intersection at the hold. Permission granted we entered the runway and lined up to find us facing the end of the runway a mere 50 yards away. Now the Robin has a good performance, but certainly not that good, so with very red faces we told Air Traffic we had made a mistake and we would after all back track behind the departing Mooney, and then watched them fly past us with a wave and large knowing grins on their faces. Eventually we were all away and after an hour and a half the tiny island of Principe in the middle of a vast ocean floated into view, with thanks to the ever faithful GPS, and we began to look forward to a couple of days relaxation in this remote resort. Annette had seen us arrive and it was with great pleasure and no little relief to me that we met up on the road half way between the resort and the airfield. When checking in, the first person we saw was Alistair poring over an aviation weather chart on the office computer, shaking his head and saying it was no good, but we would have to leave as soon as possible due to a nasty looking front approaching from the East, otherwise we could be stuck here until the weekend. Having just had three days in hell, while his little group had been in paradise, deep sea fishing, sunbathing, eating exotically and generally relaxing, we found that news a touch insensitive. At least let us have one night in paradise – and that is what we did. We ate under the stars by candlelight at the picturesque restaurant, each team regaling the others with stories of pure pleasure or sheer hell, depending on who was doing the regaling, and from which perspective.

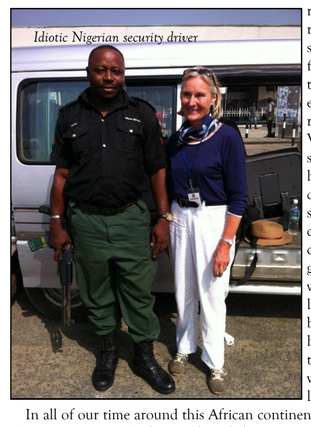
Friday March 25th

Today's leg was to enter Nigeria at Port Harcourt – a destination that would not be high on my wish list of places to visit. And so it was to prove.

At breakfast we discussed the weather. It was not brilliant, but an improvement was forecast with Port Harcourt showing VFR on their Met. report. We left for the airfield after lunch, had the exit stamps put in our passports, completed our checks, and backtracked the runway one at a time, waving to the many people who had come to see us away. An event such as this with half a dozen foreign light aircraft arriving and leaving in a group must be a rare event indeed, and worthy of witnessing for the locals. Our flight was two hours and was with poor visibility which improved as we reached the coast, announced by oil platforms all around with their flare stacks burning with a bright orange flame. There were a complex network of rivers and tributaries of the Niger Delta all along the coast, and the Controller was a busy man shepherding several aircraft to the airfield. He could probably have done without six light aircraft arriving to further complicate his day, and we were all vectored in a huge arc between sixteen and nineteen miles wide to avoid his other traffic. He was surprisingly efficient and unflustered, and got us all down on the ground without drama where, to our great relief, our drums of fuel were waiting for us. By the time we had refuelled it was nearly dark and we started to deal with the usual myriad of airport formalities, which would seem to take forever. Our passports were taken away for scrutiny and we waited and waited and waited. The pavement outside Port Harcourt terminal is not a great place to pass the time of day, and particularly after nightfall. There were people everywhere, and one suspects not all at the airport for the purpose of travel. We were advised to keep together in a group, and so we did, sitting on our rucksacks and suitcas-

es whilst Sam tenderly persuaded the officials who were holding our passports for scrutiny that we were not drug runners. After an hour and a half Sam reappeared triumphantly holding our passports.

