

Issue No.123



Autumn 2017

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BRITISH WOMEN PILOTS' ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



EVIE'S GRAND TOUR



PARAGLIDING



FEWP IN PARIS



Allie Dunnington

Beech near Pangnirtung, Arctic Canada



Allie in the Beech cockpit



Greenland Glaciers

TRANS-ATLANTIC IN A BEECH 18

In the thirteen years since I married a crazy balloonist called Phil Dunnington, I have flown balloons in 85 countries including some very remote ones like Fiji, Ghana, Albania, Laos and a few more! However, I am only fourth in rank of countries flown, still behind Phil. Our dilemma is always time and the fact that most countries left for Phil are inaccessible by road or even boat. The clever man therefore came up with the dream of acquiring a Beech 18 – just the perfect size to carry a lightweight balloon. And then fate struck: during an air-show, he fell in love! Not with me again, I hasten to say, but with 'Betty'!

Built for the Royal Canadian Air Force 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 turned into a nightmare, as we found that the aeroplane had been badly maintained, and that few pilots were capable of flying a vintage, twin-engine, tailwheel aeroplane and were adventurous enough for this unique challenge. It took three years, many

headaches and a seriously drained bank account to have a serviceable aeroplane with the right pilot (South African John Herbert) for this crazy plan!

As the whole project was Bristol-focused, departure from Bristol International Airport was natural. Our new Cameron 0-56 – a specially-designed ultra-lightweight balloon - was loaded aboard the Beech and with media in attendance the world's first balloon & aeroplane adventure was finally on its way! Flying VFR and navigating through tricky UK airspace we arrived safely in breezy 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 icy 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.



A passing Aircrew in Kulusuk



Beech and Balloon

As Phil had already flown in Iceland, the pressure was on me to fly our new balloon here! Having sourced propane from a local petrol station, disappointment quickly overtook initial enthusiasm. It poured with rain and none of our adapters would fit the Icelandic connectors for refuelling!

It took nearly 24 hours to get the refuelling sorted and by then it was late morning and a strong breeze was blowing down the runway. Nevertheless, the inflation went well and I whizzed off solo. Phil reckons that I must be the first female balloon pilot to have flown in

Iceland, only three other people including him having flown there before. Heading over an inhospitable landscape of rocks and water I landed with a good long but fun drag-landing on the grass side of the runway. Country number 84 safely completed. What a relief!

We were soon back to our aeroplanes and ready to cross Iceland for Isafjordur. But, as we all 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.



Passing Mount Thor

After a 4-hour delay, we flew in close formation across northern Iceland to Isafjordur with a scary landing on a very tight runway sandwiched between icy and tall snow mountains. I thought at one stage we'd crash!

The next morning was cold and grey with low cloud, not ideal conditions for a 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 1250ft sorted that out before breaking into the clear for a CAVOK arrival into Kulusuk's gravel strip. What a relief to be safely on the ground again. And in

what stunning scenery! This is icy Greenland – even in midsummer!

The airport at Kulusuk, however, had replaced a wartime strip at Ikateq, known then as Blue East Two, and we were keen to be the first fixed-wing visitors for nearly seventy years. It is a mass 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 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.

Kulusuk to Narsarsuaq promised stunning views of the Greenland ice-cap and its adjacent coastal mountains. Narsarsuaq, a favourite for ferrying aircraft of all sizes, was our second balloon opportunity, with Phil and myself making what we believe to be the first ever free-flight by balloon in Greenland. ATC at Narsarsuaq discouraged us from leaving due to strong winds but our pilots agreed that if it was too bumpy we'd just turn back. After the initial climb-out the ride was pretty good and we set course for Nuuk (formerly Godthab), capital of Greenland. 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).

Heading for Canada we finally felt that the continental transition was 'for real'. The sole RCMP 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-issued seal meat - not for the squeamish. No AVGAS here, so we topped up with unapproved MOGAS and were none the worse for it.

The departure towards Iqaluit (capital of Nunavut, Canada's far north) routed us past Mount Thor, allegedly the tallest sheer vertical rock face in the world at 4100ft. When we reached Iqaluit's surprisingly sophisticated airport we found our hotel booking had evaporated because the Prince of Wales was due to fly in next day. More to the point we needed to be 'out-of-there' before HRH's aircraft blocked our progress. 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 we got weathered out, which let us find long-term hangarage for the Beech.

Having not been able to balloon further north – due to melting of the sea ice - I was keen to get country 85 in my logbook. So despite the low cloud and potential rain, I took to the skies with Tim in very light and variable winds.

Having parted with our RV friends in Schefferville, we now waved farewell to Sam, Paula, Tim and Jeremy as we carried on for 3 hours towards Edenvale, a private airport north of Toronto. We landed between heavy rain showers to be greeted by the team at Edenvale. G-BKGM now shares a hangar with one of the few Avro Lancaster bombers still remaining, awaiting re-assembly.

John rushed to a training course in Seattle whilst we hired a car and shuffled our balloon inside. Phil suggested going to Post Mills in Vermont, home of his long-standing ballooning colleague Brian Boland. Brian is certainly a character! Airfield owner, balloon manufacturer and inventor of the craziest sorts of balloon carriages, Brian has flown everything from suspended buses to picnic tables. But where to fly here?? His 'flying area' is ONE huge forest. '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 my veins! I did two more flights taking off in very calm winds but zooming along at 20kt at only 700 ft. Saying goodbye to our balloon which found a space in Brian's museum, we headed for our real holiday in Cape Cod!

Leaving our aeroplane and balloon made us feel like bad parents abandoning their children, but we hope to continue the adventure in spring 2018 heading for South and Central America. Follow us on: www.onthebeech.blogspot.co.uk.

Ideas for sponsorship and logistic support are most welcome.