

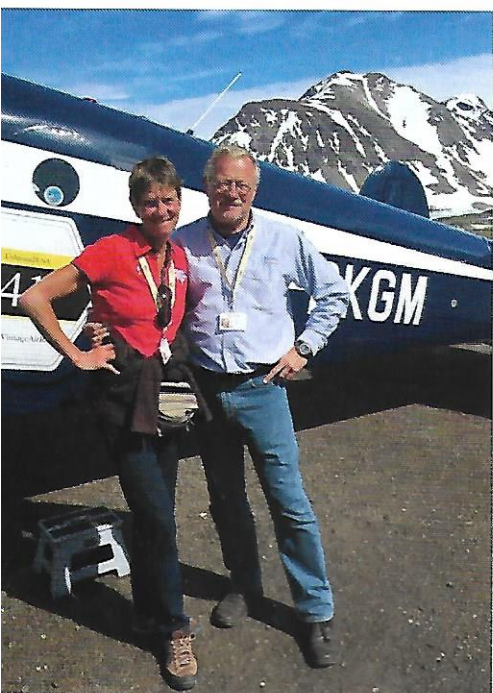


# On the Beech



© Anne Herbert

The first leg of an ambitious attempt to fly around the world by vintage aeroplane and balloon saw Phil and Allie Dunnington heading from Bristol to Toronto, Canada, via Iceland and Greenland, grabbing opportunities to fly their ultra-lightweight rig where no one had flown a hot air balloon before. **Allie Dunnington** tells the story...



Paula Froehlich  
© Phil Dunnington.

## *The Background Story*

Thirteen years on from the day I got married to a crazy balloonist called Phil Dunnington, I find myself having flown balloons in now 85 countries of the world including some more remote and difficult ones such as Fiji, Ghana, Swaziland, Bolivia, Albania, Andorra, Laos and a few more! The race is on, although I am only fourth in rank of countries flown, still behind Phil, with his world record of 113 countries. Our dilemma is always time and the fact that most countries that are left for Phil to claim are inaccessible by road or even boat.

Left: After three years of planning, the adventure becomes reality for Allie and Phil Dunnington.

Above: The Beech 18 and companion hot air balloon looking classically smart in their matching livery.

The clever man therefore had come up with the dream of acquiring a Beech 18 aeroplane – which is just the perfect size to be able to carry a lightweight balloon. And then fate struck: during an air-show, he fell in love! Not with me again, I hasten to add, but with *Betty!*

Built for the Royal Canadian Air Force as a navigation trainer in 1952, this Beech was for sale and with Phil's mum's legacy in the bank, we decided to go for the big adventure. But the dream quickly turned into a nightmare as we found that the aeroplane had been badly maintained and that it was rather difficult to find pilots who were capable of flying a

vintage, twin-engine, tailwheel aeroplane and who would be adventurous enough for this unique challenge. To cut a long story short: it took us three years, lots of headaches and a seriously drained bank account to finally have a serviceable aeroplane and to find the right pilot for this crazy plan!

## On Our Way to Iceland

As the whole project was Bristol-focused (and indeed the aircraft resplendent in 'Bristol Airways' titles) departure from Bristol International Airport was natural. Our new Cameron O-56 – a specially-designed ultra-lightweight balloon – was loaded aboard the Beech and with media in attendance the world's first balloon and aeroplane adventure was finally on its way!

Flying VFR and navigating through tricky UK airspace, piloted by John Herbert from South Africa, we arrived safely in breezy and much cooler Wick, Scotland. Here we joined two other aircraft: a home-built RV 8 (G-RRVV) flown by Mark Albery and Rogier Westerhuis, and a Piper Saratoga (N3999) piloted by Sam Rutherford, our expedition leader, together with Vintage Air Rally's colleague and photographer Jeremy Martin, film-maker Timothy Allen, and journalist Paula Froehlich from New York.

After a safety briefing about ditching in the ice sea (great prospect indeed!) we started our first major sea crossing heading north to Iceland. After just over three hours, passing the Orkneys and Faroes, we landed at Egilstadir, Iceland.

As Phil had already flown in Iceland in 1983 (34 years ago!), the pressure was on me to get things organised to fly our new balloon here. Having sourced propane from a local petrol station, disappointment quickly overtook initial enthusiasm as it started to pour with rain and none of our adapters would fit the Icelandic connectors for refuelling!

## Ballooning in Iceland

In the end, it took me nearly 24 hours to get the refuelling sorted and by then it was late morning and quite a strong breeze was blowing down the runway.



