Transatlantic Trinidad

Something to consider if
you are undergoing a midlife crisis
and a Harley-Davidson doesn't
do it for you

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Foreword

Welcome to the story of my transatlantic flight in a very small aeroplane. The two hundred or so pages that follow are lifted directly from the Blog, an internet diary, that I kept before and during the flight, documenting much of the detail of the planning and the execution of the flight.

Many of the intricacies contained in this story will be of interest primarily to pilots. Hopefully, some of the more human aspects of the account will have rather wider appeal.

The changes over the original web log are mostly typographical, spelling and formatting. The intent was to preserve the original feel of the Blog as far as possible.

I hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoyed the adventure that it describes.

Nigel Webb
April 2005.

January 15, 2005
Getting Started
Welcome to my first experience with a Weblog. This one is designed to tell family and friends about the developing adventures of N33NW, my Socata TB20 Trinidad aircraft, as I prepare to fly it from its home base in England, all the way across the Atlantic to Florida and back.

"November Whiskey" resting over at Vagar (Faroe Islands) on a trip to Iceland last year

The plan is for this voyage of discovery to kick-off just before Easter 2005, in the last half of March. The timing is designed to coincide with school holidays so that my family can fly out, scheduled, to meet me over there. If all goes well, I'll be back home in England by the end of the first week in April.

Preparations are going well. The aircraft is booked in for its annual inspection on February 15th. For the uninitiated, this is the time of year when the mechanics take the aircraft completely apart, looking for trouble, and then, hopefully having found nothing, put it back together again.

Getting into the US as a UK Citizen doesn't normally require a visa. However, once you tell them that you are not intending to use one of the usual airlines, that no longer works. So, I have an interview booked at 09:00 on the 26th of January, down at the American Embassy to be considered for a B-2 visa. This should be a formality, but it is very time-consuming. More of that later no doubt.

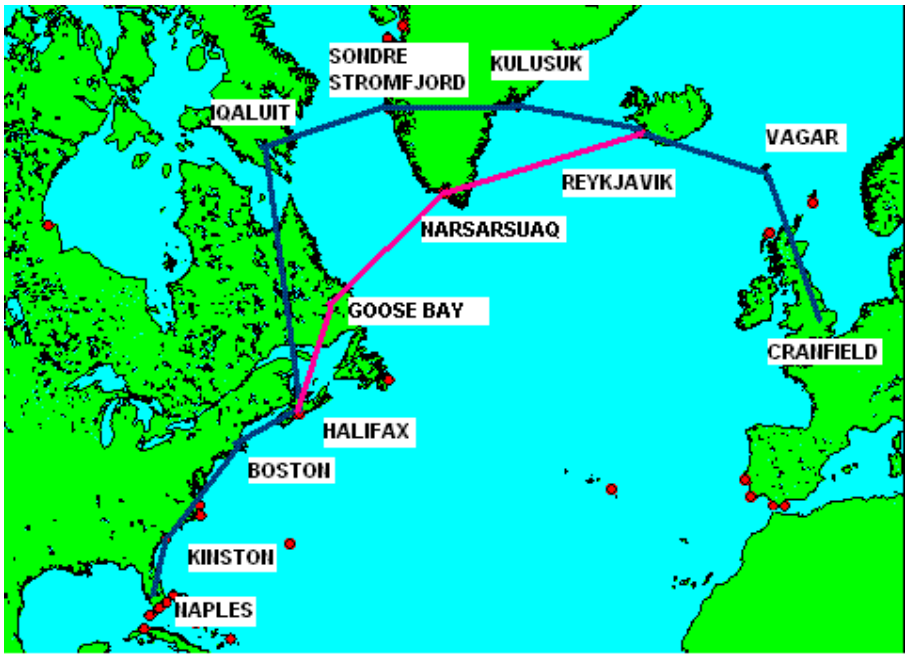
Things are shaping up nicely on the insurance front too. My current aircraft insurance only goes out as far as Iceland. It seems that the brave names of Lloyds start to worry

at the thought of North American third party liability. Hayward's, my usually very helpful Broker took several phone calls before they finally told me that they had no interest in insuring me beyond Iceland and had no advice to offer that would help. Fortunately, I am a member of US AOPA (Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association). A quick query on their online bulletin board and I was put in touch with a US Broker, and things are looking very good so far. Fingers crossed.

January 15, 2005
The Route
There are some very large expanses of inhospitable terrain between the sunny South East of England and the sun-drenched shores of Florida. Getting a small aircraft safely from Cranfield to Naples and back again will therefore require some careful flight planning. That process is far from complete at the moment, but I thought I'd share my current thinking.

Before we start, a little information about the aircraft. N33NW is a Socata Trinidad, powered by a single IO540 engine produced by Lycoming. The IO540 puts out 250HP, drives the aircraft forward at about 155 Knots (that's about 180MPH). To do this, it consumes around 50 Litres of AVGAS 100LL fuel every hour. The aircraft carries 326 Litres of fuel, spread between the two wings. That means that in rough terms, I have 6.5 hours *endurance* until the engine stops, a range of a little over 1000 miles. In reality, pilots are bound by rules which ensure that we must plan on a certain amount of contingency fuel, so the real range that we can plan to fly is somewhat less than 1000 miles in any one hop. Bladder limitations also play their part in the equation!

Against this background, you can appreciate that the options for routing across the Atlantic start to become quite restricted. We have to find a way of getting across in hops of perhaps no more than 800 miles at a time. This map gives you a sense of the scale of the problem:



Here is the thinking so far then!

On Day 1, I will take off from Cranfield and fly directly to the Faeroe Islands, stuck in the middle of the sea between Scotland and Iceland. There is only one airport on the Islands, Vagar (pronounced something like "Wag-arr"). Vagar airport is a single runway sitting at the bottom of a shallow fjord. It has an unenviable record for rain,

cloud and fog, but it is well equipped with Instrument Approach systems allowing me to land, even when the weather is quite poor. Vagar will just be a brief fuel-stop, perhaps requiring no more than 1 hour on the ground. It will have taken between four and five hours to get there from Cranfield, depending on the prevailing winds. Refuelled and fed, the flight will continue to Iceland's capital Reykjavik - a three hour run, give or take the wind. Reykjavik City airport is right in the middle of the town and has a convenient hotel right next to the airport. The handling agent, Flight Services is well accustomed to the needs of the nomadic ferry pilot population and looks after them well. This will be a great place to night stop.

Day 2 will without doubt be the hardest day from a flying point of view. Getting to Iceland doesn't require any great feats of aviating - it simply needs you to focus on the job in hand, and not to think too hard about the miles and miles of ice-cold ocean below. The distances involved are sufficiently short not to pose a challenge to the aircraft's endurance. The leg to Greenland and onwards to Canada involves longer legs, cold water, and enormous tracts of frozen nothingness. The winds between Canada an Iceland normally blow from West to East, against the direction of travel. On occasions, they can blow extremely strongly, pushing the aircraft backwards at 60 knots or more. Winds of that sort reduce the range of the aircraft to the point where I could find myself stuck on the ground at Reykjavik waiting for a change in the weather. Given more modest winds, the plan is to route across to the closest point on the Greenland coast at Kulusuk. This tiny community served by a tiny airport will be nothing more than a fuel stop. Once refuelled, I will need to climb as high as 13000 feet for the run across the Greenland snowfield to Sondre Stromfjord on the West coast of the country. This presents a couple of challenges; the higher you climb, the stronger the winds blow, and the higher you climb, the greater the risk of flying through freezing rain and similar hazards, leading to the formation of ice on the aircraft. Once again, the risk of having to sit out bad weather is at its greatest in Greenland. The locals know this, and charge accordingly for their hotels! If all goes well though, Day 2 should see me make the two stops in Greenland, before making a third and final flight across into Canada's Iqualuit airport on the shorts of Frobisher Bay. Temperatures here at the end of March rarely get above zero Celsius. With luck, it will be possible to hangar the aircraft overnight to avoid the hazards associated with the engine oil freezing.

The goal for Day 3 will be to get to my first destination - Boston. Details for this run are still sketchy. The plan is to get from Iqualuit to Halifax, Nova Scotia in one hop. The books suggest that this is possible, but as ever, the wind speed and direction will play a key part in what actually happens. From Halifax, the final short run down to the Boston area is not hard. The distances involved are quite short, and the terrain is much more hospitable. Home base for the stay in the Boston area will be Worcester in Massachusetts (KORH). I used to fly from there years ago when I spent some time living in the area - and always dreamt that I would return one day in my own aircraft.

I'll be spending a few days in the Boston area, meeting up with old friends, and waiting the arrival of my wife and children, wisely flying in from London on British Airways. With fair weather, I'll be a fair few days ahead of them. If things don't go to plan, I'll still be sitting in a hut in Kulusuk waiting for a weather improvement whilst they enjoy Boston!

Once we are reunited, they will join me for Day 4. The kids have never been to New York before, so Day 4 is an easy 45 minute run down to New Jersey's Teterboro airport (KTEB) which stares across the Hudson river at downtown Manhattan.

We'll overnight there, before heading on Day 5 down to Naples, the furthest point from home on the trip. The plan is more-or-less to follow airway "V1" down the eastern seaboard of the US. We don't have the endurance to do Teterboro-Naples in one hop, so a stop is called for. A quick look at the route maps has unearthed an airport at a place called Kinston (KISO) in North Carolina. I know nothing about Kinston, except that it sells fuel, and it is almost exactly half way from New York to Naples. More research needed there.

So there you go. That is about the extent of the planning so far. Hints and tips appreciated. You can leave comments and notes by clicking on the link at the bottom of each article

January 16, 2005
Equipment
Another post. The frequency of these postings is partly because I'm enjoying the new software, and partly because there is quite a lot of information to get across to you to catch you up on my preparations for the trip.

Prompted by a comment received on yesterday's musings, I thought I'd spend a few paragraphs on the subject of Equipment; the avionics in the aircraft, and the safety equipment necessary for flying over all that cold water. Before that though, a quick pause to enjoy a photo from a particularly relaxed couple of flights today. IFR from Cranfield to Le Touquet(LFAT) and back. Le Touquet is a small coastal resort on the Northern French coast. The flight is just 45 minutes and my parents needed no persuasion to head to France for lunch. Exams at school tomorrow kept my wife and children firmly on the ground.

Evening clouds over the English Channel from FL100

Avionics

When I bought N33NW in February 2004, she had a brand new engine, paintwork and interior, but frankly, from an avionics viewpoint she left something to be desired. Most European Trinidads left the factory in Tarbes with a basic King IFR fit (2 x NAVCOM, DME, ADF, Mode C Txpndr and Autopilot). These all worked well, but were not the ideal fit for navigating half way across the planet. Since buying her, I have added a Garmin GNS530 IFR-approved GPS, a Garmin 330 Mode-S Transponder, a JPI EDM-700 Engine Monitor, a Garmin GMA340 Audio Panel/Intercom, Ryan TCAD 9900B,GAMIjectors, and Wired-in Bose-X headsets. During the Annual in February, a SHADIN Air Data Computer will complete the fit. This unit provides TAS, Fuel-Burn, and instantaneous winds aloft into the Garmin GPS, turning into a fully functioning FMS. Ideal for working out that point of no return on the long oceanic legs.

The Avionics fit was all performed at the aircraft's home base, Cranfield. N33NW lives in Hangar 2 at Cranfield Airport where she is looked after by the staff of International Aerospace Engineering under their Chief Enginer, Andy Baker. IAE are an FAA Repair Station, a relatively rare commodity in the UK, and well worthwhile when it comes to getting work performed on an "N" registered aircraft. IAE also hold the UK distributorship for GAMIjectors. These little marvels will almost certainly prove themselves invaluable on the trip to the US. Whereas a conventional Trinidad burns 50 Litres of fuel per hour in the cruise, GAMIjectors allow the option of leaning the engine back to a lean-of-peak position, in which perhaps 5 knots are sacrificed off the cruise, and the fuel burn drops to just 40 Litres per hour. Suddenly our endurance is not 6.5 hours, but is nearer to 8. The combination of the JPI engine monitor (which monitors all six EGTs and CHTs) and the GAMIjectors is unbeatable.

HF Radio

Flying across the Atlantic, even by the route described yesterday, means taking yourself out of reliable VHF radio contact, especially on the legs around and within Greenland. If weather were no object, the plan would be to fly the route at around FL100 (10,000 Feet). At this level, the FAA produces a handy chart showing the expected VHF coverage.

In an ideal world, I would look to carry an High Frequency (HF) radio which would provide the range and coverage to fill in the gaps. Unfortunately, approved HF radio installations are incredibly expensive in light aircraft and operating them frequently entails hand-cranking out a long radio antenna that trails behind the aircraft in flight. No thank you.

In reality, at that kind of level I expect to be flying, the actual period of time when you are not able to communicate is short, and those gaps can be filled to some extent by using 121.5 MHz to talk to passing high-altitude airliners. This technique has proven invaluable in previous years when forced low by weather between Scotland and the Faroe Islands.

Survival Equipment

Needless to say, both common sense and the law require that I will be carrying significant amounts of survival equipment. Canada, Greenland and Iceland all appear to have legal requirements in addition to those laid down in the US Federal Aviation Regulations. It would be true to say that I have yet to work out exactly what I *must* carry, versus those things that are purely desirable. Acquired so far is a 6 man life raft

with canopy, an FAA Part 135 approved Maritime Survival Kit and... that is all. To come will be a full Immersion Suit, which I expect to get from SEMS Aerosafe in Basildon. They seem to be regarded as "the" specialists in this field. In the meantime, if anybody reading this has practical advice or suggestions to offer, you have my full attention!

January 17, 2005
Routing Indecision

Getting to Iceland from Cranfield is not difficult. Neither is getting from Goose Bay in Canada to Naples. The tricky bit is getting between Iceland and Canada via Greenland. The reason that this is tricky has nothing to do with the actual distances involved. Greenland is conveniently placed almost exactly half way between Iceland and Canada and if one were to route from Reykjavik to the southernmost tip of Greenland, and then on to Goose Bay, the two legs would be almost exactly 650 nautical miles each. In still air (the term used to allow us to ignore the effects of the wind), such a leg ought to take about 4:30. However, thanks to the effects of the jetstream, the winds across the pointy tip of Greenland can be quite strong, and are almost invariably west-east. It doesn't have to be blowing a hurricane before you run out of fuel before reaching dry land. For that reason, many light aircraft opt for the route I described earlier, via Kulusuk and Sondre Stromfjord and Iqualuit. Break the journey down into small hops. The downside of that routing is that as can be seen from my map earlier, it takes you a very long way out of your way. Another downside is that it takes you for many hours over deserted inhospitable and cold parts of Canada. Iqaluit is strictly Inuit territory and the weather even in the middle of the summer just struggles above freezing.

So, I am suffering from indecision. Having measured the routes once again in preparation for this posting, I have come to the conclusion that the Narsarsuaq Goose Bay routing is the one to go for if at all possible. At the bottom of this post are the distances and timings involved, assuming a 140 Knot ground speed. This is probably not a bad average. There should be legs where the timings are much better and the speed will be as high as 200 knots. It is also possible that the speed will drop back as low as 110 knots on other occasions. The routings for which the distances are shown are all bona fide airways routings. In reality, some improvement is likely on most legs thanks to "direct" routings. That helps further tip the balance in favour of the Narsarsuaq option. Once last small but vital consideration about Narsarsuaq is the fact that like most Greenland airfields, it is subject to sudden attacks of Fog. Lacking the endurance to divert far, there is an early point of no return if a swim is to be avoided. In this respect, the Narsarsuaq is not hugely different to Kulusuk, but the distances involved are further, and the options more limited if things go wrong.

I guess in reality, the decision is not one that can be pre-planned with confidence. It will be a question of seeing what the winds look like as I sit in the FBO at Reykjavik on the day itself. An exercise I quite like is to ask, what would the decision be if I were planning the flight today? A quick look at Avbrief.com at the winds between Iceland and Canada...

Hmmm 40 knots almost exactly on the nose between Reykjavik and Greenland. I'd be swimming if I tried to make Narsarsuaq today :(The winds between Narsarsuaq and Goose Bay look rather more helpful, but I'd never get that far to enjoy them.

This is a good rehearsal for a decision I expect to have to make in March. Three options: Go to Narsarsuaq, wait in Reykjavik for the winds to become favourable, route via Kulusuk and accept the many extra track miles.

I'll close by showing you for the first time the routes and timings that I have just worked out for the entire journey. You'll see that if I route via Goose Bay, there is no need to visit Halifax; I can go straight for Bangor to clear US Customs there. Also, further exploration of the eastern seaboard reveals that Kinston (KISO) may not be the best stop-off there. Instead Florence Regional, also in North Carolina, looks like a better fit.

I feel pleased to have gone through this exercise. Greenland is still an open question, but the rest of the journey feels like it is falling into place.

Cranfield-Naples 2005

Leg	Route distance (nm)	Still air timing
Cranfield-Vagar	638	04:35
Vagar-Reykjavik	417	03:00
Reykjavik-Narsarsuaq	660	04:45
Narsarsuaq-Goose Bay	650	04:40
Goose Bay-Bangor	651	04:40
Bangor-Worcester	206	01:28
Worcester-Teterboro	133	01:00
Teterboro-Florence Regional	491	03:30
Florence Regional-Naples	519	03:42
TOTAL	4365	31:10

Vagar

One in an occasional series of postings with some background on the various intended stopping points along the route.