On the British government website concerning travel in Nigeria it exhorts great caution to be taken. Kidnappings of foreigners is not a rare event in Nigeria. For this reason Sam had been persuaded by one of our group (he of Quelimane fame) that greater precautions than normal should be exercised, by means of an armed guard to escort us both to and from the airport to our hotel. We approached the car park in a protective group and located a couple of beat up Nissan people carriers with two burly black men with 'Police' on the back of their shirts, standing by it, and holding AK47's. We loaded up and the policeman in the passenger seat laid his large rifle across his knee, and remained completely expressionless for the entire journey. Our driver was introduced to us as the force's best driver, and let it be known that he had no intention of stopping for anyone until we got to our hotel, as only five days ago three Europeans were kidnapped on this road and were still missing (or so he said). The drive to our hotel was without doubt the most dangerous forty minutes any of us had ever experienced. We sped at the maximum speed that this tired old Nissan could muster, without let up. How we were not killed by this idiotic driver remains an enduring mystery. We swerved around the numerous potholes into the path of oncoming traffic, avoiding head on collisions by micro seconds. We raced over cross roads without stopping, and forced our way through non-existent gaps at roundabouts. When there was stationary traffic he merely raced down the opposite carriageway challenging oncoming traffic to get out of our way, with the lights on full beam and his hand hard on the horn. There were few street lights to help.


Idiotic Nigerian security driver

In all of our time around this African continent, it was the only time we were genuinely scared, and that was at the hands of the police who thought they were trying to do us a favour. Tomorrow we reverse the journey – but in daylight.

Our hotel was grotty although it delighted in the name of Bay Marriott Garden City Hotel; a bigger misnomer would be hard to conceive. It had nothing whatever to commend it, and the bed was categorically the worse we had ever slept in, and that is saying something. It was surrounded by a double row of high metal fencing and sturdy gates as a fortification. We were advised not to leave the hotel or the compound until we were collected in the morning by our crack driver and his silent sidekick. The return journey to the airport seemed a little tamer as we could see what was going on around us and we had asked the driver to be more considerate as he had scared the shit out of us all the night before. He was genuinely surprised by that request and it seems to dent his pride in his driving somewhat.

Saturday March 26th

It was with a great sense of relief that we were airborne late morning and left Port Harcourt behind us. A depressing place indeed. We still had to make another stop in Nigeria, and this was at Kano, 450 miles further north. It was an unpleasant flight with extremely poor visibility and moderately turbulent to boot. Constant radio contact was required between the Foxes to maintain safe separation. The runway at Kano only became visible at three miles out – God Bless those little GPS gadgets! We parked as directed in the middle of a vast apron and, having refuelled efficiently locked and covered our planes, and made our way to the terminal. Halfway there a little man came over and said we had to move all of our planes to a different spot because some dignitary was going to arrive sometime or other. This seemed a completely unnecessary request as the apron was at least 15 acres in size with just our 6 aircraft and one jet parked on it. There were probably another 13 acres unoccupied. The other five aircraft reluctantly moved theirs, but with Fox 4 chocked, locked and covered, I couldn't face it and she remained in splendid isolation all on her own in the middle. I don't think another aircraft or dignitary ever did turn up!

We stayed in the Central Hotel, renamed from the Grand hotel, and it was anything but. Sam said it would not be as good as the Port Harcourt hotel, which was a depressing thought, but in the event it was about on a par. The dining room had one long table in the middle of it with some tatty plastic chairs. There was nothing on the table and no cutlery, and there was no obvious kitchen. Gradually a few people appeared and beers were brought, and eventually rather tired chicken and chips appeared from some distant unseen kitchen. By 8 pm most people had eaten and drunk and as there was nothing else to do, they gradually all drifted off to bed. We were keen to leave this equally depressing place

Sunday March 27th

The weather forecast was terrible. A high pressure system had settled over the area trapping dust and sand in the atmosphere, creating almost nil visibility en route and an RVR of 2000 metres at Agadez in Niger. There was blue sky above, if only we could climb above the dusty murk. It was decided that Sam would go with Helmut in the turbine Cessna to Agadez, taking Annette with them, and report back via his satellite phone as to conditions both en route and at the destination. Adam would remain behind as my passenger, and to be in charge of those left behind. The reasoning was first that Helmut had a full instrument rating and second, being with a turbine engine, if he had to return to Kano then there would be plenty of Jet A1 fuel for him to refill with – an option that was not available to us Avgas-powered aircraft who had carefully calculated supplies that did not lend themselves to this sort of potential diversion.

