

**WINTER
2017**

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WORLD**



Beech 18 Saga

Macchi Light Planes

Boulton Paul P.64

Nord 260 and 262

Pacific Aerospace

Russian Navy Flypast

Bristol to Toronto

... By The Back Roads

By Phil Dunnington

Back in the 1990s the germ of an idea embedded itself in my mind. I had already set out in pursuit of most of the countries where it is possible to fly a balloon, – a total of over 50 countries. Challenges of access in the remoter locations seemed an obvious barrier and I decided that the perfect combination would be a venerable (1930s-designed) twin-engined Beech 18 with a lightweight balloon aboard. In 2014, I found a Beech for sale and, with the help of my mother's legacy, bought G-BKGM, built for the Royal Canadian Air Force as a navigation trainer in 1952 and serialled 2324.

The painful process of preparing the Beech technically for our planned westbound journey towards New Zealand was overshadowed by the difficulty of finding pilots willing, able and with the right spirit of adventure to fly the aircraft. Wife Allie and myself are both experienced commercial balloon pilots, but no amount of additional training was going to get us fit to fly the big tailwheel twin. Consequently, a new plan emerged – to take Beech and balloon to the USA, visit the 2017 AirVenture at Oshkosh – and then head down to the Caribbean.



Me and my passenger! The Beech, G-BKGM poses with the Cameron O-56, G-DKGM which made several flights along the route (Anne Herbert).

After several false starts we linked up with John Herbert, a very experienced bush pilot from South Africa. Paperwork had to be converted to allow operation of a UK-registered aeroplane in a range of countries, not to mention the dreaded ELP (English Language Proficiency) certificate just in case John couldn't speak the language! I even applied to the CAA for a 'Dangerous Goods' exemption to allow us to carry the propane needed for balloon flight in remote areas. Meanwhile,

the Beech spent the winter of 2016/17 tucked away on the estate of the Earl of Suffolk & Berkshire near Malmesbury before a pre-departure check with RGV Aviation at Gloucester/Staverton.

As the whole project was Bristol-focused (and indeed the aircraft was resplendent in Bristol Airways' titles) Bristol International was the natural starting point. A specially-designed ultra-lightweight balloon, Cameron O-56, G-DKGM, under construction at Cameron Balloons in the heart of the city was test-flown at Staverton with the Beech on the main apron and was then loaded aboard at Bristol's south side with media in attendance.

The departure date was 20th June, 2017



On the left, the Transatlantic Team. Beech 18, G-BKGM, accompanied by RV-8, G-RRVV, and the Piper PA-32, N3999 – and, above, a pair of happy globetrotters – Allie and Phil Dunnington pose with their faithful Beech 18 (all photos by Phil and Allie Dunnington unless noted).



Above: The Vans gets some attention at Egilstadir following its wheel fire. On the right an emotive shot from the Beech as it heads out over Greenland.



and the world's first balloon and aeroplane adventure was on its way. First stop was Wick in Scotland, where the infamous 'Andrew' of Far North Aviation looks after a constant stream of ocean-crossing aeroplanes in both directions. There we were joined by Vans RV-8 G-RRVV and Piper Saratoga N3999. The RV had been built in USA by Mark Albery, an expat Brit, before initially flying eastbound to UK with the aircraft being based at Enstone. A new job in California had tempted him to make the return westbound crossing with us. The Saratoga, owned by Prepare2Go organiser and ex-Army Air Corps pilot Sam Rutherford, was to be our 'mother ship'.



Above: At Narsarsuaq this Beech C-12 was on its way eastbound to Wiesbaden and, below, another of the breed – a Beech King Air 200, OY-PCL, used by Air Greenland for air ambulance duties, and seen at Nuuk on 26th June, 2017.

Egilstadir, Iceland (with en-route alternate Vagar, Faroes passed in the gloom) was our first overseas stop. All was enlivened by Allie flying our balloon (G-DKGM) down the runway (probably the first woman to fly a balloon in Iceland) and the RV-8 suffering a wheel fire on the runway during our 'streaming' departure. The airport fire service promptly attended with two immense vehicles to deal with their first-ever 'live' fire.