If you hadn't already realised, you can see all of the postings that relate to a particular topic by selecting the relevant section from the menu to the right of the screen. Not too many sections so far!

Vagar Airport(EKVG) sits on one of the smaller Faeroe Islands a tiny collection of rocks huddled together for warmth in the Atlantic Ocean between Scotland and Iceland. Vagar airport itself is separated from the Faroese' capital Thorshavn by an icy fjord that used to be crossable only by boat, but which is now traversed by an expensive looking road tunnel. As the ICAO identifier suggests (EK), the Faeroes are in fact a protectorate of Denmark, although they have their own parliament and their own language, currency and traditions. The airport at Vagar is served by Maersk Air and the Faeroes' own service Atlantic Airlines, using BAe146 and Boeing 737 aircraft. There are regular connections to Scotland, London, Reykjavik and of course, Copenhagen.

The airport was originally built during the second world war by the British, who regarded the Faeroes as being strategically important in the dark days of the Atlantic Convoys and the U-boat war. These days, there is no evidence of those roots and the airport is armed with a single, deeply-grooved tarmac runway 13/31 which sits at the bottom of a narrow and slightly curved Fjord. The airport is served by a Localiser DME procedure in both directions, both of which have relatively high minima because of the surrounding terrain and the offset nature of the approach.

The approach to Runway 13 at Vagar

As you can see from this picture, shot on a particularly sunny day in August 2004, the Faeroes have a certain charm about them, and whilst the terrain is jagged around the approaches, it is not particularly frightening. The scary bit about Vagar is the weather. Vagar has one of the worst fog records for the whole of Europe. Visibility is frequently down below approach minima, and in a further twist, the low visibility is often combined with terrific wind shear during the last 1000 feet of the approach, sufficiently so, that an 850 foot wind report is always included in the METAR.

Lets prove a point by pulling up the current METAR and TAF as I write this entry...

EKVG 171350Z 26010G21KT 220V300 5000 -SHGSSN SCT012CB BKN030 01/M03 Q0972 RMK WIND 850 FT VRB12G44KT=

EKVG 171200Z 171221 23018KT 9999 SCT012 BKN025 TEMPO 1221 24020G35KT 0800 SHSNGS VV004=

All things considered, not bad for Vagar in January. As the TAF suggests though, it can be a bad place to arrive at with low fuel. Those VV004 observations in 800 metres visibility would certainly prevent an approach, and your nearest alternate is the southern shore of Iceland, several hours flying away. TAFs from Vagar almost invariably offer PROB40 TEMPO (unlandable).

The first leg of my journey presents me with a choice, and with this background, you'll see what a tough choice it can be. First choice, would be go from Cranfield direct to Vagar. That should take around 4.5 hours. I don't have the safe endurance necessary to make the southern shore of Iceland against any kind of determined headwind, so as I fly up the UK, I will be looking to regularly update myself with the Vagar weather. If all looks OK, Vagar will be the first stop. If things look at all doubtful at Vagar, I will land at Wick on the very north coast of Scotland. There, I'll refuel and fly non-stop to Reykjavik, bypassing Vagar altogether.

January 18, 2005
Ferry Tanks and Licences

A quick post today in response to a couple of e-mails that I have received.

Why aren't you fitting a Ferry Tank?

That is a good question! A 200 Litre Ferry tank would stretch my range and endurance by as much as 4 hours. With that kind of range, Scotland to Canada direct would be feasible.

There are two parts to the answer. The first reason is purely one of logistics. Once in Boston, I will be joined by my family. They will be flying down to Naples with me, and I plan to do some touring with them whilst in the Boston area, as well as down in Florida. Since the Ferry tank sits on or about the rear passenger seats, it would need to be de-rigged whilst I was in the US and re-rigged again for the journey home. All rather more hassle than I would ideally like. Along the same lines, fitting a ferry tank (classed as a fuel system modification) to an N-registered aircraft in the UK is a potentially lengthy and admin-rich process. For this reason, it is said that many UK-resident N-regs are illegally tanked on leaving the UK, with the tank being rapidly de-rigged on arrival in Canada before any FAA inspectors can jump on the undocumented modification. I'd rather stay legal and admin-free - being untanked looks like the way to achieve that!

The second reason for not wanting to fit a tank gets to the heart of why I am undertaking this journey at all. I have already flown across the Atlantic on a number of occasions in rather larger pressurised multi-engined aircraft. That really presented little challenge beyond the basic planning. This time, I wanted to experience the crossing in all its difficult glory. Fitting a ferry tank seems a bit too much like cheating!

What kind of licence do you need to fly across the Atlantic?

You can cross the Atlantic on a PPL if you want to. In principle, Iceland, Greenland and Canada all require the Commanders of GA flights heading into the Atlantic to hold valid instrument ratings. Iceland still requires the pilot to enter his licence details on departure and arrival records. Transport Canada used to interview every pilot preparing to head East, working painstakingly through their planning in order to try and minimise the risk of death and/or big SAR (Search And Rescue) bills. Rumour has it that these days, whilst you may be subjected to a random inspection, most flights depart without their paperwork being so much as sniffed at.

In any event, the weather across the Atlantic is sufficiently challenging at any time of year that you'd be pretty stupid to try it without a current and confidently-held instrument rating. As the FAA Transatlantic Operations Manual charmingly puts it:

"<u>It is extremely unlikely that you will be able to conduct a flight across the Atlantic and remain in visual meteorological conditions (VMC) for the entire flight.</u> **Go back and READ THE UNDERLINED SENTENCE AGAIN!**"

January 26, 2005
Two steps forward
Not much to say over the last few days. I took the aircraft up to Inverness in the North of Scotland for a boys' outing last weekend. The journey was notable for the winds at FL100/110. Around 80 knots from the North. That was sufficient to reduce groundspeed on the way up to 47 knots in the climb and 75 knots or so in level flight. We were rewarded on the way down again with groundspeeds of up to 220 knots. 3:20 outbound, 2:05 coming back. Winds of that strength are fairly exceptional in the UK, but somewhat more common in the vicinity of Iceland and Greenland. A performance like that on the "big journey" would have me sitting in the hotel in Reykjavik looking for things to do - infinitely preferable to taking a swim.

Meanwhile, back at the preparations for the flight, things continue to come together. Two are particularly worthy of note.

FAA IFR Field Approval

When I bought N33NW in February of 2004, I arranged for the seller "Air Touring Limited", who happen to be the UK Socata Dealer, to swap out the existing KLN94B IFR GPS and replace it with a GNS530 from Garmin. I am sure that the KLN is a great GPS, but I happen to have become comfortable with the 530 in my other aircraft over time, and I am a believer in keeping the workload as low as possible!

If we were in the US, a swap of that sort would be a complete non-event. The Unit is TSOd and the installation is very straightforward, only FAA approval would be necessary for the Flight Manual Supplement. For that, I would head down the local FSDO and the job would be done. Here in the UK, there are no FAA FSDOs, and so the owner of an N-reg aircraft has to negotiate with any number of FAA independent engineers, and finally with the FAA London International Field Office to get the job done. The growing N-registered GA fleet in the UK is placing an increasing strain on the goodwill of the FAA London Office which leads to delays in getting inspection dates. Add to that, some dramatically poor customer service from Air Touring Limited and their tame independent engineer, and it has taken no less than a year finally to get the FAA around to approve the aircraft. That day dawned yesterday and the irritating "GPS Limited to VFR Use Only" sticker has now been removed and my flight manual has been duly signed. The FAA guys were on a roll yesterday and although the visit was primarily targeted at my GPS, they also took the opportunity to approve my Ryan TCAD. Leaving aside the Annual Inspection, now looming in a couple of weeks, N33NW is looking in good shape for the trip.

The GNS530 and the now defunct VFR Only Placard (below the AI)

Getting my B-2 Visa

Continuing the momentum, today was the day of my Visa Interview at the US Embassy in London. My trip is quite legitimately a vacation. I often visit the US on business, but on this occasion, the goal is purely fun. Ordinarily, Brits vacationing in the US do not require a visa under a simple process called the "Visa Waiver Scheme". If you are in possession of a return ticket, intend to stay in the US for less than 90 days and are travelling on an approved commercial air carrier, you simply fill in a form whilst enjoying your in-flight drinks, and pass through customs and immigration without further procedure.

Not so, the Brit attempting to enter the US in his own small aircraft! Since N33NW is nowhere near being an "approved commercial air carrier", I fail to qualify under the Visa Waiver scheme and need to apply ahead of time for a B-2 Visa.

The first stage in this process is a call to a premium rate telephone number to the US Embassy's call centre on Scotland. Four or Five pounds later and I was offered today at 09:00 for my Interview. This isn't a bad delay. I made the call on the 15th of January and just 11 days later, was the interview. At peak times, the delay can be as long as a month before the interview.

The second stage in the process is the arrival on your doormat of a letter confirming your interview time and reminding you of the various forms that need to be completed and presented at the interview. For a B-2 visa, these consist of:

a) Pay 60 pounds to the US Embassy. This "Visa Application Fee" is non-refundable, and must be paid in using their pre-printed bank counterfoil. The appropriately stamped counterfoil must be presented to Embassy staff before you will even be allowed into the building.

b) Form DS-156. This takes the form of an online PDF form into which you need to supply your basic passport details, details of any previous visas held or denied, and some information about your parents and wife. Once done, you print it off and sign it.

c) Form DS-157. This is also a PDF file online. This one was introduced post 9/11 and applies only to men like me, of military service age. Once again, we provide basic personal details, and are asked to declare if we have ever taken part in any armed conflict. We also hand over Job details along with any academic qualifications. So far so good.

d) The letter you receive from the Embassy includes a whole sheet dedicated to the the size and shape of photograph which must be attached to the Form DS-156. The size concerned turns out to be almost unheard of outside the US and many people lose sleep over how and where they will be able to obtain one. On all the occasions I have required US visas, I have studiously ignored the specified format and taken my turn in the Railway Station "Photo-Me" machine. Not the format so carefully described in the letter, but totally acceptable, it would appear. Three pounds Fifty to add to the total.

So armed with all of the above, I headed boldly down to the Embassy in London today. 45 minutes on the train, Twenty pounds return. I arrived at the Embassy at 08:30 to find that the 08:15 queue was still standing outside in the 2 degrees Centigrade London morning. The 09:00 queue was not huge, but I was behind at least 60 people all with interviews as the same time as me. A very dejected crowd of 09:30 people were also milling around mutinously. In charge of the queues outside was one Embassy contractor, a Brit, but with a fairly impenetrable Indian accent who was seemingly constantly assailed by new arrivals who couldn't work out which queue they were meant to be in. My top tip, Invest in some Signs chaps!

I am something of a veteran of the Visa application process. In my current passport alone, there are 3 M-1 visas that I have been required to obtain since 9/11 for various courses of training to convert my UK Pilots Licences into their US Equivalents. On past performance alone, I confidently expected to be standing outside still at 10:00, the stated interview times having invariably been meaningless. To my surprise though, the 09:00 queue started to filter in via the initial security check at 08:55. This check is conducted in a small tent outside the Embassy building and consists of the usual airport-style arch, with the assembled frozen masses being expected to empty their pockets using fingers that long-since gave up the unequal struggle with the temperature.

Once through the arch, mercifully beep free, we walk into the Embassy building where a poorly paid junior official repeats the same mantra to everybody. "Do you have any mobile phones, palm pilots, PDAs, cameras or anything like that?... Well switch them off please". I know the script by now. "Yes I have, yes it's turned off", I anticipate. There is a moment's uneasy hesitation and he lets me through to the main waiting area.

First stop is "Visa Services". These people have the monopoly on delivering your passport back to you after the US has completed your application. They aren't a courier service as such, but without paying them 10 pounds, in cash, there and then, you will not receive your "Visa Service", priority envelope which will be used to put your completed application and passport in. The man in front of me has not anticipated this turn of events, despite it being prominently noted in the invitation letter. The Visa Service lady is uncompromising. No, they don't take cards sir. No we

can't take a cheque, no, you'll have to leave the building, visit an ATM and queue outside again once you have the money. "Man in front" is clearly distraught at the thought of several hours waiting in the queue again, but that cuts no ice with Visa Service lady, and with a whimper, he leaves. We all want Visas, and there is an overwhelming atmosphere of quiet resentment that we may be expected to comply with any number of indignities in silence for fear of marking ourselves out as a trouble maker, and having the all-important application denied.

Another 10 pounds poorer, you next receive a butcher's-counter-style number; I was "192" today. With this token in hand, you take a seat in the large waiting area, waiting at this stage to hand your application in.

In the past, this initial wait has taken upwards of an hour. Today, much to my surprise, I hardly had time to sit down before my number was called. At this stage, I have yet to meet a single American. The man behind the glass in Booth 11 is no exception. He accepts my forms, and my mis-sized photo without comment, he takes from me the envelope that I have just purchased from Visa Services, he checks that I have paid my 60 pounds and he takes my passport away. "Do you have any supporting documentation Sir?" he asks. "Proof that you have ties to this country and that you intend to come back?" "No, not really" I reply. I have had a few Visas in the past and I rather hoped that I had established my good character by now". He didn't seem entirely convinced, but I was nonetheless invited to sit down again and await my number.

The morning had gone sufficiently rapidly now, that relying on previous experience was proving flawed. In the past, the wait after handing over the documents could be as long as three hours. Three hours in which the primary sport to be enjoyed is People Watching. An enormous number of people who are clearly not of British extraction rub shoulders with a far smaller number of businessmen, impoverished student backpackers and the odd family group, presumably looking to leave Britain for good. Everybody is deprived of the use of their mobile phones, so most gaze around the room rather aimlessly, nervously waiting for the next tannoy announcement, accompanied by the appearance of their number on the expensive looking, centrally mounted plasma screens. It is 09:40.

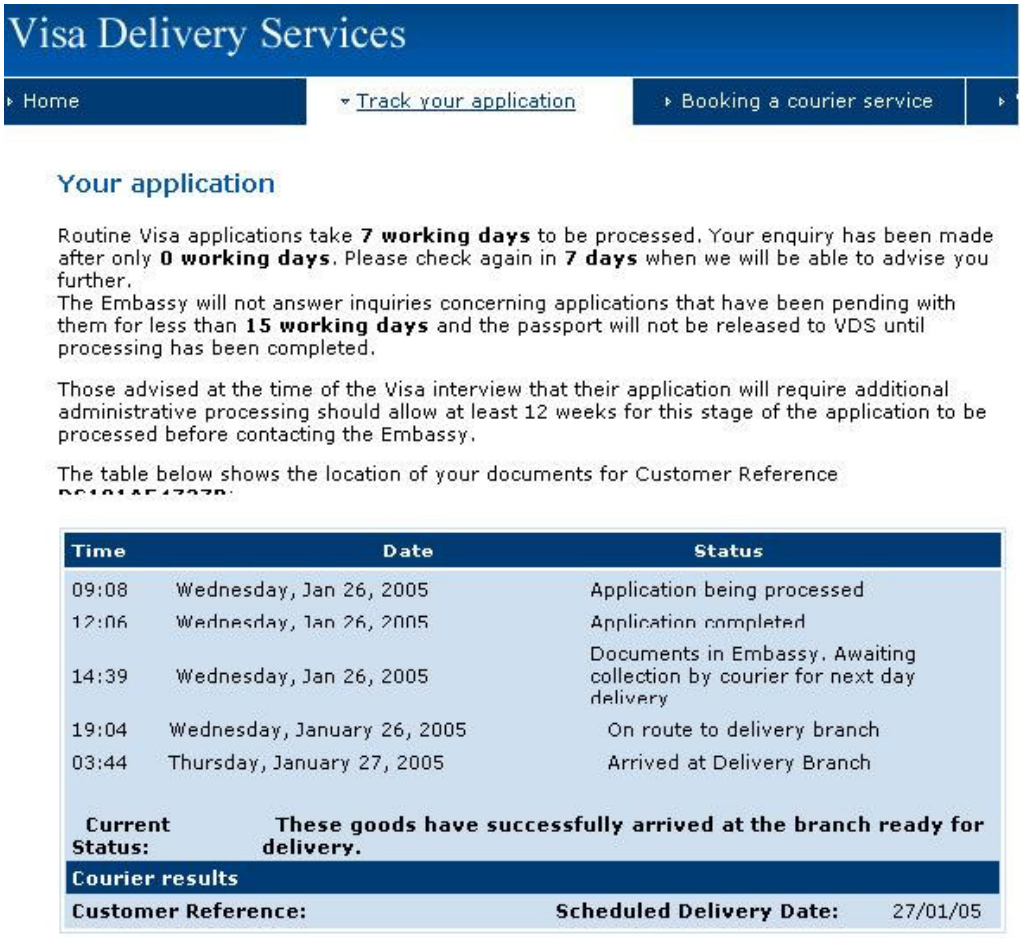
And my number is called - within 10 minutes of sitting down. In the past, this has been a bad sign, a recall to the window at which your application was submitted, telling you of some basic error in your form filling. But on this occasion, the news appears better. Rather than being called to one of the filing windows (1 - 11), I have been called around to Booth 21, one of three which appears to be conducting the actual interviews themselves. Behind the glass of Booth 21 stands my first real American of the morning. A chap I would guess in his late 50s with steel grey hair and a look that is tough to read. "So you're a pilot then?" he says. "Absolutely!", I respond. "That's great", he says, "do you have your licence with you?" I mentally kick myself, my licences are sitting at home on my desk. "No problem, do you have an Instrument Rating?". This chap is clearly a specialist. "I do. In fact I have an ATPL". The mood changes instantly. It transpires that my inquisitor is a retired air force C130 pilot who regularly did the Atlantic run, flying into Keflavik, Goose Bay and plenty of other places en route. We chat for 10 minutes or so about the route, and his recollections of the airports concerned. He admires the rather pretty Reykjavik stamp

in my passport and the conversation draws to a close. "Well, I think that's just great! Have a nice time and a safe trip!" He has granted me a 10 year B-2 visa with unlimited re-entry into the United States. "I figure you'll be doing this trip a few times" he says with a smile, and the interview is over. I leave the embassy at 09:55.