We twiddled our thumbs, having worked our way into the VIP terminal and drank coffee for two and a half hours. Sam called to say they had landed at Agadez, but that the visibility was poor. The choice was ours but obviously we didn't want to stay in Nigeria another night – it was a place that did nothing to impress us. We left, climbing to FL085, but the blue sky remained stubbornly out of view above. We flew along on instruments for three hundred miles talking to the other Foxes and trusting our faithful GPS's. Pinpointing the airfield we descended, and at less than 1000' we saw the runway in our 12 o'clock with a little over a mile to run. We all arrived safely and were relieved to be shot of Nigeria.

Niger is one of the poorest countries in Africa. We left the airfield and drove along dirt tracks lined with shacks and table tops selling various sad looking goods and food. The shacks consisted of nothing more than a few poles holding up bits of sackcloth. Some of the stalls were barbequing chicken and lamb ribs which looked very tasty, but we were taken to our hotel for the night, the Hotel Auberge d'Azel, which was secluded behind a wall and turned out to be a delightful Moroccan style oasis in the middle of this dry and barren land where everything worked – even the Wi-Fi. Four of us wandered around this shabby village during the early evening and met a Tuareg silversmith eager to sell his wares and who invited us to follow him to his little shop where his family made all his wares. It was, he said, just around the corner and we obediently followed him down street after dusty street, turning this way and that, and it was always 'just a couple more streets and we'll be there'. I became seriously uneasy that we were getting a long way from the main street and the safety of our hotel and eventually I called a halt, much to the disappointment of our guide. I could see that it would have been all too easy to have been suddenly surrounded and relieved of anything we might have had on us, and so I led a hasty retreat back to the hotel. The next morning he appeared in our hotel courtyard and set out his necklaces and silverware on a colourful rug, whilst we had our breakfast. Various bargains were struck accompanied by much bartering to reduce the prices which had undoubtedly been raised to begin with – so honour was satisfied all round.

Monday March 28th

We retraced our dusty journey to the airfield for an early departure – the forecast was for more low drifting sand to build up during the day. Again Helmut took off early for an assessment of the visibility while we listened out on the radio. Reporting similar conditions to yesterday, we threw caution to the winds and took off to follow Helmut, deciding that high flight would again be the best option. Again we staggered along at varying altitudes trying not to bump into one another as we could see nothing either forwards or downwards for three and a quarter hours. And so we had flown the whole way across Niger without seeing anything of the country, save for our pleasant stay in Agadez.

A slight improvement in the visibility for the last 40 miles enabled us to see the runway from 5 miles out, and as we approached I couldn't help but think of Steve Noujaim and his recent record breaking run Southend – Cape Town – Southend to beat Alex Henshaw's longstanding record, using Tamanrasset as his first stop on his way South and his last stop 2 days later on his way back to clinch the record. The airfield sat in isolation in the desert, a long strip of tarmac used jointly by the civil and the military. There were smiles all around as they brought us forms to fill in – two copies please – but the smiles rapidly evaporated when the drums of fuel arrived. They were replaced by deep suspicion as to its provenance. "What was in the drums?" (Pretty obvious really) "Had duty been paid?" etc. etc. We tried to convince them that it was Algerian fuel, bought in Algeria and would be used in Algeria, but they summoned their superiors to adjudicate on the matter who confirmed that it was all above board, and so the smiles returned again and we set about refuelling.

We were met by Claudia La Suisse in whose Gites Saharien tourist camp we were staying. She and her husband, both Swiss, came to Tamanrasset and bought the piece of land and developed it for the tourist trade twenty years previously. Claudia had lost her husband a number of years previously to a sudden heart attack and had subsequently remarried a camel breeder from Agadez in Niger. He had his business down south, and she still ran the lodging camp in Tamanrasset, but the tourist trade had suffered badly for some years, and most particularly after the kidnap of tourists in 2003. The only way that they could see one another was to get on an aeroplane for the journey, because the risk of a bandit ambush on the main road south, even to Algerian nationals was far too high to risk driving.