© Allie Dunnington

Nevertheless, the inflation went well and I whizzed off solo. Phil reckons that I can claim to be the first female pilot ever to have flown in this amazing country with only three others including him to have flown there before. Heading out over an inhospitable landscape full of rocks and water I landed with a good long, but fun drag-landing on the grass side of the runway. Country no. 84 safely in my books. What a relief! Helped by local airport staff we were soon back to our aeroplanes and ready to cross Iceland for Isafjordur.

But then disaster struck: as we taxied to the end of the runway, the RV suffered a sudden tyre fire. The airport fire services promptly attended with two immense vehicles to deal with their first-ever 'live' fire. After a four-hour delay, we set off to fly in close formation across the vast expanses of northern Iceland to Isafjordur with a scary landing on a very tight runway sandwiched between the icy sea on one side and tall snow mountains on the other. I thought at one stage we'd crash!

The next morning saw a complete change in weather: it was very cold and grey, and low cloud presented a serious hazard for departure. Certainly not ideal conditions for a long distance flight to Greenland! Sure enough the clag persisted and at FL75 we started picking up ice on the wings and screen. A 'dirty dive' to 1,250ft above the sea sorted that out before breaking into the clear for a CAVOK arrival into Kulusuk's gravel strip.

Above: *Betty* stands alone in the desolate environment of Iqateq, which is strewn with the rusting hulks of US Army trucks.



© Allie Dunnington

Above: Space at a premium. Phil checks the neatly-packed balloon rig, before it is stowed inside *Betty* the Beech.

What a relief to be safely on the ground again. And in what stunning scenery! This is icy Greenland – even in midsummer!

## Flight to Bluie East Two

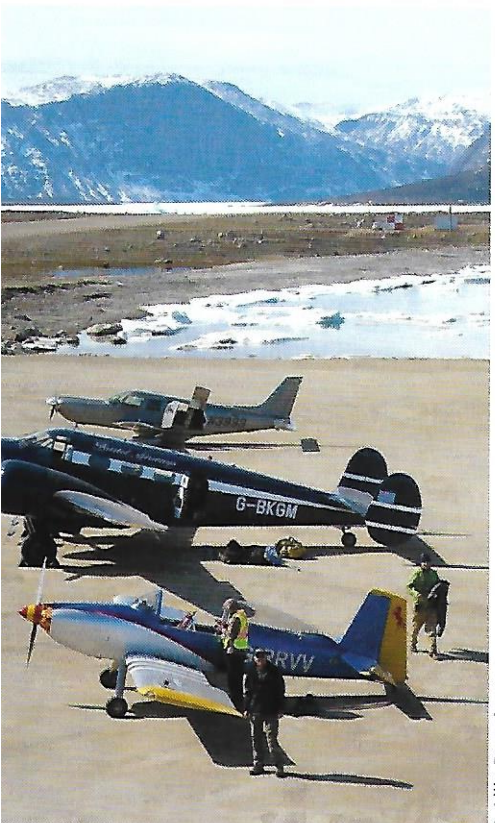
The airport at Kulusuk had replaced a wartime strip at Iqateq, better known then as Bluie East Two, and we were keen to be the first fixed-wing visitors for nearly seventy years. It is a mass of thousands of rusting fuel drums, collapsed hangars and derelict US Army trucks. The Beech was chosen as 'lead' for the RV and Sam's Saratoga because it



Above: The first ever free flight by balloon in Narsarsuaq, Greenland...



Below: ...is followed by another 'first', an aeroplane balloon retrieve.



Above: The three aircraft in the Vintage Air Rally prepare to take off from Qik, Canada.

has big tyres and the strip was reported to be loose gravel. Just how loose became evident when, after two low-and-slow passes, John put G-BKGM down only to sink into the soft surface.

No roads lead to uninhabited Ikateq, so outside help was discounted and we warned the other two aircraft not to follow. They cruised around for half an hour whilst John managed to get unbogged and we found a firmer strip for departure. Nail-biting indeed as John used sand-strip techniques learned in Africa to reduce drag and build speed, but we made it back to Kulusuk for a chastened (and expensive) beer.

## Over the Greenland Icecap

Kulusuk to Narsarsuaq promised stunning views of the Greenland ice-cap and its adjacent coastal mountains. We were not disappointed, and managed to avoid a once-common fate of landing by mistake in the white-out where ice, snow and cloud merge.

Narsarsuaq, a favourite for ferrying aircraft of all sizes, was our second balloon opportunity, with Phil and I making what we believe to be the first ever free flight by balloon in Greenland. Add to that accolade the chance to taxi the Beech to the runway end, offload the balloon, inflate, fly to the parking apron, then collect and repack with the faithful Beech 'retrieve', and you have a historic first.