It just remains for Visa Services to deliver my passport back to me at some point over the next couple of days.

January 27, 2005
Visa Services
A bit of a footnote to my Embassy visit. Normally, once your visa application is successful, it takes a few days for the Visa to be stuck into your passport and the combined document to be shipped back to you. You can chase the progress of this on the Visa Services Website www.visadelivery.com, by entering the Customer Reference Number provided to you at the same time you received your Ten pound envelope.

So I got up this morning, with nothing better to do, and I thought I would enter my number and see how things were coming along.



Visa Delivery Services

Home | Track your application | Booking a courier service

Your application

Routine Visa applications take **7 working days** to be processed. Your enquiry has been made after only **0 working days**. Please check again in **7 days** when we will be able to advise you further.
The Embassy will not answer inquiries concerning applications that have been pending with them for less than **15 working days** and the passport will not be released to VDS until processing has been completed.

Those advised at the time of the Visa interview that their application will require additional administrative processing should allow at least 12 weeks for this stage of the application to be processed before contacting the Embassy.

The table below shows the location of your documents for Customer Reference

Time	Date	Status
09:08	Wednesday, Jan 26, 2005	Application being processed
12:06	Wednesday, Jan 26, 2005	Application completed
14:39	Wednesday, Jan 26, 2005	Documents in Embassy. Awaiting collection by courier for next day delivery
19:04	Wednesday, January 26, 2005	On route to delivery branch
03:44	Thursday, January 27, 2005	Arrived at Delivery Branch

Current Status: **These goods have successfully arrived at the branch ready for delivery.**

Courier results

Customer Reference: **Scheduled Delivery Date:** 27/01/05

It looks like my documents were ready before I even got home on the train! That is service!

Now, the only challenge is that somebody needs to be at home to sign for the documents when they arrive - something that could happen at any time from now, through to 5:30 this evening.

January 31, 2005
Reykjavik
Another in the occasional series of commentaries about airports along the route I intend to visit.

By hook or by crook, the intention is to get to Reykjavik by the end of my first day of travel. This isn't a hugely ambitious goal, but provides a tremendous psychological boost, akin to getting half way up a mountain and pitching camp. By the time you reach Reykjavik, you've already flown over large amounts of cold water, and are sitting on an exotic island more than half way to the US.

Reykjavik (literally, "Steaming Bay") is perhaps the only City in Iceland that most people can name. Situated on the South-West tip of the island, Reykjavik is one of Europe's smallest capital cities and the airport (BIRK) sits right in the centre of the city. These days, the airport really only exists to support a little flying club, a flight school, some private owners, and the seemingly never-ending stream of transatlantic ferry pilots and adventurers. There are a tiny number of commercial flights from the airfield, mostly Fokker 50s of the national airline *Islandsflug*, serving some of the regional centres of the island. All the big stuff flies in and out of Keflavik airport, home of the US military presence on Iceland, some 45 minutes to the West of the city. One can only assume that noise considerations will at some point put a stop to BIRK. For the time being though, its approaches, surrounded by bright coloured houses and dominated by the imposing spire of the City's "Hallgrimskirkja" church make it one of the most memorable airfields you could hope to fly into.

Short final to Reykjavik in 2004. The rather unusual building in the foreground on the right is "the Pearl", a massive exhibition space and excellent panoramic restaurant

Reykjavik airport is, as you might expect, excellently served with instrument approaches of all sorts. This is just as well, the weather in Iceland can rapidly change from CAVOK to unlandable in a matter of a few minutes. The lesson as ever is to keep your options wide open. The shot above was taken in August 2004 during an unseasonal period of sunshine and temperatures in excess of 20 Celcius.

Once on the ground, handling for GA vagrants such as I, is courtesy of Flight Services Limited. These chaps are good! They have without doubt prevented hundreds of ill-prepared pilots from hurting themselves with their tireless and knowledgeable assistance in matters as diverse as adding alcohol to your AVGAS to prevent it from freezing in the arctic temperatures, through to detailed information relating to preferred routings, customs procedures and associated paperwork. For their services, they charge around 100 pounds for an aircraft of N33NW's size. Money well spent. Fuel in Iceland at around 0.50 pounds per litre is about half the price it is in the UK, so the high cost of the handling is soon forgotten when the fuel bill comes in.

Flight Services Limited, a haven for ferry pilots in Iceland

Once the aircraft is booked in and tied down at Flight Services' facility, the next stop will be a bed for the night. Fortunately, right opposite Flight Services is a modest but reasonable hotel with self-contained restaurant - all no more than 100 feet from your aircraft. Since I expect to get my head down early on arrival, and get up for a quick getaway to Greenland the following day, this hotel is where I plan to spend my time in Iceland. I've done the tourist spots now... Of course, if the winds aren't playing ball, this hotel could be home for more than a day or two. I hope I won't be spending too many evenings writing my Blog to you from there :D

Aircraft and hotel all in one shot. What could be more convenient?

February 1, 2005
Getting closer - the departure date is set
February the first and the departure date seems to loom ever-closer. With the appropriate visa now in my possession, I have booked my family on the British Airways flight to Boston; they will arrive on the evening of Saturday 26th March at Logan Airport.

With that date in the diary, my own departure date becomes more obvious. If the weather were to co-operate, I could expect to reach Boston at the end of three days' flying. In reality, the loss of a day or three through weather is almost inevitable. The plan will be therefore, to leave the UK on or about Sunday March 20th, with a view to being in Boston with perhaps a day in hand to pick up a hire car and meet the family from Logan.

February 6, 2005
The Annual Approaches
This time next week and it will be time to say goodbye to N33NW as she goes through her annual inspection. The timing of Annuals is never good. Like many people I was initially delighted to find that mine was during the dark winter months - only to find that there are always opportunities to go flying, just around the time that the annual is due. In this case, I unwisely chose to have the aircraft taken apart on February 14th - Valentine's Day. Oh well! Plans are afoot to go to Paris next weekend with the family. One last blast before the aircraft disappears into the hangar. With the installation of all those avionics, the aircraft is extremely well known to the engineers at International Aerospace so there should be no surprises. In addition to the inspection itself there are one or two things that I have asked them to take a look at.

1) The aircraft has been rigged so that in wings-level cruise flight, the right aileron is raised into the airflow by about 1 centimetre. This is obviously not right although the aircraft can be trimmed to fly without apparent ill-effects. The annual should provide the ideal opportunity to fix that.

2) Probably as a consequence of (1), the aircraft needs about 3 notches of left rudder trim to fly in balance when in the cruise. This could be a badly mounted trim knob, but I have rationalised it as being to do with the mis-rigged aileron.

3) The Pitot heat switch occasionally pops off in flight. I suspect that the combined switch/CB is showing its age and needs replacing. Hopefully, this explanation will turn out to be correct - the alternative is some sort of short circuit somewhere.

The annual should take around a week. IAE have put in a Star Trek "Scottie" style estimate of two weeks. We'll see! The earlier it comes out the more flying I'll get the chance to do before heading out across the US. It has been my experience that faultless aircraft tend to emerge from annuals with bugs that were previously unknown. A week or two to shake those out will be good for my peace of mind!

This snapshot was taken yesterday by Air Traffic Controller and pal Steve Le-Vien. Steve moonlights as the FISO at the world famous Shuttleworth Collection of historic aircraft. Saturday was their pre-season opportunity to test their radio equipment and I

dropped in to give him some practice. No landing on this occasion - the grass runway is being reseeded for the season and is still very soft and brown!

February 7, 2005
Old Flames
You know that feeling you get when you've recently split up from a girlfriend and then her name crops up in conversation. Somebody tells you that she's got a new boyfriend, or she was seen in town... I have no idea whether or not I am unique, but I always get that feeling when I hear about former aircraft of mine. Perhaps I should seek professional help.

I took the opportunity of a day off work today today to fly over to France for lunch, picking a friend up on route at Shoreham on the South Coast. No sooner had I shut down on the ramp at Shoreham when Julian, the friend concerned greeted me with the sight of my former Cessna 421C, N156RH resplendent in the *For Sale* section of "GA Buyer". I sold her a little over a year ago to a Hungarian chap who runs a Road Haulage company. He was not a pilot, but was sufficiently wealthy to have one or two of his own. I had had my doubts about them at the time of the sale. The man himself knew very little about aircraft and spoke no English, so the deal was conducted almost entirely through a young interpreter with similarly scant aviation knowledge. The approval flight, flown by the "professional" pilot was a nail biting affair conducted in solid cloud around Cranfield with a lack of proficiency that was very unsettling. I was sufficiently concerned about them that I stayed at the airport to see them take the aircraft away to Hungary and breathed a quiet sigh of relief as the tailfin disappeared into the 200 foot overcast in a passable climb attitude. And now, less than a year later, the aircraft is being advertised for sale, with little more than 60 hours flown in those 11 months 10% of which would have been the journey to Hungary. She has been taken off the N register and put onto the Hungarian, and they are looking for considerably more money for her than they paid me. Good luck! The 421C is a lovely aircraft, but a type that has had its day. There is only so far you can go burning 170L/hour of AVGAS with 2 big Geared Continental Engines. It was the aircraft that made me decide never to buy another piston twin. We had fun together, but I'm glad we are no longer in love.

Something borrowed...

Lunch with Julian at Le Touquet (LFAT) was, as ever, a delight. The visibility today was pretty awful, so I managed to chalk up one more NDB/DME approach at Shoreham and plenty of smooth flying above the low-level stratus layer that currently envelopes the UK and Northern France.

Parting company at Shoreham Julian was kind enough to lend me a couple of handy bits of survival equipment for the trip. The first was a water-tight plastic bag, designed to accommodate my ICOM radio. There would be nothing worse than getting into the dinghy successfully, only to find that your radio had taken a bath. The second device is a JOTRON hand-held strobe. This tiny device emits a powerful strobe light, dramatically increasing your chances of being spotted in the open sea. Lets hope that I will be returning both of these devices to Julian unused in a few month's time.

February 9, 2005
Wick
On a good day, it is possible to get directly from Cranfield, all the way to Vagar on the Faeroe islands in one hop of about 4.5 hours. That leaves a pessimistic endurance of 2 hours which on an even better day might get you to Hofn on the South East tip of Iceland. You'd have vapour left in the tanks though!

So the plan is to head directly from Cranfield to Vagar on day 1, with a quick refuelling stop (pilot and aircraft) before heading off to Reykjavik. There are a number of problems with that plan though. Vagar, as I've written before, has a truly awful weather record, with fog and turbulence aplenty. Fuel on Vagar is as expensive as any you'll find anywhere on the planet and there is the slight psychological issue on leaving Vagar that you are starting up a cold engine and immediately testing it over a large quantity of icy cold water.

So there has to be a Plan B, and this is where Wick enters the picture.

I can't think of anything nice to say about the town of Wick, a cultural vacuum perched precariously on the North Eastern tip of Scotland. Wick airport however is an entirely different picture. This is largely because Wick is home to Far North Aviation and its proprietor Andy Bruce.

There can be nobody in the UK with more knowledge and experience of handling Transatlantic GA ops than Andy. No sooner have you landed than he is at your side with the fuel bowser. Once fuelled and oiled, you are driven up to his offices where you are assisted with the fuel duty drawback form, which Andy files for you (You can then look forward to a cheque on your doormat from HM Customs and Excise on your return). Andy knows the standard GA IFR routes like the back of his hand and will file your Flightplan for you, or help you with any planning issues that you might have. The whole service is outstanding.

Cranfield to Wick is about three hours, and from Wick to Reykjavik is about four and a half. The more I think about it, this plan B sounds a lot better than Vagar and plan A.

With 6 weeks to go, I am happy to allow myself these changes of mind

A previous stop in Wick - showing the large Far North Aviation hangar

February 9, 2005
Blog Therapy
It's quite therapeutic, this Blogging business.

You will have gathered that as I wrote my little piece on Wick, I changed my mind about routing via Vagar and will now route Cranfield-Wick-Reykjavik on day one.

Inspired by this plan, no sooner had I finished my earlier Blog entry today, than I picked up the phone and gave Andy Bruce a call. The result is that he is now expecting to see me in March and will have a smart Mustang survival suit waiting for me to pick up and borrow for the journey. These suits look very nice - a far cry from the Michelin man suits I am more familiar with. Another satisfying evening as yet another part of the puzzle drops into place

The Mustang Survival Suit

February 11, 2005
If Carlsberg made Pilot Shops...
With the firming up of plans around Wick, and the survival suit now ordered, the number of tasks outstanding has become quite short. In essence, just two items remain. I still need to pay for and receive my US Insurance, and I need to sort out the charts, approach plates and GPS data necessary for the trip.

That turned out to be yesterday's mission.

Ask most pilots in England who you call to get Aeronautical charts and one name will come top of the list, Transair. Ask most experienced pilots who you call and that name tends to take a bit of a knock. Transair are without doubt, the biggest and best advertised Pilot Supplies shop in the UK with a truly massive mail-order business and a growing number of retail outlets in places as diverse and seemingly random as Central London, Shoreham, Fairoaks and Gloucester. However, as anybody who has ever done any price comparisons will tell you, Transair are, shall-we-say, ambitious in their pricing policy. They stock everything you might need, and everything has a few percentage points of mark-up over almost any other pilot shop on the planet. They seem to thrive though, so perhaps my views are in the minority.

Over the seas in far-away Holland is the tiny town of Lelystad and its associated GA Airport (EHLE). Lelystad is something of a rarity in green eco-friendly Holland where Light Aircraft noise, fumes and fun are under extreme pressure. Lelystad sports a 1200m hard runway in immaculate condition, a beautiful terminal building with a control tower like an upside-down traffic cone and it is connected to the centre of Amsterdam by a 35 minute-or-so train ride.

Lelystad's unusual control tower (photo by Steve Le-Vien)

More important than any of this today is that Lelystad is also home to The Pilot Shop.

Pilot Shop is owned and run by a very friendly chap called Peter Mundy, who I was lucky enough to encounter for the first time six or seven years ago through our participation in an Internet Discussion List - the FLYER LIST. Peter is a Brit who set up home in Holland many years ago, and now speaks Dutch like a native and can often be found taking to the air over Holland and France in search of fine dining. A man after my own heart.

Pilot Shop has all the same stock that Transair offers, but at rather keener prices, and more importantly, even though they have a thriving mail-order business, it provides an excuse to pop over to Holland for a visit and to talk through my charting options, rather than being referred to the Jeppesen Catalogue and left to grope my own way forward.

So it came to pass that yesterday morning in gusting westerly winds and 800 foot ceilings, I took N33NW over to Lelystad for lunch with Peter. 1:15 outbound thanks to tailwinds that at times pushed 60 knots. Despite the winds, perched in the airway at FL90, it was remarkably smooth and largely cloud free. One of those days where there are layers of stratus all around but the level you have chosen for the cruise just happens to be between two layers. Lelystad is VFR only, but since most of Holland is below sea level, descending under radar control to find VMC is not often a problem, and I was able to creep the last 10 miles or so to Lelystad in VFR under 1200 foot overcast.

As luck would have it, my arrival coincided with lunchtime, so after a brief walk down to Peter's shop, we braved the wind and rain and crossed the road to the neighbouring restaurant overlooking the runway. Here the waitresses wear pilot shirts and epaulettes. Rather fetching. Peter is always rather tight-lipped about whether he supplies the girls' uniforms, or whether they order from Transair.

Over lunch, we talked through my charting options. I have all the charts I need as far as Wick, but at that point I am forced to download charts from the various online AIPs covering Iceland, Denmark (for Vagar) and Greenland. Similarly whilst I have charts available online for Canada and the US, there is no real substitute for having a paper chart in front of you, preferably in a familiar and consistent format. For this reason, I have always liked Jeppesen Airways Manuals, and have only been deterred by the rather extortionate prices they charge. Fortunately, for users needing occasional coverage outside their normal range, Jeppesen produce "Trip Kits". These are one-off chart sets for a particular geography which are issued up-to-date for a particular date-range - they can simply be disposed of after use. It transpires that I need three trip kits.