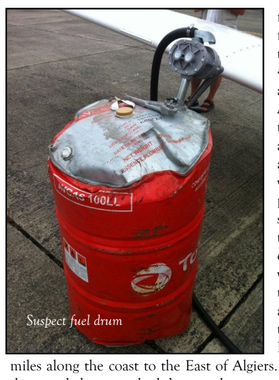
She took us on a tour of the town and we visited a large Souk before arriving at her camp which had a large gravelly courtyard with trees and shrubs, and around which were a collection of simple dwellings. The communal shower and toilet blocks were all but en suite and this freaked out a number of the team who refused to stay there opting instead for the local government run Hotel Tahat, which at least had en suite facilities. In the face of very difficult tourist times for Claudia, it was a big slap in the face and was, I thought extremely rude to her, and embarrassing for Sam who had laid it on for us. Annette and I, Richard and Wendy in Fox 7, and also Sam and Adam stayed in the camp and had a simple yet comfortable night.

We all ate at Claudia's that night in the open air sitting cross-legged on cushions laid out around large round copper table tops on low wooden frames arranged on colourful rugs and mats. We enjoyed eating couscous and lamb stew from a single communal bowl in the centre of each table. We were allowed to use spoons rather than eat the traditional way with one's fingers, and it was courteous to eat only from the segment in front of you – although tunnelling into the central pile to cause lumps of meat to avalanche to your corner was permitted. Much cunning rivalry was displayed in this way. Dessert was individual chocolate pots which neutralised the rivalry, and then we drank tea which had been prepared with much ceremony during the previous twenty minutes by boiling and pouring and boiling and pouring until we were finally given small glasses into which the tea was poured from a height of two feet or more in an arcing stream without a drop being spilt. Meal over, the town party went their way, whilst we stayed sitting in wonderment under the bright stars unpolluted by artificial light, finally creeping off to bed in our little huts with their outside communal toilets.

Tuesday March 29th

Today we had an early start for our flight to El Golea via a refuelling stop at In Salah. The visibility was a big improvement on the previous three flights that we had had from Nigeria, but there was a strong quartering crosswind to test our landing techniques at In Salah after three and a half hours flying. Refuelling went well from barrels in the very hot and searing winds, and when completed we took off for the remaining 200 miles to El Golea.


El Golea terminal buildings


Suspect fuel drum

for the 400 mile flight to Algiers (and the thought of that 4* hotel!), and set off after our colleagues. After we had been in the air for an hour and a half I was aware that my phone was vibrating in my pocket with a message. Sam was texting to say they had encountered bad weather within seventy miles of Algiers and the three of them had diverted to Bejaia, one hundred miles along the coast to the East of Algiers. There was no avgas there and they now hadn't enough to get to Algiers with a safe reserve and he wanted the three of us to divert there also to bring what spare fuel we had with us to help them out. There followed a discussion between the three of us on our chat frequency for nearly half an hour to decide what to do. Eventually Fox 2 decided to go as they had plenty of spare in their tanks which they could drain out to help the others. Helmut in Fox 3 also went there as he could be used to shuttle to Algiers to get spare avgas if all else failed. I decided to go direct to Algiers since the spare 25 litres that I carried in a can on the back seat would only have been useful to top up my own tanks to complete the divert and it would therefore have been pointless me diverting also.

As I got closer to Algiers with a bit of high-ish ground in the area, there were several large rain cells reaching down to the surface which required substantial manoeuvring to avoid, but eventually we found a clear track and the ground began to lower. Calling Algiers approach we got no response even after many attempts and as we were now within 25 miles of the airport we were beginning to wonder whether we had the right frequency, despite checking and rechecking many times. After a while a Scandinavian airliner came to our assistance with a relay, and we eventually were able to make direct contact with the approach frequency – but not until we were within 15 miles of the field. A greaser of a landing pleased me no end, which was followed by a very long taxi back to the GA apron, when, BANG, my starboard main wheel tyre burst and I came to an ignominious halt in the


Fox 4 - puncture in Algiers

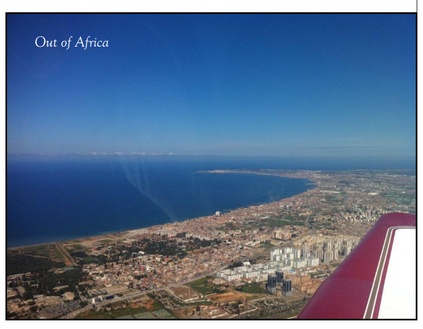
middle of the commercial link lane to the threshold. I informed the tower who immediately told me to exit the link to clear the route for their airliners, but as I was unable to move, the airliners had to divert around me.