With the Vans duly attended to, it was onward to Isafjordur, via the most spectacular tabular volcanic mountains. Having made an impossible-looking approach for a fjord-side runway we then treated ourselves to an outdoor feast of seafood at the town's traditional restaurant. Leaving the next morning in the cold grey overcast we knew that weather would be critical for the long slog to Kulusuk in eastern Greenland. Robinson R-44 HB-ZLO was parked awaiting suitable conditions to follow us across (but we heard it ultimately had to give up). 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 we broke into the clear for a CAVOK arrival into Kulusuk's gravel strip. From there Bell 412 helicopters, including OY-HCY, run a regular shuttle to nearby Angmassalik. We also found Islander 5X-EMM which was refuelling en route from Cumberland to St Maarten in the Dutch Antilles.

The airport at Kulusuk had replaced a wartime strip at Ikateq, better known then as Bluie East Two, and we were keen to be its first fixed-wing visitors for nearly 70 years. We found it to be a mass of thousands of rusting fuel drums, collapsed hangars and derelict US Army trucks. The Beech was chosen as 'lead ship' ahead of the RV and the Saratoga because it 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 'GM down – only to sink into the soft surface. Since there are no roads leading to uninhabited Ikateq, outside help was impossible, so we warned the other two aircraft not to follow. They cruised around for half an hour whilst John

managed to get unlogged 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.

From 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 Allie and myself making what we believe to be the first ever free-flight by balloon in Greenland. Add to that accolade the chance



Above left: Air Greenland's distinctive red colours were to be seen on the Bell 212 OY-HCY at Kulusuk. Above right: Making a long ferry flight from Scotland to the Caribbean was Islander 5X-EMM.

to taxi the Beech to the runway end, offload the balloon on the 'piano keys', inflate, fly to the parking apron, then collect and repack with our faithful Beech providing 'retrieve', and you have a historic first.

Our vantage point allowed us to inspect a derelict Antonov An-2 (LY-AJG) on the dump and watch as a pair of mysterious-looking 'United States of America' Beech C-12s, 24380 and 40488, made their way to Wiesbaden. Narsarsuaq's ATC chief was not recommending immediate departure due to strong winds of 26kts gusting to 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 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). Nuuk Airport is busy with Air Greenland Dash-8s and their medevac King Air OY-PCL.

Heading next for Canada we finally felt like the continental transition was 'for real'. Mind you the sole RCMP police lady at 'Kik' (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. There was no (aircraft-category) 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 where Eurocopter AS350 C-GNGK was in transit. En route, we circled a crashed but intact Kenting DC-3 (believed to be CF-OOV) which had run out of fuel in 1973. Then, when we reached Iqaluit's surprisingly sophisticated airport we discovered that our hotel booking had evaporated because the Prince of Wales was due to fly in the next day on a Royal visit. More to the point we needed to be 'out-of-there' before



Above: Somewhat of a rarity these days – a Beech King Air 100, C-FAIO, in service with Air Inuit at Schefferville, Quebec. Below: The Twin Otter operator, Ken Borek Air had its aircraft C-FBBV working out of (the hard to spell) Qikiqtarjuaq on Baffin Island.



HRH's aircraft blocked our progress. Dornier 228 C-FEQX was amongst the more interesting types present, along with Embraer Phenom G-CKAZ as far from home as we were.

From Iqaluit onwards was straightforward if less spectacular and, after a comfortable night in Schafferville, Quebec, we arrived at Sorel Airport east of Montreal. This was our chosen finishing point because it was now clear that we would not be able to achieve our Oshkosh goal. Unfortunately a shortage of pilots (and money!) precluded that. Schafferville hosted magnetometer-equipped Navajo C-FVTL, and, on a nearby lake,

abandoned floatplane Cub C-FOIK, whilst Sorel, a club field, saw Murphy floatplane C-FFTI. Here, for the first time, we got weathered out, but it gave us a day for a desperate search for long-term hangarage for the Beech, pending her next adventure in spring, 2018. Fortunately, we were welcomed by the kindly folk of Edenvale, a private airport north of Toronto, where G-BKGM now shares a hangar with one of the few Avro Lancaster bombers still remaining (FM104, formerly on display in Toronto city) which rests awaiting its re-assembly. So, for the Beech and Balloon the Caribbean and Central America beckon . . .



Above left: Transport Canada's DHC-7, C-GCFR, with a rather neat observation turret on the roof and, above right, Air Iceland's Dash-8, TF-FXG. Below left: The captain of the Beech 18, John Herbert, looks out over a snowy Greenland with a good array of navajds to guide him! Finally, seen below right, the Beech at Sorel, near Montreal, after a trip covering 4,000 nm and 35 flying hours. Time for a winter rest!