Atlantic Special ATLSM-10
Canada East CAE04-10
US East USB01-10

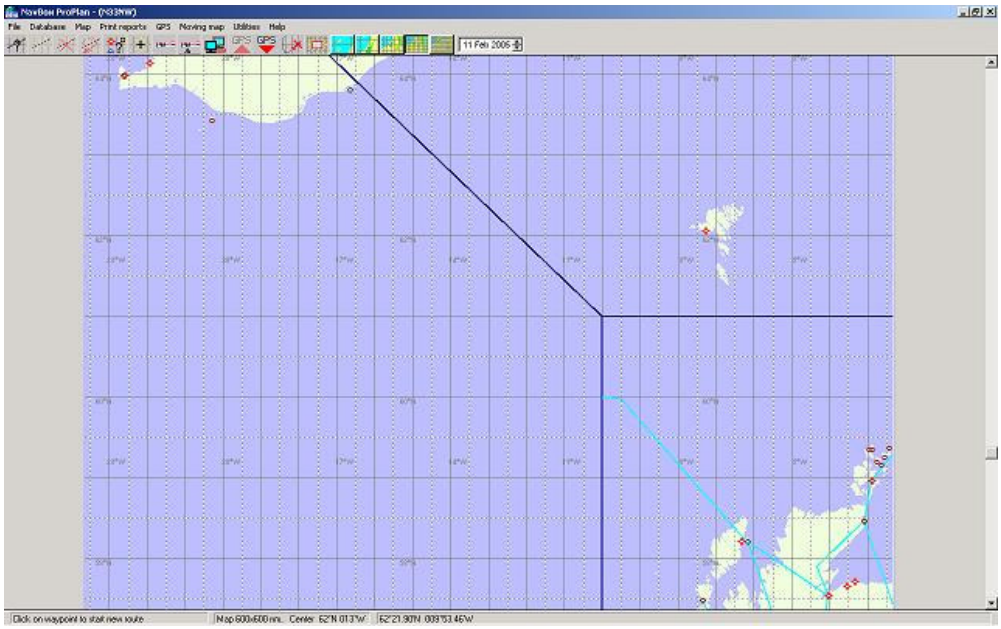
These will be ordered by Peter for the appropriate date range, and delivered shortly before my departure. They contain not only the instrument approach, taxi and airport charts for the flight, but also the enroute airways charts. I intend to conduct all major flights under IFR, even when in the US. This keeps the need for local VFR "Sectional" charts down to a minimum. I can buy those as I need them once over there.

The next topic of conversation is GPS Navdata. My Garmin 530 is kept current with "Central Europe" data every 4 weeks. This covers me as far as Iceland, but runs out at that point. To extend that range to cover Greenland, I need the confusingly named "International" dataset. This is very much "International" from an American's rather unique viewpoint, in that it covers much of the world, except the US and Canada. Leaving Greenland, I will need a US dataset which covers the rest of the journey.

Data for the GPS is stored on a tiny plastic datacard. This can be removed from the GPS when new data becomes available, inserted into a device connected to your computer, and the new data sucked (for a fee) from the Internet. Peter orders me a future download of International and US data which will be credited to my Internet account ready for download nearer the time of departure. Since I have just one datacard for my GPS, Peter kindly lends me a spare one on which to download the American data. Moving from one continent to the next should be as easy as pulling one card out, and inserting the next...

We finish lunch and return to the Pilot Shop where Peter's partner in crime, Olof is still hunched over the Austrian AIP entering changes into a vast database.

For the uninitiated, Peter and Olof, in addition to running the Pilot Shop, are also the brains behind an outstanding European Flight Planning tool, a program called Navbox. Perhaps best though of as a direct competitor to Jeppesen's FlightStar, Navbox is a graphical flight planning program allowing VFR and IFR routes to be planned in great detail and PLOGs produced for inflight use. Keeping Navbox up-to-date is a full time job, ensuring that every change in every AIP is reproduced and double-checked in Navbox's database. All this effort, and Navbox retails at a fraction of the price of FlightStar.



Wick-to-Reykjavik - a zoomed out view on Navbox

Noting that the visibility has come right down, I say my fairwells to Olof and Peter and I head back into the rain over to the terminal. I file an IFR plan back, despite the

strong headwinds. You can't really pretend to be VFR in this, and Peter takes me up to meet a pal, Henk in the tower whilst we wait for Brussels to process the plan. Not many movements today. GA in Holland is under pressure, and very few pilots hold instrument ratings. Just a based R22 learning to hover-taxi and a rather shiny Lancair Columbia.

Plan accepted, I say my farewells and head home. Not a bad flight time considering the wind, 2:05 including a self-positioned ILS into Cranfield in 1500m vis, drizzle and indistinct cloudbase- there is no other traffic about. I am on the ground at just after 17:00 and dinner out with the boys is not until 19:00. I head up to the tower and chat with Ellen the Air Traffic Controller over a cup of tea. It's a quiet watch.

Another job done.

February 13, 2005
It was going so well...
I just got back from a trip to Tours (LFOT) in France's beautiful Loire Valley. The plan was for a weekend away to jointly celebrate my wife's birthday and Valentine's day. We booked into a place that we first visited 13 years ago, and have visited many times since, Jean Bardet, the multi-starred restaurant of one of France's best known chefs.

The UK and Northern Europe is in the midst of a hugely violent northerly airflow at the moment, this makes taking off from Cranfield's runway 22 more than a little challenging - but take-off we did on Saturday morning, and we were rewarded with Ground Speeds of around 190 knots all the way there.

Monsieur Bardet's cooking was up to its usual high standards, and the children were beautifully behaved. A perfect outing. This afternoon, we flew back, struggling against 60 knot headwinds and the occasional bouts of moderate turbulence. Still, things were going very well.

Then, it happened. A dull thud somewhere near Dieppe, and the aircraft suddenly and momentarily pitched up before returning to normal flight. I carried out a few handling checks - everything seemed normal. A look behind at the tailplane revealed nothing so I elected to continue back to Cranfield. The rest of the flight was uneventful if slow.

It was once we'd shut down and got out that I noticed immediately that N33NW had parted company with her tailcone - a 12 inch or so piece of fibreglass moulding at the very rear of the aircraft which serves little purpose other than to make the thing look tidy and to house the rear-facing white navigation light. The cone is held onto the aircraft by multiple screws which attach to brackets inside the aircraft. The brackets are riveted to the airframe. The cone and screws had gone, and with one exception, all of the brackets had sheared in half leaving just the stubs riveted to the airframe. Presumably, my tailcone is in a field somewhere in France. Let us hope that it is not lying next to the body of a concussed Frenchman.

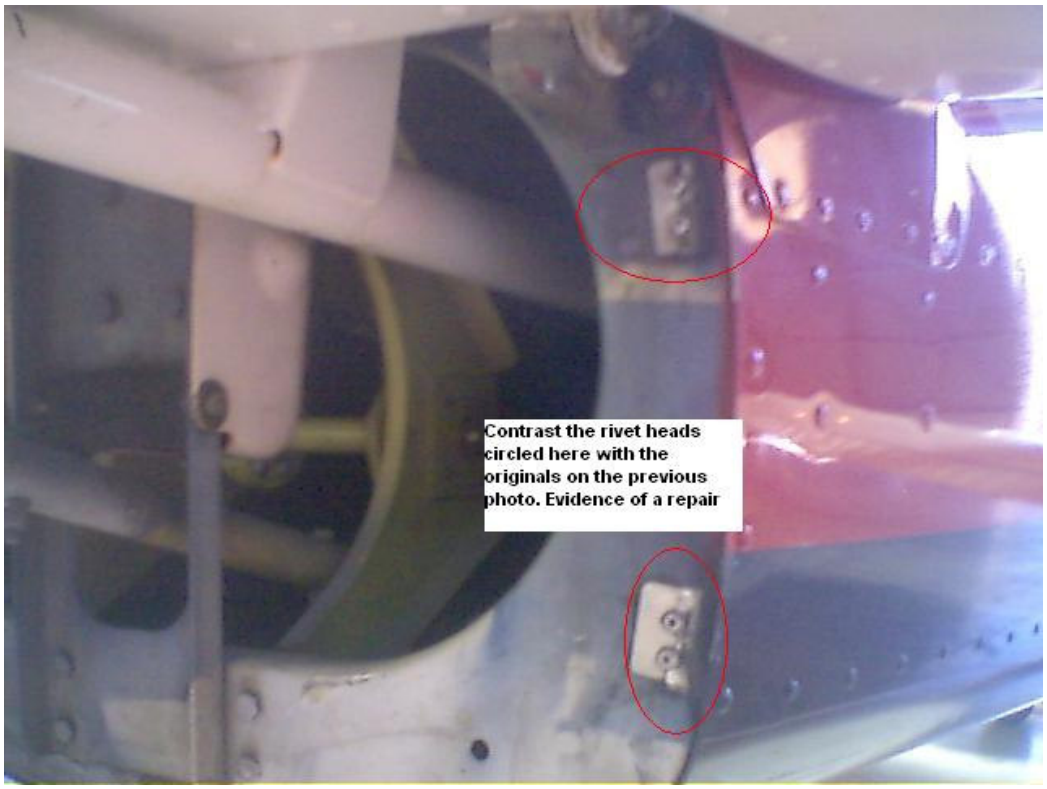
I have never heard of such a tailcone separation on Socatas, so on arrival back home half an hour or so ago, I checked on the Socata Users Group Website . The discussion makes interesting reading. This appears to be a common occurrence, particularly following a turbulence encounter. The boards tell of numerous pilots losing tailcones in broadly similar circumstances.

Ah well. The annual inspection starts tomorrow. I already know one item that will appear on the list :(


The now-missing
tailcone

February 15, 2005
Progress on the Annual
The Annual started yesterday with much rubbing of chins and pointing at the area of missing tailcone. It would appear that in normal operation, TBs of all sorts vibrate sufficiently for the original rivets holding the cone mounting brackets to become loose. This gives rise to a frequently seen repair in which the old rivets are removed and new ones applied. Just such a repair has obviously been performed on N33NW at some point in her past, although the logs don't throw any light on when that might have happened. Suffice it to say that the remaining brackets are held by a mixture of rivets old and new, with some of the new rivets being "pop rivets".

Now I am possibly one of the least mechanically minded people on the planet, and wouldn't know a pop rivet if it fell on my head. Indeed, we are still hoping that there isn't a Frenchman lying in a field near Dieppe with a similar, if more serious problem. It would appear though, that because of the restricted working space in the tail area, pop rivets are easier to apply, but more likely to fail in the future. On the basis that a top bracket has departed with its rivets, leaving the remaining brackets broken, the evidence points to the top bracket coming undone and the 155 knot airflow breaking the rest in short order.



Rather poor mobile-phone pictures of the affected area. Note the different Rivet head types

Meanwhile, the rest of the annual is going ahead at full steam. Compression checks on the cylinders are fine, not one cylinder less than 78/80. However, the exhaust muffler is showing the signs of heat and age and looks like it may need replacing. Whenever you run Lean of Peak, a practise I adopt in view of my GAMIjectors and EDM-700 engine monitor, the finger of blame points at excessive exhaust temperatures. A quick check through the historical data logged by the EDM suggests that any exposure to high temperatures was not during my ownership... It may well just be old age. One to watch though. Mufflers are notoriously expensive, despite being rather simple pieces of piping. It could well cost around 700 pounds. No firm price on a tailcone yet either. The Socata price may well be a similar 700 pounds, but we are pursuing some other options - more of which soon no doubt.

Let's hope that those are the only major items found...

The Annual in Progress (poor mobile phone picture)

February 15, 2005
More progress to report.
Tailcones are expensive. £510 (about US$1000). Worse still, navigation lights are also expensive. About £300 for a bulb, lens, bulb holder, and wire. All these prices, direct from Socata, with about a 7 day lead time. So far, my leads into second hand tailcones have gone silent, so it looks as though Socata will be benefiting from my generosity.

Meanwhile, tomorrow we'll know what a new muffler costs once the Socata "spin the wheel" price-omatic has finished spinning. £700 seems to be the best guess. However, in the interim, I've been contacted by a kind fellow TB20 owner who has just replaced the entire exhaust system on his, and who may have a muffler that is in good condition. He is happy to give this to me at no cost. I won't embarrass him by naming him.... but what a gentleman!

Andy Baker at IAE told me this evening that they have completed the "Engine" part of the annual with no further issues. Airframe starts tomorrow. Fingers continue to be tightly crossed.

Insurance

And now the last piece of the puzzle has come together. Aircraft and Marine Insurance of Washington state have agreed to cover my journey for the very reasonable sum of $583. I spoke to Viviane this evening, and the deal was done. A policy document will be in the post soonest.

Not many weeks to go now. Can you tell that I am excited?

February 16, 2005
Welded to the spot

I hope you're sitting down, I was told today. That £700 muffler (silencer) turns out to cost just over £1500 from Socata. Yes, that's right folks, a new silencer for a rather basic piston engine costs £1500 or if you prefer, a few cents shy of $3000. That kind soul that had contacted me yesterday about his exhaust system turns out to have a problem with his silencer too, so sadly, whilst the thought was good, that avenue was not open to me.

And so, in a quest to avoid paying $3000 for a silencer, I have come to know a little bit more about the world of TB20 exhausts. Socata's explanation first of all. Whilst the original part as fitted to my aircraft was made of Stainless Steel, Socata have upgraded the part on more recent aircraft and it is now manufactured from an exotic alloy called Iconel. With the change of material came an approximate doubling of the price. Iconel is apparently felt to be rather more heat and corrosion resistant. It would have to be at that price.

It turns out that whilst my TB20 has a perfectly ordinary Lycoming IO540 engine in it, the exhaust system is a Socata one-off, and only Socata make them. If I owned a Cessna or a Piper, a million and one companies in the US would be able to supply an alternative, and perfectly legal replacement exhaust. But not so with Socata exhausts.

However, all is not lost. If you can make one type of exhaust you can make them all. In US, there are also any number of companies that whilst producing true replacement Cessna and Piper Exhausts, can "overhaul" Socata exhausts with the FAA's blessing. To accomplish this sleight of hand, you send them your old silencer, and for all I know, they toss it in the trash, before "overhauling" it, and sending you back a new one, which looks suspiciously, as good as new. One of the best-known names in that business is Aerospace Welding Inc. A quick call to Eric, the Socata guy there, and my muffler can be "overhauled" good as new, for the princely sum of $800 or if you prefer, just over £400. What is more, the work can be turned around in three days, says Eric.

It will not be a surprise then, that my silencer is, as I write, winging its way to Eric aboard some Fedex airliner. No money was required up front, always a good sign, and the silencer will return with the all important FAA "yellow tag" and a 1 year warranty.

I feel that I have achieved something today.

February 17, 2005
Greed is Good
The annual grinds on at a seemingly snail-like pace - or maybe I'm impatient. It seems that the two weeks that was estimated is looking pretty safe at the moment. Today has revealed a few more small bits and pieces but nothing too bad. Worthy of note are:

1) My errant rudder trim - the problem by which I seemed to need ever-increasing amounts of left rudder trim in the cruise, has been identified. A "loose screw." With the rudder trim re-rigged and the screws tightened, we are back in business!

2) The elevator trim tab is connected to the elevator by a series of hinges not unlike those on a piano lid. These hinges appear to be of a very low quality and give up the ghost every so often. Mine are apparently showing signs of just that. The price for a new length of hinge - far too much.

Which brings me to the main point of this particular Blog entry. The price of spare parts. Firstly, a quick primer to bring you up to speed. The aircraft, a TB20 Trinidad is made by a company called Socata. Socata is a subsidiary of the much larger EADS organisation, best known for the production of the Airbus range of airliners. Socata aircraft are built in Tarbes (from whence the "TB" name), and Airbuses are built not far away in Toulouse, deep in the South West of France.

Whilst Socata have now started building TB aircraft to order only, they still manufacture and distribute spare parts through a large network of international distribution agents. In the UK the sole agent is Air Touring. Air Touring has been around as a name for as long as I can remember. Based at Biggin Hill airport in Kent, they have been selling Socata aircraft since long before I was a pilot.If you want parts from Socata, the French will refer you to Air Touring as soon as they know you are UK based.

Nothing unusual so far, except that the management of Air Touring appears to have placed their faith in that business maxim first made popular by Gordon Gekko, "Greed is Good". Nothing typifies this more than the recent muffler example. Socata factory gate price (so far as it can be established), around £1000. Air Touring price, a little over £1500. Air Touring's price for my tailcone £500, factory gate, around £300. In both cases, a call to the Dutch distributor, and the price is barely more than the factory gate price. The same is true of other distributors I have approached directly. Most add an understandable and small margin - there is nothing wrong with profit - but Air Touring seem to have taken this to an extreme. It makes me wonder about my £500 tailcone, ordered from Air Touring before I appreciated the extent of the markup. Could I actually have obtained it for £300 or so? A worthwhile point of discussion.

So, I have taken a decision. I will purchase all my spares from the Dutch distributor, Devoort, based in Lelystad of all places. Had I only realised when I visited Peter Mundy the other day, I could have popped in and said hello.

I am starting to know the charming Marieke at Devoort very well now. They are no doubt, delighted to take Air Touring's business away from them. Air Touring's loss. It should not be possible for me to buy a part from Holland and have it delivered AOG (Express Delivery, Aircraft On Ground) to Cranfield, for less than the price I pay for

normal (slow) delivery from Air Touring.

I would love to write something favourable about a British company, but on this occasion, I struggle to find anything nice to say. Perhaps it is a good thing that Air Touring is branching out into Lancair sales. They won't get much Socata business.

February 18, 2005
Socata Strikes Back!
After a few days away from the aircraft, I thought the time might have come to wander over to Cranfield and take a look at my pride and joy today. So, I got up, full of the joys of spring this morning, ready to take a drive over the airfield. Before I got as far as the front door though, the phone rang, and it was the engineers. "Guess what", they said. "Socata are refusing to deliver the parts directly to us in the UK, because we are insisting on ordering through the Dutch distributor."