There followed lots of official people milling around scratching their heads, including the airfield manager who became very agitated by my presence and demanded to know why I was there – had I permission to be in Algeria, where had I come from, did I not know the weather was not VFR and my colleagues had all diverted (the metar for the field was definite VFR) etc. etc. I advised him to listen to the airfield weather for himself and he would see it was clearly reporting VFR conditions. Since this was doing nothing to help the situation he eventually called engineering who appeared and jacked the plane up when I was able to easily remove the wheel and give them my second spare tube (lucky, or what!!) to make a repair for me. While I was sitting there like a lame duck, the other five aircraft reappeared and landed after their diversion to Bejaia, and all taxied past me with incredulity and some amusement. Eventually engineering reappeared with the repaired wheel and then there were smiles all around as I was able to unblock their precious link lane and taxi away to our parking spot.

We were pleased to check into our western style hotel, the El Djazair, which had clean towels, toilet paper and loos that flushed, hot water and crisp clean bed sheets, and a nice restaurant to match. We were indeed back to 4* accommodation and one flight away from the finishing post in Ibiza.

Thursday March 31st

It was now the last day of March and the morning was fine, as it had been for most of the days we had spent around Africa. Yesterday someone had used a false passport at the airfield, and so security was extra tight with armed security checkpoints every hundred yards or so. Thus the security procedures were even more tedious than usual. The departure briefing was for an IFR clearance to the FIR boundary where we could then convert to VFR flight – they would not allow us to depart VFR. Unfortunately they failed to make us aware that we had slot times, and so when we were ready to depart and called up for clearance, four of the six of us were told we had already missed our departure slot times and had to await new slots to be issued by Brussels Eurocontrol. This was a very tedious wait of an hour and a half twiddling our thumbs by our aircraft. Eventually we departed and had a trouble free flight, kissing a final goodbye to Africa as we coasted out and shortly thereafter sighted Ibiza and a welcome reuniting with Europe.


Out of Africa

Knowing via a listening watch that the Mooney had been cleared to land on Runway 10, we were surprised to be given Runway 36 to land on, and when querying the runway we were informed that Runway 10 was blocked. We discovered that the Mooney had suffered a burst nose wheel tyre while taxiing in, and was obstructing the runway exit. Landing was no big issue as the wind was fairly benign, and as we backtracked after our own landing we started to take the brand new fast turnoff back to the terminal, but noticed to our horror that it was still works-in-progress with a sharp 9" drop off and no barriers to protect it. We rapidly veered away from it and continued to the end of the runway and took the established and original taxiway back. Having parked the aircraft I went to see the Mooney to see what their problem was and found the fire truck there and lots of people milling around its nose wheel which was in a sorry state of health, and very flat at the bottom, although the tyre casing seemed OK. Fox 2 carried no spares, but I had asked my engineer to put a spare tube into my spares kit before setting off from the UK, so took Derek from the Mooney to investigate the size. We hoofed out all of our suitcases and general detritus to get to the bowels of my luggage compartment and found a sealed box with not one, but two new tubes – which were the exact size of the Mooney nose wheel. How fortunate was that!