Leaving Narsarsuaq was discouraged by their ATC chief due to strong winds 26G 36kt, but our pilots all agreed that if it was too bumpy we'd just turn back. In the event, after the initial climb-out, the ride was pretty good and we set course for Nuuk (formerly Godthab), capital of Greenland. As a capital it doesn't seem to have much to offer, but pilot/controller Tom and his visiting German seaplane *Examiner* made us very welcome and we partied on into the 'night' (which of course was actually daylight at that latitude).

## Across to Remote Arctic Canada

Heading next for Canada we finally felt like the continental transition was 'for real'. Mind you, the sole RCMP police lady at 'Qik' (Qikiqtarjuaq to be correct, if unpronounceable!) welcomed us to

Canada "as long as you're not bringing any alcohol with you" (as if!). The locals were queuing for free-issue seal meat – not for the squeamish. No (aircraft) AVGAS here, so we topped up with unapproved (car) MOGAS and were none the worse for it.

Our departure towards Iqaluit (capital of Nunavut, Canada's far north) routed us past Mount Thor, allegedly the tallest sheer vertical rockface in the world at 4,100ft, and on via Pangnirtung. En route, we circled a crashed, but intact, DC-3, which had run out of fuel in 1973. Only when we reached Iqaluit's surprisingly sophisticated airport did we find our hotel booking had evaporated because the Prince of Wales was due to fly in next day on a Royal visit. More to the point we needed to be 'out-of-there' before HRH's aircraft blocked our progress.

## Ballooning in Canada

From Iqaluit the flight was straightforward, if less spectacular and, after a comfortable night at a curious B&B run by energetic 70 year old Clara in Schefferville, we arrived at our chosen finishing point, Sorel Airport, east of Montreal. Here for the first time we got weathered out, but it gave us a day to desperately seek long-term hangarage for the Beech.

Having not been able to balloon further up North – due to melting of the sea ice – I was very keen to get country no. 85 in my logbook before I lost our team and balloon! So despite the slightly grim looking weather with low cloud and potential rain, I took to the skies with Tim in very light and variable winds. Considering the washed-out state of the crop fields we were lucky to end up with a dry balloon.

Having already parted with our RV friends in Schefferville, it was time to wave farewell to Sam, Paula, Tim and Jeremy as our team carried on for three hours heading West towards Edenvale, a private airport north of Toronto. We landed between heavy rain showers, but were immediately greeted by the friendly team of Edenvale. G-BKGM now shares a hangar with one of the few remaining Avro Lancaster bombers, which is awaiting its re-assembly.

John rushed to connect straight to a training course in Seattle whilst we decided that we needed a break from our



© Timothy Allen

Above: Tim Allen, in one of the other Vintage Air Rally aircraft, captures a stunning image of *Betty* the Beech flying over Greenland.

over-doses of adrenaline. Hiring a car and shuffling our balloon inside seemed to be the answer. Phil had the clever idea to head south-east towards Post Mills in Vermont, USA, were we planned to reconnect with his long-standing ballooning colleague Brian Boland. Brian is certainly a character!

*Boland's Balloon Museum*

Airfield owner, balloon manufacturer and inventor of the craziest sorts of balloon carriages, Brian has built 148 balloons and flown everything from suspended buses and kayaks, to picnic tables and motorbikes! I was keen to test his home-built light-weight 48. But where to fly here? His 'flying area' literally is ONE huge forest with no clear space!

Never mind, "Sometimes you just drop into the trees", Brian commented on my worries. And indeed our first flight over endless forest and into the setting sun

definitely pumped that adrenalin back into our veins!

I made two more flights, taking off in calm winds, but finding us zooming along at 20kt at 700ft. Saying goodbye to our balloon, which found a space in Brian's amazing balloon museum, we headed finally for our real holiday towards Cape Cod.

Leaving behind both the aeroplane and the balloon, Phil and I felt like bad parents abandoning their children, but we hope to continue the adventure in the spring of 2018, when we will be heading for South and Central America.

Follow Phil and Allie's Balloon & Beech adventure at [www.onthebeech.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.onthebeech.blogspot.co.uk) – and read further instalments in *Aerostat*.

The next Vintage Air Rally is in March/April 2018. Check out the details at: [www.vintageairrally.com/rallies/upcoming/ushuaia2usa](http://www.vintageairrally.com/rallies/upcoming/ushuaia2usa)

Contact the Dunningtons with any ideas for sponsorship and logistical support on subsequent legs of the project.



Above: *Betty's* pilot John Herbert, a key figure in the adventure.

Below: Photographer Tim Allen prepares for flight in Allie's petite folding basket.



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