Yes, just when it looked like we had this nailed, it turns out that the problem is not just with Air Touring, the UK distributor, but with the actual manufacturer. Socata has signed distributor deals, and it would appear that the firm is prepared to act in violation of European Competition Law to prevent those distributors from trading within the EU, but outside their designated areas.

My new-found Dutch friends were understandably mortified. Everybody had acted in good faith, and yet it appeared that Socata were not prepared to play ball, preferring to support a distributor whose prices are notably out of line with those being charged by all of the others that I managed to contact.

So, I made two phone calls. One was to the parts manager at Socata, suggesting that he provide me with a statement in writing confirming that he was not prepared to ship my parts to me unless I ordered with the UK distributor. Needless to say, Socata recognised the legal implications of this immediately and wouldn't commit to writing their policy down! The second call was to the Air Touring, the UK distributor, where I spoke to Mike Pearce, the Managing Director. I have known Mike for several years now. He sold me N33NW last year, and he sold me a previous TB10 G-GBHI some years before that. I pointed out to Mike that Socata were placing me in an untenable position. I was being forced by a policy seemingly contrary to European Law, to buy from him even though his prices were consistently as much as 40% higher than any other distributor. Mike offered a number of opinions as to why the differential might arise, but ultimately agreed to look once again at the numbers, not only for my hinge-kit, but also for the tailcone and light, already ordered some days ago.

A couple of hours later, and as if by magic, Air Touring's prices have fallen into line and can they take my order please...

My new-found Dutch friends are deprived of business that I would have liked to give them, and Air Touring have discovered a problem with, amongst other things, the EURO/STERLING exchange rate programmed into their system, so are now able to bid sensibly. Grudgingly, they have my order, and the parts are expected in Cranfield on Tuesday. A retrospective discount has been applied to my tailcone and light. I am not sure that either Air Touring or Socata themselves come out of this very well. Shop around, seems to be the best advice, as ever. I wonder how many other customers in the UK have been affected by the old "incorrect currency rate" problem.

No more snags

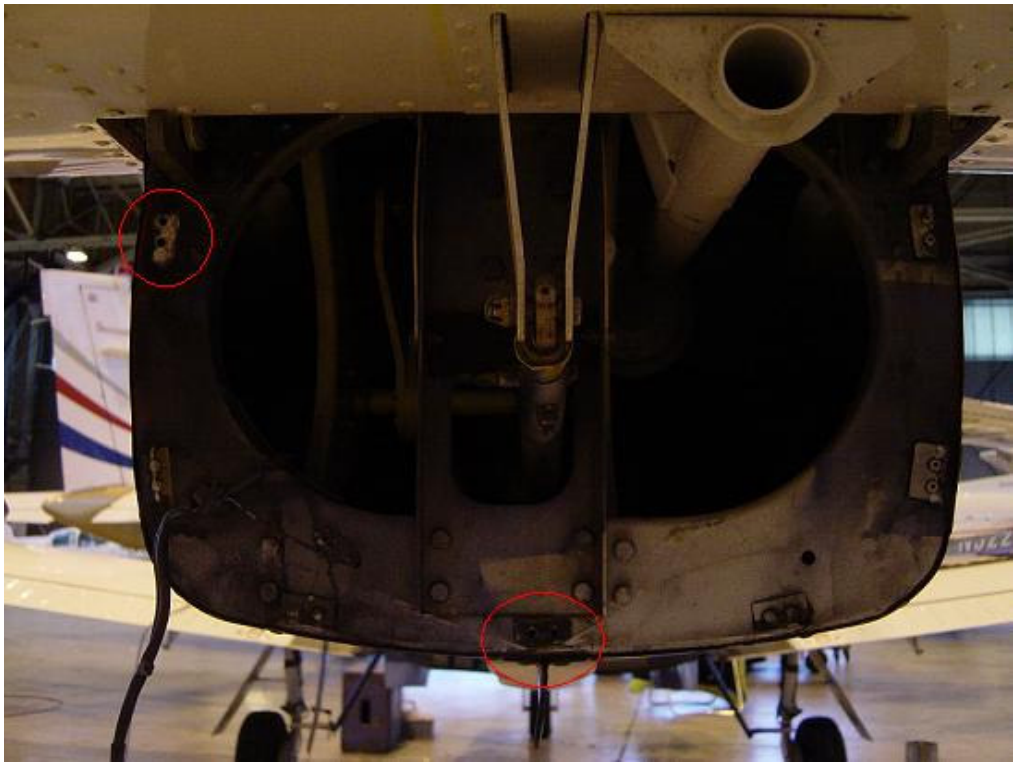
The other great news today is that the inspection part of the annual is now over. All the snags that are going to be found, have been found, and we are at the stage where

once the parts arrive, the aircraft can be zipped up back together again. I've written about most of the things found. The list of more significant items seems to be: Tailcone, elevator trim hinges, RH brake pad and a small hydraulic leak, overhaul magnetos, and silencer. Not too bad, considering the heavy use the aircraft gets from me in a year - perhaps 350 hours or so.

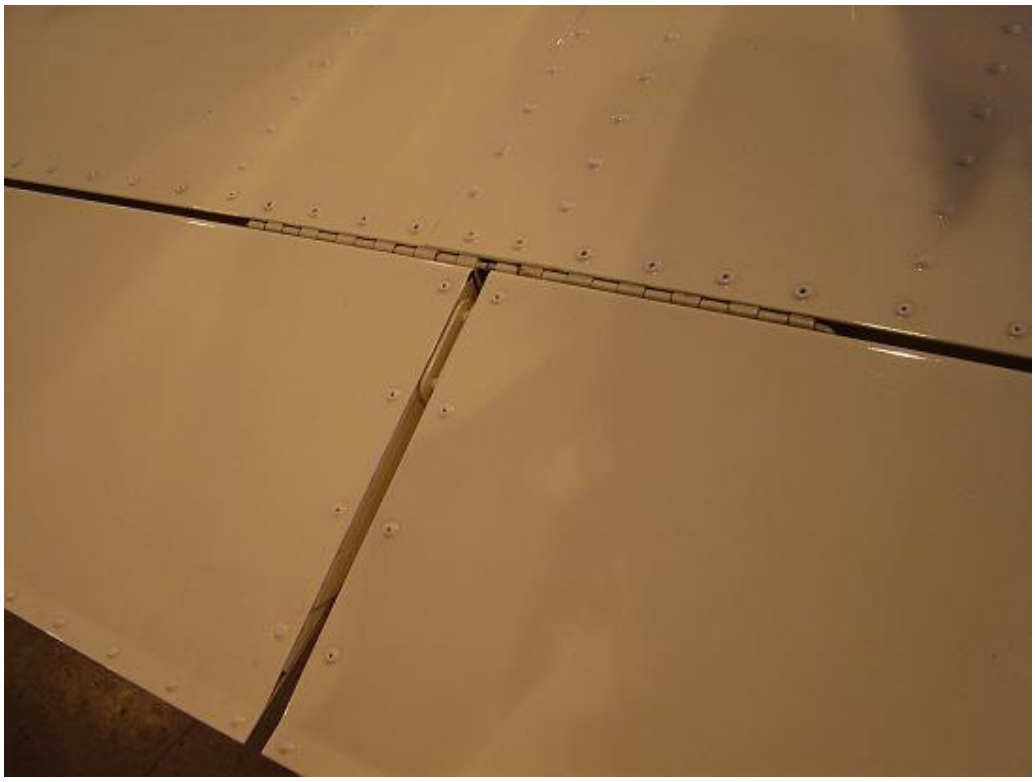
With the main engineering out of the way, the avionics guys are now slotting the Air Data Computer in. This magical box provides real-time fuel consumption data along with heading, Outside Air Temperature, Airspeed and other data into the GPS, which is then used to provide precise range, speed and endurance calculations useful for crossing large bodies of water.

If the parts arrive on Tuesday as planned, Andy's original estimate of Friday for completion should be looking pretty safe.

A few photos from my hangar visit to finish with:



Better quality shot of the tailcone area - failed and missing rivet/brackets ringed



One of the most expensive hinges on the planet - a TB20 elevator trim hinge

The source of my Rudder trim problems - the two orange nuts had started to come adrift

Work in progress on the installation of my Air Data Computer

February 20, 2005
Seeing Double
Sometimes you get lucky. I had just such an experience a few weeks ago, although I didn't appreciate it at the time.

In the Internet age, nothing remains secret for long. Anybody who flies an aircraft will know that in the UK at least, every time you take-off or land, somewhere there is a Plane Spotter taking a note of your registration, listening in on the radio to hear where you came from, and occasionally, taking a photo. Some owners get really peeved about this for reasons I've never totally understood. I've never had a problem with it all. Any aircraft fan is one less person who will be voting to close your local airfield or campaigning about noise. When I first bought N33NW, she was registered rather alarmingly as N666HM. The registration of the beast! As part of getting the aircraft the way I wanted her, I arranged for a paint job and took the opportunity to change the registration. The arrival of a New N-registered aircraft at Cranfield was quite an event for the spotters and one in particular was kind enough to actually ask if he could take a photo with a view to getting it published. So, I let him up close and he took a really nice photo that I still treasure.

In due course, this photo has ended up on the Internet, and it was by this route that it came to the attention of a Dutchman called Alex. Alex is a fellow Trinidad owner who was keenly looking for a paint scheme for his aircraft, had seen the photo of mine, and had done the necessary detective work to find my e-mail address. And that's how, three weeks ago, I got an e-mail out of the blue from Alex, asking me if I could possible let him have the paint numbers that were used on my aircraft.

I have to confess, my involvement in the scheme consisted of picking colours out of a rather generic paint colour chart. They weren't named, so I had no idea which paints had actually been used. Keen to help Alex, I called Air Touring (yes, them!) and they put me in touch with Jet Aviation at Biggin Hill, the specialists who had painted N33NW on my behalf. A few more calls, and finally the colours were identified, in sufficient detail to know which shop to go and buy them. I passed the details on to Alex, and heard no more about it.

Then, as you know, my tailcone fell off! The new tailcone will be arriving on Tuesday, and will of course, be unpainted. Ordinarily, paint matching is another time-consuming affair, and you never know how good the results will be. On this occasion, having just done the necessary research for Alex, we know that the paints will be absolutely spot on.

Over the weekend, Alex sent me a photo of the finished job on his lovely aircraft:

Based only 30 minutes flying time from Lelystad, we plan to meet up when I go over to Peter Mundy's in a few weeks time to pick up my charts.

February 21, 2005
Flight Planning in the USA
You'll forgive me if it seems as though last week was a tad obsessed with the annual. This is normal in owner/pilots and it passes as soon as the engineers tell you that the inspection is over. I'm feeling much better now. The pain of being grounded for a couple weeks has been eased greatly by two kind gentlemen. One is Tony Crowe who flew me to Kemble in his Beech 19A for lunch last week. The other should probably remain nameless. He thinks I was doing him a favour, when in fact, the reverse is true. I had a lovely day's flying in beautiful clear skies on Saturday, whilst Mr X on my left sweated under the hood flying instrument approaches into Cranfield, Southend and Biggin to keep his FAA IR current. Thank you Mr X!

So as the snow falls gently in England, what better time for a quick look at flight planning in the USA. I've already mentioned Peter and Olof's excellent Navbox product. This does exactly what I want in Europe. Thanks to its map-based graphical interface, I can plan flights along the airways of Europe with ease, working out fuel requirements, flight times and more with a few clicks of the mouse. Sadly, Olof's brain would probably melt if he had to handle the process of keeping the tool updated for airspace outside Europe, so once I get to the eastern shores of Iceland, Navbox will no longer be of help.

The airspace to and from Greenland is not especially complicated. For reasons of fuel endurance, the routing will be as direct as the controllers are prepared to allow. In any event, the published airways routings to and from Narsarsuaq require little in the way of online flight planning. Not so, Canada and the US. Whilst I will have a lifetime's supply of Jeppesen folders and maps thanks to Peter Mundy, if I am to avoid a hernia, an online tool is really going to be necessary in view of the complex airspace and vast distances involved in navigating down the Eastern Seaboard of North America.

I've been a member of AOPA US (Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association) for many years now. Originally I joined when I lived in the US, now I keep it up, because despite also being a UK licence holder, I fly an N-reg aircraft which I fly on the basis of my US ATP (or ATPL - Airline Transport Pilots Licence as they are known in the UK). Occasionally, people will attempt to cajole me into joining AOPA's UK organsiation, but to be honest, I have never been impressed by what I saw actually achieved by that group of well-intentioned individuals.

By contrast, AOPA US with its massive natural consituency and low fuel prices is a substantial lobby group, and as befits such a group, the benefits of joining are not to be sniffed at. My annual membership fees, currently less than the price of subscribing to a glossy magazine at home, gets me... a very high quality magazine each month, a baseball cap (Yay!), an Airports Directory of the US, and much more important than all of this; access to an online flight planning tool.

AOPA's tool showing Boston Airspace and centered on my desination KORH (Worcester)

Imaginatively named, the AOPA Real-Time Flight Planner, this tool is effectively a cut-down version of Jeppesen's FlightStar product. FlightStar is a competitor to Navbox which normally retails at enormous cost. FlightStar is a very impressive piece of software that integrates fully with Jepppesen's CDROM-based JeppView approach plates. Nice though it is, my choice of Navbox in Europe was effectively driven by not valuing Jeppesen's shiny interface as highly as Jeppesen do!

But here we are in the US, and AOPA is giving me Flightstar, free of charge. This version of Flightstar works online. When you fire it up, the first thing it does is to update its airspace definitions (after checking that your membership of AOPA is valid), downloads a list of TFRs (Temporary Flight Restrictions) and opens up a map of the US. Overlaid on this map are all the airways, controlled airspace, airports, beacons and waypoints that are necessary to plan a flight in minute detail from the North Shores of Canada to the Mexican Border. Better still, having planned the route, something the software can do for you automatically, you can add real-time weather onto the plan, and if still happy, file the flightplan online via an integrated DUATS interface. Once again folks, this was free with my AOPA US membership.

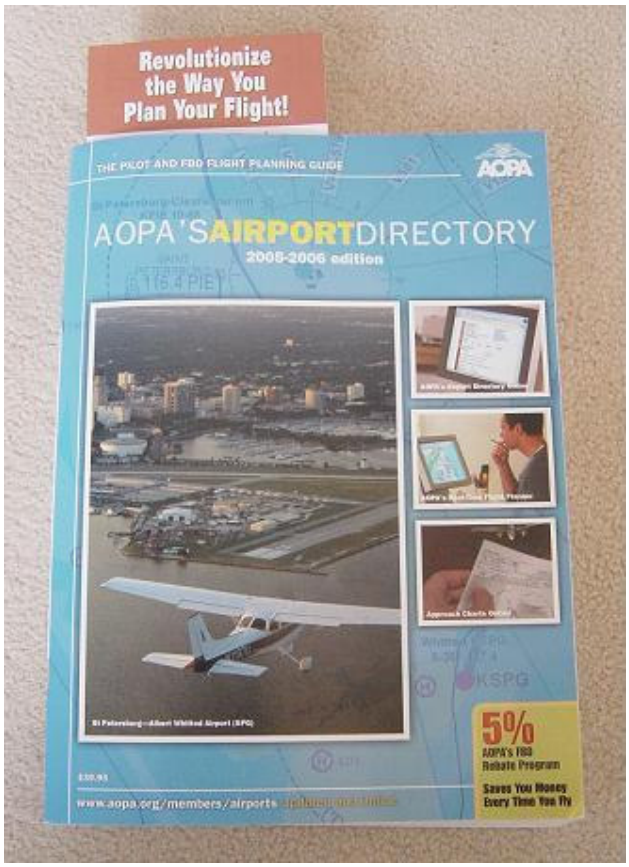
Would it really be impossible for UK AOPA to cut a similar deal?

February 23, 2005
The Three week Two week annual and a Visit to an Expert
I know I promised not to mention the annual again, but as Arnie said, "I lied". Things are coming together though. The Socata parts (hinges and tailcone) have yet to arrive, despite being promised for yesterday. Eric at Aerospace Welding received my Silencer last Friday, and has confirmed that it will be shipped back to me this Friday. So in reality, not a lot is actually going to happen to my aircraft this week. Once things are put back together, the annual will have taken two working weeks, it's just that the two weeks will have happened over the course of three weeks. That is still no problem. I just need enough of a window between the end of the annual and my departure date to shake down any snags that the annual might have given rise to.

While things have been a bit slow on the Annual, yet more bits and pieces have steadily come together by way of trip planning.

Viviane at my US insurance brokers e-mailed me last night with a copy of my Insurance "Binder"; what we would call a covering note in the UK. Unfortunately, all of the details were correct, except for the aircraft registration. I appear to have paid to insure N339W. I called to let her know and a replacement is promised imminently. Since the policy itself will not be printed until the date of my departure (the cover runs from then), I will probably never get to see the real thing until after my return, so Viviane is sending me a copy of the boilerplate from which the policy is produced so that I have a full copy of the terms and conditions.

Yesterday, this year's copy of the AOPA Airports Directory fell through my letterbox. This telephone directory-sized guide to all the airfields in the US includes taxi-maps, frequencies, facilities, FBO details and such practical information as local restaurant recommendations. It costs $40 to buy, but comes free with the AOPA membership. The guide is always published at around this point in the year, and I had wondered whether or not it would arrive before my departure. Updates to the aeronautical information are available online, but for my purposes, armed with the full set of Jeppesens, the guide is at least as useful for the restaurants, hotels and hire-car numbers as anything else.