While we were pondering the problems with Fox 2, the fire truck sped away from the scene towards the threshold of Runway 36. As we watched him go, we noticed a lone figure walking briskly from the threshold toward the terminal, and this turned out to be Joe, the Frenchman who had joined the group for the northbound leg as the safety pilot for Alain in Fox 6. As he passed, he said he would not fly with Alain any more as he feared for his life! What had happened was that after landing on runway 36, Alain had, like us, backtracked and seen the new fast turn off, failed to notice that there was a 9" drop off the edge, and bounced over it with extreme good fortune that he did not damage his prop. Once he was in these works-in-progress there was no way back and so he continued taxiing. Unfortunately it had a liberal coating of wet tar which Alain taxied through with increasing urgency but decreasing progress until just before the other end and in sight of the safety of the taxiway, he could go no further as all his wheels were gummed up with wet tar. The fire truck had to throw him a tow line which Alain tied onto the nose leg, getting his shoes liberally coated with tar while so doing, and which he subsequently transferred to the cockpit carpet. Once pulled clear of the tar, Joe leapt out and stormed off in a fit of Gallic shrugging and French expletives, leaving Alain to taxi his now tar-bespattered aircraft to parking. The fire truck had probably had its busiest day of its career!

A while later Fox 2's nose wheel was repaired, and at the same time one of the main wheels given more air as it also seemed very underinflated, and then we all set off for the hotel which Sam had warned us that although the best in town, was 'very basic'. That could well have been the understatement of the whole trip. To be as kind as possible to it, it was just plain appalling! The rooms were an unhygienic box with no bed linen as we Westerners know it; the only two loos for the whole set of rooms were at one end of the corridor – one of which was just a 'long-drop', a hole in the ground with two marks as to where you should place your feet, and the other had a sit-down loo, with a cistern around six feet above it, but no connecting pipe work from one to the other. Instead 'flushing' consisted of the application of a small handheld spray unit, the efficacy of which I shall leave to your imagination. For us men


Street barbecue in Agadez

folk it was just plain disgusting, but for the girls it really was the last straw. The restaurant – deemed to be the best in town – did not fill us with confidence, sadly borne out by Adam being extremely unwell in the night and suffering for most of the day until his ongoing sickness had completely emptied his stomach of all the unhygienic food from the hotel.

Wednesday March 30th

The return to the airfield couldn't come soon enough to get away from the ghastly El Golea hotel to make our way to our final African destination of Algiers where we knew that at last we would have the comfort of a 4* hotel – but first we had to get there. The plan was that Sam would now be Alain's safety pilot and Joe would take his place in Fox 3 with Helmut. On arrival back at the airfield Fox 2's main wheel which had been re-inflated yesterday was again at half mast – clearly there was a hole in the tube. While Derek and Bernhard decided as to what to do about their wheel, Sam took off with Alain in Fox 6 for Algiers closely followed by Richard and Wendy in Fox 7 and Alistair and Charlie in Fox 5. Helmut and I decided that we were not prepared to go and leave the Mooney's crew on their own, until we were sure that their wheel was repaired – just re-inflating it again was not an option, as it would have been a recipe for a blow-out either on take-off or landing. Adam was still being very unwell and was lying in the shade of the Cessna wing; Joe was sitting lonely and waiting in the terminal.

Not without difficulty, Bernhard, Helmut and I jacked the Mooney up and took the wheel off, and Bernhard set off into town to seek out a tyre repair man. In Africa, the one thing that is a universal skill is repairing tyres, and sure enough a repair man was found in a little hut on the side of the road. Quickly taking the wheel apart and discovering a fold in the inner tube which had chafed into a small hole, he confidently vulcanised a patch onto the hole, with the warning that he could not guarantee it for more than a thousand miles! Bernhard was prepared to take that risk (it would probably have meant about another 10 years flying to achieve that) The repair man asked one Euro for his trouble and probably thought his Christmases and birthdays had all come at once when he was given ten Euros.

While the tyre was being repaired, Derek was pre-flighting Fox 2, and discovered to his horror that his fuel had considerable water in it. It took ten samples to clear all the water from the right tank and the left tank was no better. Fortunately my samples were all OK – clearly there had been one barrel that was very dodgy and Fox 2 had been unfortunate to have had it all. Just before lunch the remaining three aircraft were ready

After very slow refuelling undertaken by one man who had many jobs at the same time, we departed for the Ocean Hotel where we shared hugs, congratulations and a glass of champagne with each other, and prepared for a celebratory dinner that evening with speeches all round.