A Visit to an Expert

Whilst I have crossed the Atlantic before in much larger, pressurised aircraft, this will be my first trip across in a tiny four seat single-engined aircraft. In fact, it was to capture that experience that I really started on this adventure. But, I am under no illusions. I am no expert. There is a world of difference between flying a large turboprop across the Atlantic with the altitude to avoid the weather and the range and speed to keep out of trouble, and what I am contemplating.

With this in mind, I've arranged to meet a man called Martin Courage of Aerodynamics Ltd. Martin is an enormously experienced ferry pilot who delivers aircraft large and small to many and various corners of the world. The Atlantic run is second nature to him, although I believe that even he has grown out of flying single-engined puddle-jumpers across the big cold sea. I first met Martin a year or so ago when I was attempting to sell my Cessna 421C. Of the various would-be brokers I spoke to, he was the most direct and honest about the aircraft's upsides, downsides and value. That knowledge ultimately saved me a lot of wasted time pitching the aircraft either at the wrong market or at the wrong price.

Martin has kindly agreed to let me buy him lunch early next week in exchange for the ability to run my plans past him and to pick his brains on the details. It should be an interesting session.

February 25, 2005
Weather Flying
It is obviously the season to get your Trinidad repainted. Peter, another colleague of mine, with a TB20 based down in Bristol has just had a lovely new paint job done on his pride and joy, G-SAPM. Not totally dissimilar to my paint scheme, the aircraft has what I would describe as a Cadbury's Blue underside, and a white top. This topside is adorned with red and blue swirls, vaguely reminiscent of the current Beech paint scheme. The work, which included a new leather interior was done by Eastern Air Executive in Sturgate, Lincolnshire, a tiny ex-wartime airfield now home to a small club and Eastern Air's engineering and painting business.

Peter is obviously feeling well-off, because in addition to spending whatever the paintwork cost him, it is also time for his Annual. Following discussions of a month or so ago, he has decided to bring his aircraft to my home base, IAE at Cranfield to get the annual done. While he is there, he is getting Andy to install GAMIjectors and a Digital Engine Monitor. A smart move. Let's see how long his annual takes. Can I start the bidding at three weeks?

Originally, as this plan had been made and the date fixed, I had offered to run Peter back to Bristol once he'd delivered his aircraft. In the ideal world, my aircraft would have come out of annual, and I would be wanting to put as many hours on it as possible. Of course, in the real world, this didn't happen, so plan B surfaced. Peter would fly to Cranfield, and I would fly him back to Bristol in his own aircraft, before bouncing one last time back to Cranfield.

There are times however, when it is easy to imagine that a greater power is plotting against you. The Eastern side of the UK has been sitting for the last few days in a constant easterly stream of snow bearing clouds. Cranfield's runway has been covered in varying degrees of snow and slush and being a small airport, lacks the facilities to deal with that kind of weather. Yesterday was forecast to be the worst day so far, with a mild occlusion passing through from the east depositing heavy snow, as much as a foot deep, in our neck of the woods with a milder covering extending as far west as Bristol.

Peter was understandably concerned about flying across in those conditions. He is an experienced pilot with a very current instrument rating, but is not unreasonably cautious. We chatted through the weather charts at length yesterday morning, before he ultimately decided to give it a shot. I always feel slightly guilty having those conversations. You never want to be responsible for causing somebody to fly against their will, but the conditions yesterday were actually not bad at all once you could mentally see past the continuous light dusty snow, and modest vis and ceilings.

I think that it would be fair to say, Peter surprised himself. Our communal analysis of the weather charts proved to be accurate, and cruising over IFR at 10,000 feet, Peter was out of the worst of the weather in smooth air having taught himself something. So easy was his flight over, that the Cranfield Glideslope transmitter decided to set him a challenge by failing during his approach. Peter wisely went around off the first approach, before landing successfully off the second. Our return bounce to Bristol and back was similarly uneventful.

Peter taxiing in at Cranfield yesterday morning.

I arrived home yesterday to find the latest copy of the American Aviation magazine FLYING, sitting on the doormat. Despite my loyal allegiance to The UK's FLYER Magazine for which I write regular articles, I also read FLYING magazine avidly. Reflecting on the day's flying, I was naturally drawn to the Editorial or "Left Seat" column by J Mac McClellan, entitled "Cross Country Time Matters Most". In a nicely-written three page article, Mac expounds his view that too many pilots essentially fly the same hour over and over again, practising landings and take-offs at familiar local airports on nice sunny days. They may even give themselves extra points for practising PFLs, stalls and the other standard Flight Instructor manoeuvres. In reality, their flying would benefit far more from flying some distance to less-familiar airports on less-comfortable days. It is on cross country-flights, he says, where pilots have the majority of mechanical problems, the majority of in-flight diversions due to weather, and meet the challenges that actually make them think. This is, just as true for IFR pilots as it is for VFR pilots, most of whom, will have got through the entire IR program by shooting approaches in the local area, rather than planning and executing cross-country flights.

His concluding paragraph:

"The bottom line on learning to fly trips on a reliable schedule is to just start doing it. Take an instructor experienced in cross-country flying, or even a friend who has logged travel time, on the first trips and get your feet wet...No amount of conventional training or practice in the local area will prepare you for what you will find when you leave the nest"

I think he has a point.

February 27, 2005
Rule 1: Always Consult your Wife
"What are we actually going to do when we're there?", I was asked by my wife this morning. Good point. I've spent a lot of time and energy working out how to cross the Atlantic, and rather less time figuring out what we are going to do to amuse a wife and two small children for two weeks in America. The problem is harder than it first seems. Things that keep wives amused do not necessarily impress small children. Fortunately, I'm with the kids. I love sitting in the Shamu's Spash Zone at Sea World, I love the rollercoasters and, I wouldn't mind going on "Mr Toad's Wild Ride Ride" again.

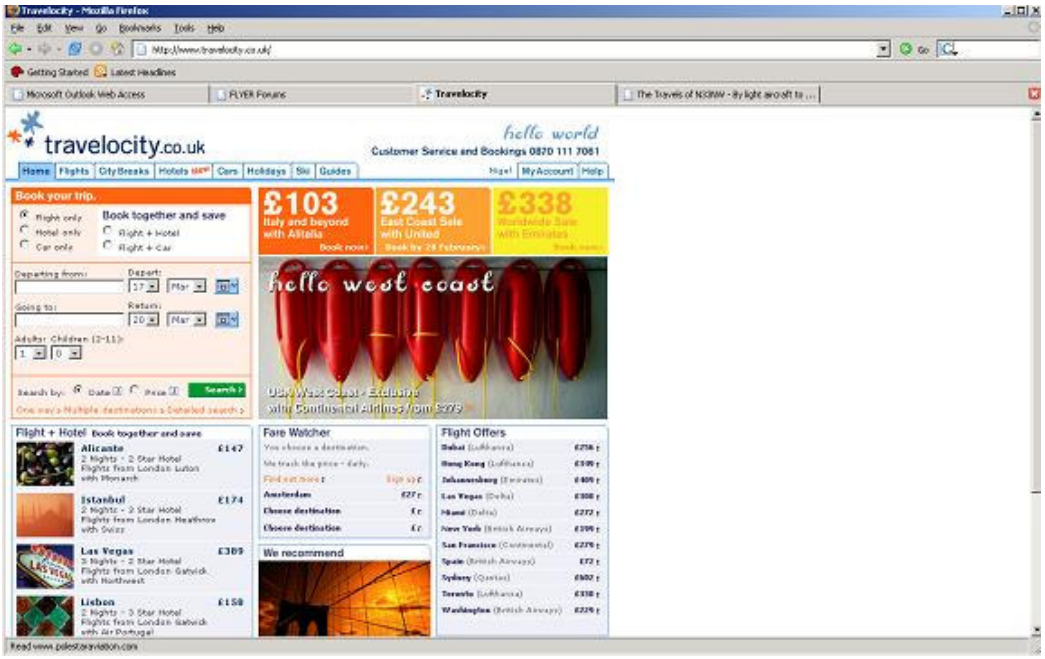
Kate, my wife, has rather loftier ambitions. Glass-bottomed boats at Key West, fine dining and shopping trips around Old Naples.

So this morning, we sat down for the first time, and worked things out.

Boston features as the first stop on our plans because of the time I spent out there. I have some very good friends in the Boston area who are long overdue a visit. A particular "must" is my former workmate Mary, Godmother to my daughter Sophie. Mary last met Sophie some 5+ years ago at her Christening, and whilst I have seen Mary since, the rest of the family hasn't. We have quite some catching up to do. Kate and the kids will arrive in Boston (hopefully to be greeted by me) on Easter Saturday. The plan will be to stay in the Boston area until Tuesday, and then head down to Naples Florida. We'll give New York, on my original itinerary a miss in the interests of getting down to Florida as quickly and painlessly as possible. To that end, Kate has also, wisely, decided that entertaining two Kids in a TB20 for the 7 hours or so that it will take to get to Naples from Boston is not going to be much fun. **Travelocity** to the rescue once again, and for £50 a head, the family can catch a flight from Boston, direct to South West Florida Regional Airport (RSW) a few miles up the road from Naples. They will pick up a hire car and meet me when I finally land at Naples, they promise!

So it turns out that I will be alone on all of the Long cross-country legs, and the family will join me for the day trips from Naples to places like Key West, Orlando and Venice. I should have consulted with Kate to start with - it's a good idea and it will make for much more stress-free flying. :-))

We'll spend a week in Florida soaking up the rays and doing the usual kiddie-friendly stuff, before heading back to Boston (courtesy of Travelocity and N33NW) in the middle of the following week to see Mary again and say our fond farewells. With the family dispatched back to England, I'll then hang on for a week and drop down to New York on my own. I have some business to do there which will pay for the whole trip, as well as providing me with the ideal excuse to catch up with some more old friends.



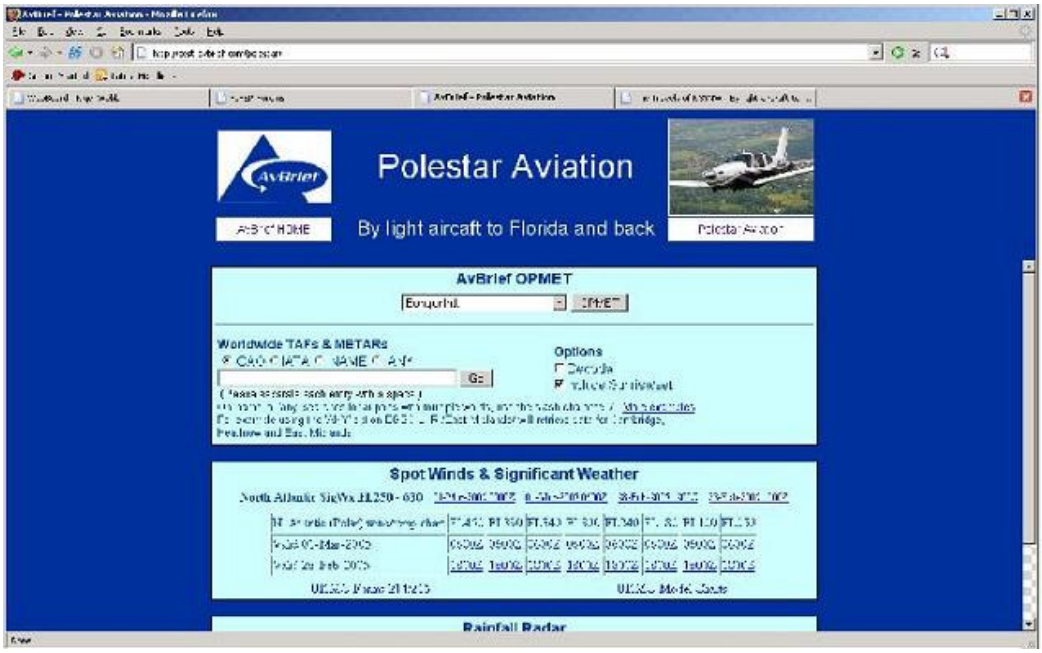
Booking the Family on Commercial Flights with Travelocity - My Top Tip for Peaceful Private Flying

February 28, 2005
A Personalised Weather Service
There is no shortage of weather information available for the North American section of my journey. However, without minimising the weather that Northern Canada and The Eastern US can throw at you, the really weather-critical parts of the flight will all be associated with the North Atlantic Crossing. The crossing will be conducted at around 10,000 feet, so I will be worried about all of the usual factors that affect flight in light aircraft - icing, turbulence, cumulonimbus build-ups and more. In addition, because all of the three Atlantic legs, Reykjavik, Narsarsuaq and Goose Bay are potentially endurance limited, I'll be focusing particularly hard on the potential headwinds. The arrangement of pressure systems near the North Pole is custom designed to almost ensure a healthy headwind when travelling from east to west, and much more than 40 knots on the nose will have me swimming in the icy waters. That tends to focus the attention somewhat.

Doing my usual thing flying around Europe, this kind of decision making is somewhat out of the ordinary. Endurance is rarely a critical factor and alternates are readily found for almost any conceivable route. For my everyday weather planning, I use a website called AVBRIEF.COM Avbrief is a small but successful organisation owned by a group of pilots, all of whom I am lucky enough to know as friends. Julian Scarfe, Paul Handover, Peter McCarthy and Ian Seager. These four, aided by a small but dedicated team have produced a thoroughly useable website providing an enormous variety of weather data ranging from TAFs and METARs through to Synoptics, WX radar and more recently, NOTAM data. So successful has been their penetration of the private pilot market (in competition with the State-owned Meteorological Office) that they have recently started to branch out into the provision of flight briefing terminals for airlines and airports. These services are rather more heavily customised for each client than the everyday PPL briefing tool, and are starting to be seen as serious competition for the big boys at Jeppesen and WSI.

And it is this customised briefing that lies behind this Blog entry. I am perfectly capable of picking the relevant transatlantic information out of the main Avbrief site, should it be necessary, but to be honest, remembering the various unfamiliar airport codes, let alone typing them in repeatedly could rapidly lose its attraction. Enter Paul Handover. Less than a week ago he extended the offer to me of a "personalised" airline-style site for my journey, customised specifically for my route. This means, having the airports I intend to visit and alternates all pre-entered - All my weather at the push of a button. Shortcuts to the transatlantic sigmet and winds charts. Quick access to NOTAMS for the FIRs I am interested in, and various other customised features that make the experience of weather planning much easier than it would otherwise be.

Today, as I got home from the office, I spoke to Paul on Skype. The site is ready to view - Excellent. Everything I could possibly have wanted and more. As I have planned this trip over the last month or so, people have been incredibly generous, and this is just another example. The aviation community in the UK is large and diverse, but on occasions like this, it can seem very small and close knit.


Polestar Aviation
By light aircaft to Florida and back
AvBrief OPMET
Worldwide TAFs & METARs
Options
Spot Winds & Significant Weather
Rainfall Radar

March 1, 2005
There are also good days
There are days in aviation when everything goes wrong and your tailcone falls off. Fortunately, there are also days when things come together. Today was just such a day.

Let me start with a picture:

Yes, if you hadn't already guessed, let me introduce you to my new tailcone. Here it is hanging up in a corner of the hangar just one hour ago, luxuriating in its first coat of paint. The blue is going on tomorrow and aircraft and tailcone will be reunited (hopefully, for good) on Thursday.

And that is not all. This morning, I picked up the new silencer, lovingly "overhauled" using one atom of the old silencer and a lot of suspiciously new metal. It looks fantastic - all the more so when you realise that it came in at a quarter of the price that Socata wanted me to pay.

And even that is not all. After some fiddling, poking and programming, Garry, the Avioncs Chief at IAE proudly announced that the Air Data Computer and Fuel Flow Data is now feeding happily into the Garmin 530 GPS. I am equipped with the nearest thing to an airliner FMS system this side of $500,000.

With a little luck, I will be able to take N33NW out to Lelystad on Friday to see Peter Mundy and pick up my Jepp manuals. In short, I'll be back in business.

Today dawned overcast and wet at Cranfield with more than a hint of snow in the air. Today was also supposed to be the day that I flew over to Gloucester to meet up with

Ferry Ace Martin Courage to pick his brains on my forthcoming flight. However, this is the world of Aviation we are talking about, and Martin was having one of those "tailcone" days - stuck on the ground in Bournemouth with a Cessna 340 that needed work doing. After a quick session on the phone, I borrowed G-KPTT, IAE's TB20 and flew down to meet Martin for lunch and he didn't disappoint. I won't give his secrets away online, but to say that it was an illuminating session would be an understatement. As much for the which hotels to stay in, and where to get cheap fuel, as for the flying tips, I left Bournemouth this evening much wiser... and very much aware of how little I know.

And finally as if to prove that today really was a good one, waiting on the doormat for me at home this evening was my new plastic licence from the FAA complete with its holographic logo and modern styling. At last, an end to flying around on an increasingly grubby piece of home-laminated cardboard, the previous licence style, which looked as though it had been made by my daughter on an inkjet printer. All I need is my aeroplane back now. I can't wait!

March 2, 2005
Rehearsing the Weather
As I write, the south of the UK is being showered with a mixture of rain and snow and work commitments mean that I am grounded today. On days like this, I have found it a useful exercise to rehearse some of the weather-based decision making necessary for the flight to Florida. Which hotel room would I be stuck in if today was my departure date? I'll include snippets from the relevant TAFs, METARs and Charts and you can play along too.

First of all, then how about Cranfield to Wick. A look at the TAFs and METARS

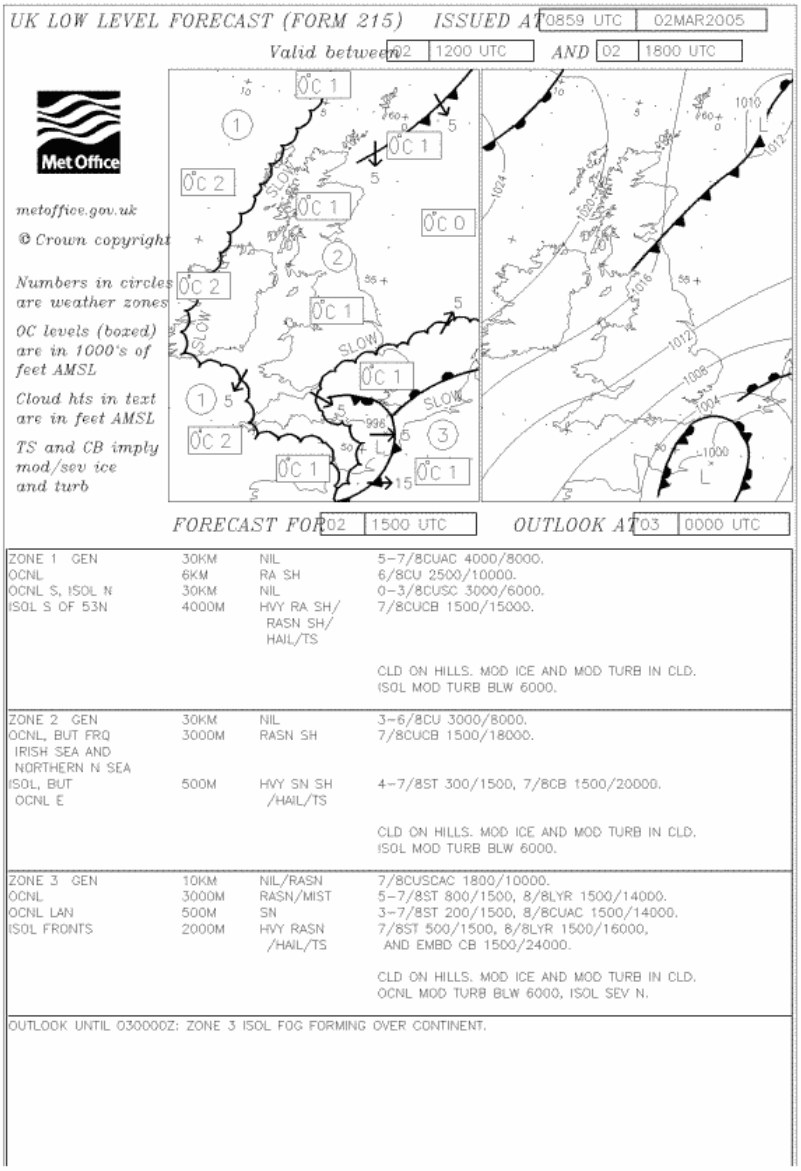
CRANFIELD

METAR EGTC 020950Z 01011KT 2000 -SN BR BKN006 02/01 Q0999=
TAF EGTC 020934Z 021019 36010KT 2000 BR BKN008 BECMG 1013 7000 -RASN BKN012 BECMG 1316 02017G30KT TEMPO 1319 4500 RASN BKN007 PROB30 TEMPO 1719 1000 SN BKN002=

WICK

METAR EGPC 021020Z 35012KT 9999 VCSH FEW010CB SCT024 03/02 Q1011=
TAF EGPC 020928Z 021019 01020G30KT 9999 FEW014CB SCT025 TEMPO 1019 3000 -SHSN SHGS BKN014CB PROB40 TEMPO 1019 0800 SHSN BKN008CB=

and here is the Form 215 for the route



UK LOW LEVEL FORECAST (FORM 215) ISSUED AT 0859 UTC 02MAR2005

Valid between 02 1200 UTC AND 02 1800 UTC

Met Office

metoffice.gov.uk

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Numbers in circles are weather zones

OC levels (boxed) are in 1000's of feet AMSL

Cloud hts in text are in feet AMSL

TS and CB imply mod/sev ice and turb

FORECAST FOR 02 1500 UTC OUTLOOK AT 03 0000 UTC

ZONE 1 GEN	30KM	NIL	5-7/8CUAC 4000/8000.
OCNL	6KM	RA SH	6/8CU 2500/10000.
OCNL S, ISOL N	30KM	NIL	0-3/8CUSC 3000/6000.
ISOL S OF 53N	4000M	HVY RA SH/ RASN SH/ HAIL/TS	7/8CUCB 1500/15000.
			CLD ON HILLS. MOD ICE AND MOD TURB IN CLD. ISOL MOD TURB BLW 6000.
ZONE 2 GEN	30KM	NIL	3-6/8CU 3000/8000.
OCNL, BUT FRQ IRISH SEA AND NORTHERN N SEA	3000M	RASN SH	7/8CUCB 1500/18000.
ISOL, BUT OCNL E	500M	HVY SN SH /HAIL/TS	4-7/8ST 300/1500, 7/8CB 1500/20000.
			CLD ON HILLS. MOD ICE AND MOD TURB IN CLD. ISOL MOD TURB BLW 6000.
ZONE 3 GEN	10KM	NIL/RASN	7/8CUSCAC 1800/10000.
OCNL	3000M	RASN/MIST	5-7/8ST 800/1500, 8/8LYR 1500/14000.
OCNL LAN	500M	SN	3-7/8ST 200/1500, 8/8CUAC 1500/14000.
ISOL FRONTS	2000M	HVY RASN /HAIL/TS	7/8ST 500/1500, 8/8LYR 1500/16000, AND EMBD CB 1500/24000.
			CLD ON HILLS. MOD ICE AND MOD TURB IN CLD. OCNL MOD TURB BLW 6000, ISOL SEV N.

OUTLOOK UNTIL 030000Z: ZONE 3 ISOL FOG FORMING OVER CONTINENT.

From this, we can quickly tell that the snow I am seeing at Cranfield is substantially associated with Area 3 on the Form 215. This in turn is caused by a declining frontal feature which is slowly heading south (as seen by the right hand weather projection). There is something of an icing risk departing Cranfield, but to the extent that much of what is falling is snow, and the weather radar returns are weak, this risk is quite low. So we can head off to Wick, rapidly entering area 2 of the chart where the conditions are good. The 215 tells us that GENerally, we would be wise either to cruise below 3000 feet, or above 8000, to stay out of the cloud. The winds (taken from the Form 214 -not reproduced here) are around 050 at 25 for the route, so either is possible without undue impact on the groundspeed. I would take the high road, making it easier to keep a look out for those occasional CBs in the Northern North Sea that the

215 warns us about.

There is nothing in the Wick TAF which makes the place unlandable, with the possible exception of a the risk of an occasional snow-bearing CB over the field. However, we can see that those features are TEMPO, meaning that when they do come, they will last for a maximum of 60 minutes and in any event for no more than 50% of the period. We also note that the 215 has them as being occasional. A case perhaps of the TAF being rather more pessimistic than the 215 warrants. This is not at all unusual.

From our high-level cruising vantage point, we should get a good look at the local situation before committing to descend for our approach.

So how about Wick-Reykjavik?

REYKJAVIK
METAR BIRK 021000Z 32003KT 9999 FEW018 BKN045 03/M01 Q1023=

TAF BIRK 020709Z 020918 28012KT 9999 -DZ BKN015 TEMPO 0918 3000 DZ BR BKN005 OVC015=

This is an interesting one. The METAR tells us that Reykjavik is actually experiencing rather better weather than the Forecast had predicted. There is weather in the TAF that could freeze us quite horribly, so an alternate would be wise. Two come to mind, Vagar and Hofn

VAGAR

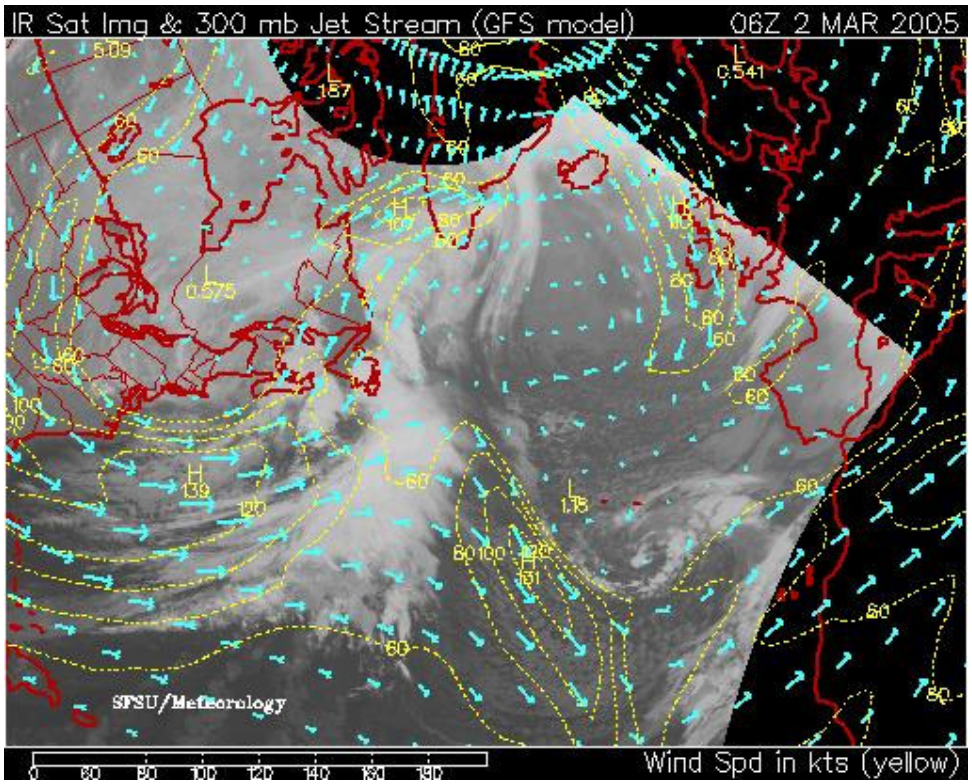
METAR EKVG 020950Z 34018KT 9999 -SHSN FEW020 BKN035 M00/M05 Q1019 RMK WIND 850 FT 35019G32KT 310V020=
TAF EKVG 020900Z 020918 02020KT 9999 BKN030 TEMPO 0912 02022G35KT 0800 SHSN VV002 TEMPO 1218 1800 -SN BKN012=

HOFN

TAF BIHN 020737Z 020817 34005KT 9999 BKN035 BECMG 1113 24010KT=

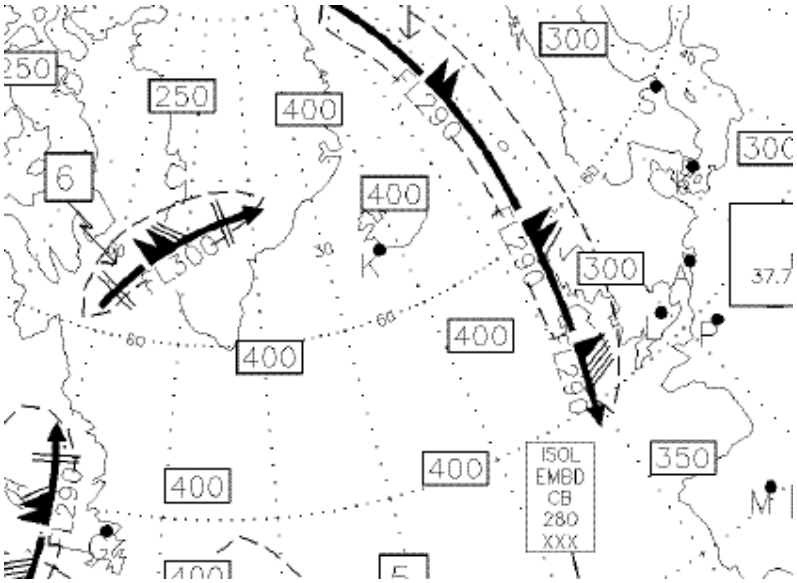
NO METAR AVAILABLE

Nothing inherently difficult about landing at any of these locations, with the exception of the usual turbulence at Vagar. The only troublesome question is the cloud layer, apparently at around 3000-4000 feet. To work out whether or not this is a problem, we turn to satellite imagary.



This is one of many images available around the internet. In this case windflow data has been superimposed onto the underlying IR image. What we can see immediately, is that the cloud pattern over the Atlantic between Scotland and Iceland is in essence, the same cloud pattern as we have been flying over to Wick. If we were able to keep out of the tops there, then there is no reason to imagine that we will have a problem going to Iceland. We also note with a smile that Reykjavik is 1 degree warmer than Cranfield.

But all of this is to ignore the biggest potential issue, the wind. From the NAT Wind charts (not reproduced here), the average wind for a flight across at FL100 would be about 350 at 45 knots. This is re-enforced when you look at the position of the jetstream in this SigWx chart



Not a great sign, it has to be said. We turn to Peter Mundy's Navbox program for a view on the impact of this wind on the flight. For a still air time of 4:35, this wind pushes us to nearly 6 hours. Do-able, legal, but very near the knuckle. So if today was the day, I would be braving the turbulence of Vagar for a fuel-stop.

Tonight, would be spent as planned in the Loftleidir Hotel at Reykjavik airport after a later than ideal but safe arrival.

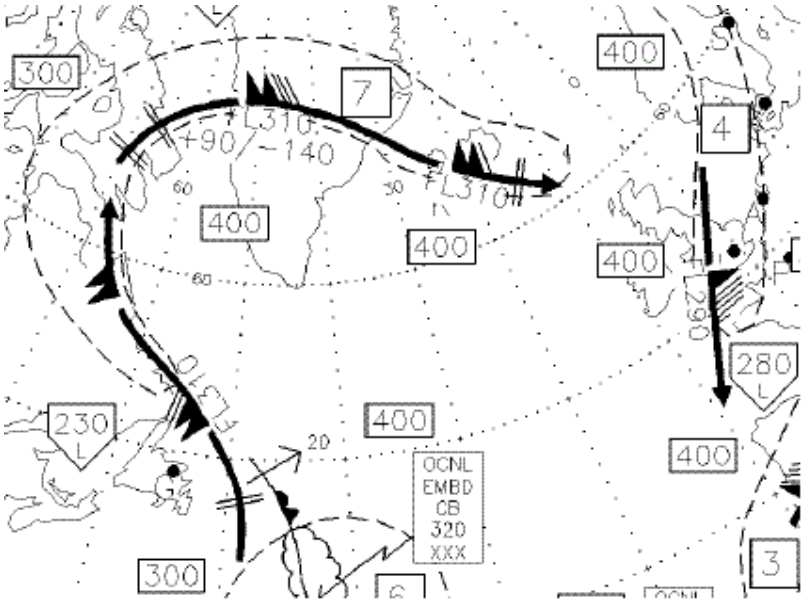
March 3, 2005
Today's Jetstream
Thank you for the many kind comments about yesterday's posting. Judging by the volume of feedback I am receiving on this Blog, there are a lot of people out there interested in "doing the Atlantic", and for my part, the hints, tips and general advice sent to me through the comments boxes and by e-mail are gratefully received.

Yesterday's exercise highlighted very well how critical the winds are going to be for this journey. Each of the three critical legs, Wick-Reykjavik, Reykjavik-Narsarsuaq and Narsarsuaq-Goose Bay are approximately the same length and each has a prevailing headwind as I fly across to the US from England. The challenges for each route are slightly different. Wick-Reykjavik is in many ways the easiest of them, with no shortage of enroute diversionary airfields and continuous VHF coverage. In total contrast, Reykjavik-Narsarsuaq is probably the toughest, with 200 miles of so out of VHF contact in the middle of the route, and a destination with a pitiful instrument approach at the bottom of a fjord prone to fog. And as if this were not enough, when you finally get there, if you can't land, you don't have enough fuel to divert elsewhere with a comfortable margin.

Narsarsuaq - airport and town. Truly, the back of beyond
Here seen on a rare, good weather day

Barring mechanical failure, two things are going to stop me from getting to Narsarsuaq. One is a strong headwind, and the other is ice accumulation. They have pretty much the same effect. The headwind slows your groundspeed down, and any significant accumulation of ice will bring the airspeed down every bit as rapidly, with potentially fatal consequences. Remember, N33NW has a de-iced propeller, but that is all - a token gesture at best.

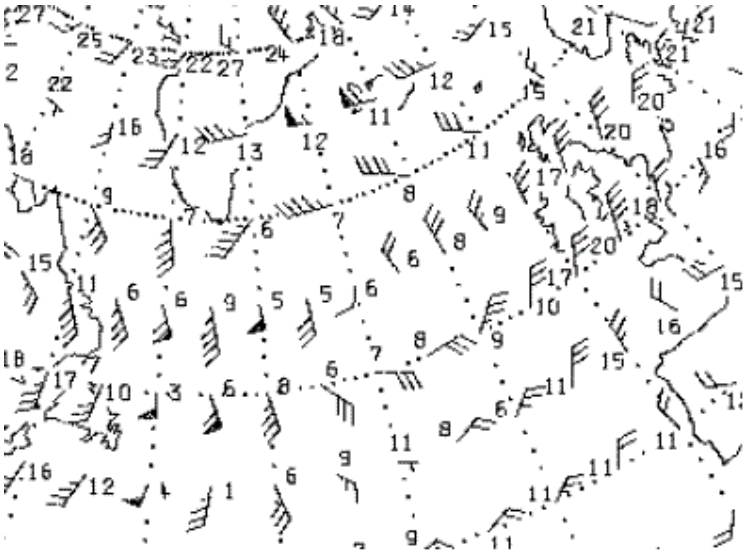
So at a glance, which chart is going to give me the best indication of whether a particular oceanic leg is do-able or not? In my opinion at least, the best single chart is the Significant Weather (SigWx) synoptic that I showed you yesterday. Here is the relevant part of today's timed at 12Z.