Friday April 1st

The weather over France looked good and the prospect of a clear run home looked promising. We had a good breakfast and shared a taxi to the airport with Derek and Bernhard flight planning direct Limoges where we arrived without incident three and a half hours later, refuelled and filed a further flight plan direct to Stones Farm, and then went to have some lunch in the airport café. Personally refuelled, we returned to the plane and requested start clearance to be told that Toulouse didn't have our flight plan and that we would have to re-file it. This lost us an hour which was very frustrating at this final stage in our journey, but eventually we departed and arrived back at Stones Farm at the end of a most amazing flying adventure at 18.05 on April Fool's day.

Conclusion

Few of the team knew each other before departure, but we bonded well, shared in the good times together and and supported each other to solve the crisis moments as they arose. Many new friendships were made. Had the start been delayed another week, then both the Egyptian and Libyan airspace would have been closed and the trip would not have happened.

It was a steep learning curve for us all – none more so than for Sam who worked incredibly hard to solve every problem as it came along. There were many 'what if' occasions when it was painful for us, such as the loss of the Crusader in the Sudan, and the presence of the British Ambassador on that very day, the fortune of having two spare tubes of the correct size when needed, and the expertise, albeit a bit rough and ready, of engineering skills to solve problems as they arose – but that is what makes an adventure. Without Sam's knowledge of Africa and its people and his long list of contacts (some of whom undeniably let him down at crucial moments), and of course his belief and determination that the mission would not fail, I doubt the journey would have been possible. An enormous thank you is due to him from all the participants.



It was not a trip for softies and the two girls, Annette and Wendy, earned admiration from all for their continuous good humour and unflinching support for their pilots. Not having their own piloting skills, it was probably harder for them than for any other member of the team.

Statistics

We were away for 57 days
We visited 21 different countries, of which 16 were in Africa
We flew a total of 120.15 hours
We did 54 landings during the trip (including one go-around!)
The longest leg was 4.05 hours (+ two more of 4.00 hours)
The maximum height we achieved was 11,500 feet
We refuelled from barrels on 21 different occasions
We used a total of 4,673 litres of fuel (no, don't even ask!)

Aircraft serviceability

In general all the aircraft maintained pretty good serviceability with problems solved, or deferred until the halfway point in South Africa, or arrival home – which was just as well because a major problem would have incurred a massive logistical engineering solution with having to fly engineers in from maybe many hours away.

Fox 1 - Cessna Crusader - Nose gear collapsed in the Sudan – aircraft destroyed.

Fox 2 - Mooney Turbo - Landing gear door link broken – Pointe Noir – in house repair - Two punctures at El Golea – in house repair - Water in fuel at El Golea - drained clear - Clogged filters causing autopilot to continually drop off line - Cleaned after returning home.

Fox 3 - Cessna - Low oil pressure in Bazaruto resort - loose wire on sender unit - Magnetic chip showing metal particles - in house cleaning.

Fox 4 - Robin Regent - Failed tacho cable - replaced at 50 hour check in Stellenbosch - Low oil pressure Cape Town to Keetmanshoop - spurious reading - Main wheel puncture in Algiers - repaired on field.

Fox 5 - MCR 4 - Water in mogas collected on Principe island - drained clear.

Fox 6 - Piper Archer - Flat battery in Johannesburg - replaced at 50 hour check - Taxied into wet tar at El Golea - seriously dented pride!

Fox 7 - Grumman Traveller - Hot running engine most of southbound - baffles repositioned correctly at 50 hour check in Stellenbosch.

Fox 8 - Robinson R44 - Failed to restart after putting down in Sudanese desert for refuelling - Hot starting problem nearly resulting in flat battery. (Did not participate in northbound - disassembled and shipped home.)

The cost of the trip was high and the experience unforgettable, but Annette and I would have never have dreamed of undertaking it without the knowledge and expertise of Sam to help and guide us. But remember, memories can never be taken away from you.

Martin Gosling