These charts actually depict significant weather (stuff you'd probably want to avoid) in the range FL250-FL630, 25000 feet to 63000 feet. At first blush, you might wonder why that would interest me in my little aircraft flying at the highest at around 12000 feet. In reality though, the weather that I will experience in flight is significantly dictated by the upper winds and the weather systems of the upper atmosphere, so for the "big picture", this chart is a good place to start. For my purposes, they are published three times a day with valid times of 06Z, 12Z and 18Z with each chart being made available significantly in advance.

The first feature we are interested in is the location of the jetstream. The jetstream is a core of high-speed wind that flows through the upper atmosphere. Airline route managers flight planning their aircraft across the Atlantic pay particular attention to this since a carefully selected North Atlantic Track could make hours of difference to a long haul flight, either way.

I obviously won't be flying high enough to be "in" the jetstream, but on the other hand, the winds at my sort of level will tend to follow the general course of the jetstream both in terms of position and speed. Here is the 10000 foot wind chart for 06Z today (there is no 12Z chart but it makes little difference in this case).



You can perhaps see why I prefer the earlier SigWx chart for its clarity. Notice that the main learning point from the SigWx chart is that the jetstream is basically pointing at Scotland from Iceland. Compare that with the wind arrows on the 10000 foot wind chart and you'll see that they are basically aligned. The number of tails on the arrow tell you how strong the wind will be. A full tail is 10 knots, half a tail is 5 knots, a triangular black flag on the tail is 50 knots. So the news from that chart is that the winds today for the run from Wick to Reykjavik would be around 30-40 knots more-or-less on the nose, with worse still to come if you cast your eyes across to the next leg down to the tip of Greenland. This is the kind of chart that would have you sitting in your hotel room waiting for better - or perhaps out exploring the fleshpots of Reykjavik!

An established jetstream can remain unmoving for several days, pinning the wise pilot down, despite otherwise good weather. Other times, the path of the jetstream can swing around quite wildly. The only constant is that it will be blowing generally from west to east. Transatlantic flying in this direction is not so much about waiting for tailwinds, as minimising headwinds.

I'll publish "Today's Jetstream" from time-to-time, particularly as we head towards the departure date. For those who are new to this, you can perhaps understand now why the actual day I leave will as much be determined by the jetstream as almost any other factor.

March 3, 2005
Why go to Naples?
Of all the places in Florida to head to, it may have crossed your mind to wonder why I am heading to Naples in Florida. Naples is a long way south of the obvious attractions of the Orlando Area. Why go to a place that is better known for its "Snow Eagles", retired New Yorkers passing their Golden years gently in the sun? Well the answer lies in a Flying School called Naples Air Center.

When I first learnt to fly, the licences I gained were all British. Later, when I came to the US to live, these licences were essentially useable at face value, with little formality. All that was needed a visit to the Local FAA Flight Standards District Office to obtain an endorsement - in effect a US licence *based on* your underlying UK licence. These were much happier times, prior to the attack on the World Trader Center and the degree of administration around foreign licences was minimal.

Having moved back to the UK, my American licences lay dormant in a cupboard until the dawn of a curious animal called JAA. In times past, all matters aviation in the UK were looked after by the Civil Aviation Authority. Around 1999-2000, the UK signed up to join a new body called JAA, the Joint Aviation Authority. Whilst the CAA would continue to look after domestic affairs, JAA was delegated the responsibility for large tracts of Air Law as well as determining the terms, conditions and privileges associated with Pilots' licences and medicals. Without turning this Blog entry into a pseudo-political rant, it would be fair to say that JAA has spread confusion, cost, inconvenience and misery where previously there was light. But that is not all. Barely has JAA settled in, than we find ourselves once again moving towards yet another Euro structure, EASA, the European Aviation Safety Agency. EASA has already taken over aircraft certification, and will shortly take over Flight Crew Licensing in Europe. The end goal is a laudable one - unity across the member states. So far, the execution gets "Nul points". The degree of regulatory uncertainty that this litany of change has brought about has caused many European pilots to seek regulatory comfort elsewhere - most commonly, in the arms of the FAA.

The FAA may be much attacked by US pilots, but by comparison to JAA/EASA, the FAA is a model regulator. Clear attainable licences, with easily understood privileges, clearly written regulations, low cost of regulation and proactive in the adoption of new technology. For many, the attraction is the relative ease with which an FAA instrument rating can be obtained in contrast to the European situation. For others such as myself, the attraction is the regulatory stability and clarity.

Drawn by this, I came to realise that all I needed was an aircraft with an "N" on the side and some US licences that, unlike my old set, were not in any way based on my underlying UK/CAA/JAA/EASA licences. Buying the N-registered aircraft was easy. Getting the FAA licences proved equally so, thanks to **Naples Air Center** (NAC).

NAC is owned and run by husband and wife team Richard and Nikki Gentil. They are, for a school which attracts many British pupils, the perfect pair. He is a former airline captain, she is a British girl who came to America, learnt to fly, and stayed. I first heard of them through friends that had gone across to get US IRs. In some cases, these were people who had no previous instrument flying experience, and who had got their Ratings in three weeks or less. Because of work constraints, I too was only in a

position to take a week or so's break, and the idea of being able to come in, sit the ground exams, fly the flight tests and go home appealed. And without turning this entry into a sales pitch, that is exactly what I did from CPL, IR, ME to ATP. Highly recommended.

So, why am I heading to Naples? A couple of reasons. Firstly, because when I last stood on the tarmac there having flown the ATP flight test, I promised myself that the next time I stood on the same spot, it would be having flown there myself in something very small. Secondly, in my time in Naples I never really did the place itself justice, thanks to the volume of studying required. Exploring it with the family will be a lot of fun; a place which is mercifully free of the football-shirt-wearing, lager swilling Brits that infest Orlando.

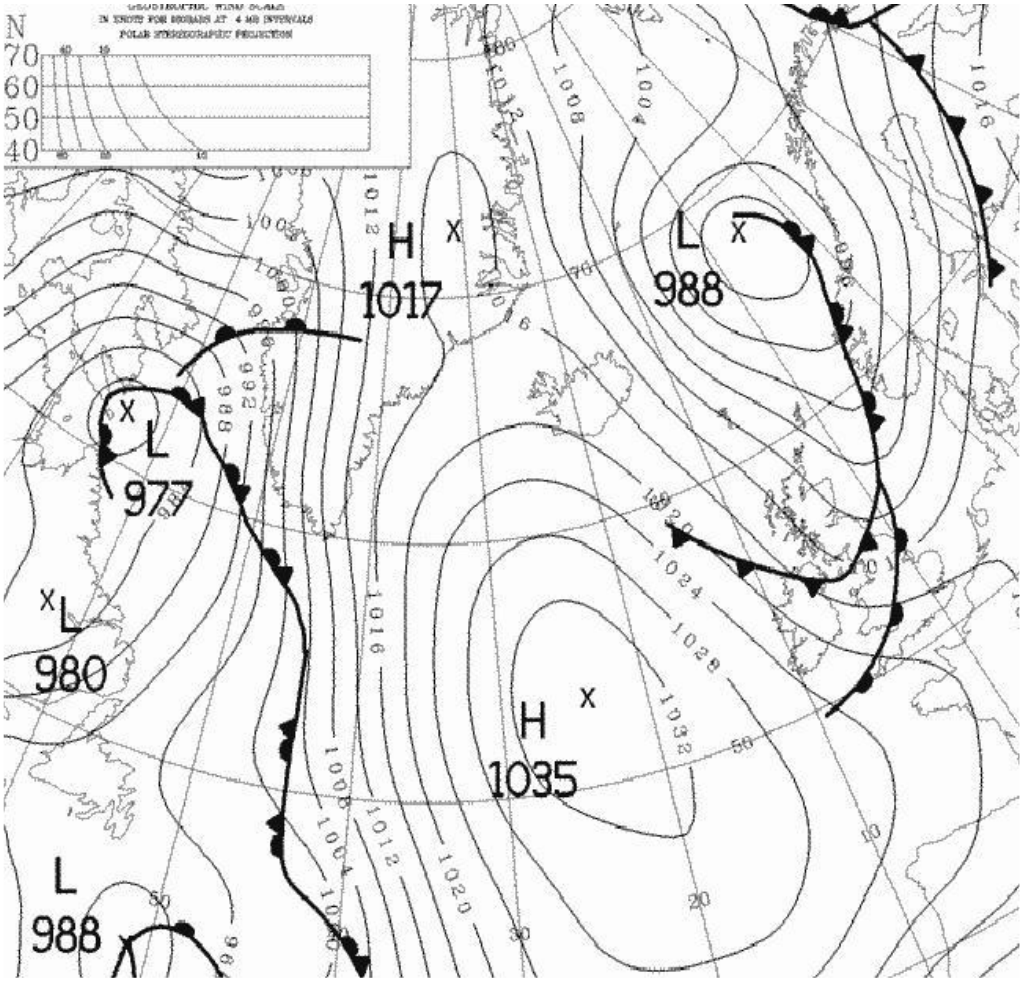
A quick look at the Naples Air Center website reveals that since my stay, they have installed a webcam. I'll admit that it is not the most inspiring of views - I would have put it facing out onto the apron. However, for me the view is sadly special, because in those seats, I sat studying for seemingly interminable ground exams, just to receive that plastic credit-card sized licence to fly.

A snapshot of the Naples webcam. Some of my colleagues reading this may even recognise the instructor leaning on the counter

March 4, 2005
An alternative view of the Winds aloft
I got a mail overnight reminding me that at this time of year, the prevailing weather systems are a more reliable determinant of the winds at FL100 than the higher level jetstream. Fair comment, although in reality, the two are always fairly close to one another.

It is snowing horribly at home today, sufficiently so that so far, I can't get up the drive to go to work, so why not do a quick 15 minute entry on North Atlantic Low Level Weather Systems? Wake up at the back!

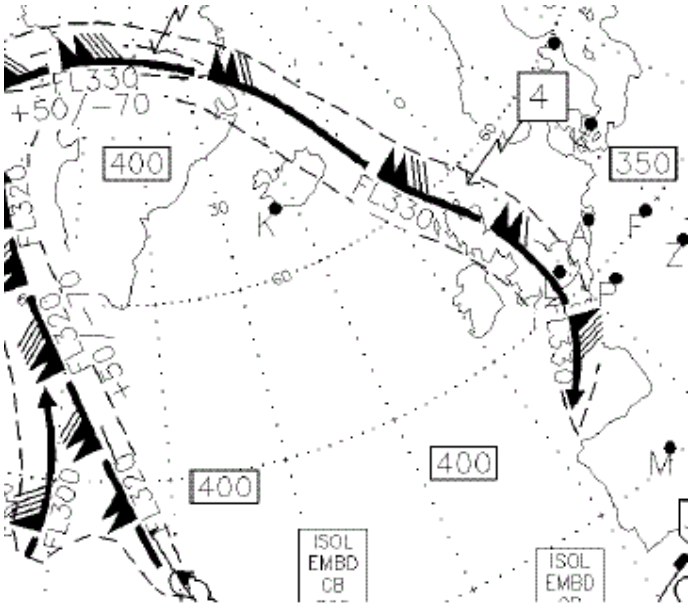
The Met Office produces a superb series of charts based around a surface analysis and a predictive model. Whilst UK focused the charts more-than adequately cover the entire North Atlantic. In timing, they range from a Current Analysis, showing the actual conditions, through to a 24, 36, 48, 60, 72, 96 and 120 hour look ahead. Lets take a look at an extract from the Current Analysis, valid today at 6AM.



Several things about this picture should strike the eye. From the perspective of the North East Atlantic, the governing feature is the 988Mb Low centered East-North-East of Iceland. We know that in our neck of the woods at least, air flows anticlockwise around the a low, and that at altitude, that wind flow is substantially

parallel with the isobars. So, as was the case yesterday, for a flight from Wick to Reykjavik, the wind remains more-or-less in our faces. The spacing of the isobars gives an indication of how strong the winds will be. In reality though, this is something of a black art, despite the helpful scale on the top left of the picture. Seeing that kind of spacing, I would expect winds of around 30 knots on the route to Reykjavik.

So much for the winds. They tie up with the jetstream picture for today, reproduced here. You'll note immediately how the jetstream lines up with the path of the most densely-packed isobars on the synoptic chart.



So we know about the winds. An area that I left a little vague last time was the nature of the weather that might be encountered enroute. For this, we turn back once again to the synoptic. Most, but not all, of the flying weather that is going to cause us problems is associated with weather fronts. Circulating around that 988 LOW are a number of parcels of air of different temperatures and humidities. Nasty weather tends to occur where two air parcels of different types rub against one another. This boundary is known as a front. Where a cold parcel is following a warm, we call this a cold front, and where a warm parcel is chasing a cold, we call that a warm front. Because the warm air has a tendency to rise up over the cold air, a warm front tends to travel rather more slowly across the ground than a cold front so for any given Low Pressure system, the warm fronts will tend to get caught up by the cold fronts. When a warm front is finally overtaken by the cold, we call the resulting mix an occluded front. Warm fronts are shown by a series a semicircles along the frontal line, cold fronts by triangles, and occluded fronts by alternating semicircles and triangles.

Some truisms that are slightly more often right than wrong... Cold fronts are often associated with good visibility below cloud, tall cold clouds, big rain drops, serious icing risk and severe weather. Warm fronts are often associated with poor visibility, drizzle, lower levels of cloud, and rather lighter icing. Occluded fronts are a tough call, but in my experience often hide some of the nastiest thunderstorms and other weather artifacts that you could ever hope not to meet.

Armed with these rules of thumb (they should not be regarded any more highly than that), it is easy to see why my car is stuck in the driveway and I can't get to work. Southern England is being swept in quick succession by two fronts, one warm, the second cold. In fact, we can see as we look up towards the centre of the low, that the warm front is in the process of being caught up by the cold, and has started to become occluded.

Another horrendous rule of thumb for you. Imagine an outline an inch or so either side of any frontal line like a large sausage shape enclosing the front. That is the extent of the worst of the weather associated with the front. The chances are that Wick for example, is now through the worst of that weather.

METAR EGPC 040850Z 31014KT 9999 VCSH FEW015CB SCT044 02/01 Q1009=

but that Luton is right in it.

METAR EGGW 040850Z 22008KT 160V260 2000 R26/1100 R08/1200 -SN BKN005 OVC008 M02/M02 Q1010=

Notice the CBs in the Wick forecast. I told you that they tend to pop up near Occluded fronts. Wick is that much closer to the centre of the LOW that it sits near the occlusion line. Rules of thumb, but not at all bad.

If we were sitting at Wick wondering if we were about to encounter bad weather on the way to Reykjavik (leaving aside the wind), the synoptic places no frontal activity between the two. A very good sign. We've seen the Wick actual, how about Vagar (enroute) and Reykjavik itself?

METAR EKVG 040850Z 32037G48KT 9999 BKN040 01/M07 Q1010 RMK WIND 850 FT 32042G59KT 300V360=

METAR BIRK 040800Z 29006KT 9999 FEW010 SCT024 BKN038 04/03 Q1020=

Not exactly Cannes, and Vagar has its customary high winds, but its hardly as bad as Luton. A look at the Satellite pictures to get an idea of the cloud tops and our picture would be complete.

Knowing what we know, we can now start to think about what would be ideal weather for the outbound crossing. A Low to the West and South of Ireland would do, ideally moving towards the west. Not too common an occurrence at this time of year but it does happen.

Not everybody minds the cold fronts
No school today because of the 988 LOW

March 5, 2005
Back in the Air again
On Friday afternoon, the snow melted sufficiently to be able to get the car out of the drive - which was a lucky break, since at Lunchtime, Andy called from IAE to say that the aircraft had been put back together and was ready to fly.

Sitting on the ground in the sunshine having just returned from ground runs, N33NW was a sight for sore eyes. The three weeks she has been out of commission have dragged badly.

Sitting in the Cranfield evening dinge, ready to go

It is the sign of a good engineer (or a bad one who has grown tired of life) that Andy was keen to come up for the test run. He too flies a TB20, a real advantage in your engineer, and he wanted to see the Air Data Computer at work for himself. At just past 4PM, we climbed away from Runway 04 towards a nearby reservoir, Grafham Water, for some handling checks and a general play.

TB20s have something of a reputation for high cabin vibration levels, and N33NW is no exception. In fact, when I first bought the aircraft, I was disappointed to discover that it seemed to vibrate rather more than most. In an attempt to minimise this vibration, I followed all manner of well intentioned advice, each morsel reducing the vibration slightly, but not enough to really satisfy me.

In no particular order, I:

a) Fitted a Three Bladed Scimitar Propeller (Socata UK claims that these increase vibration, but my experience was the opposite)
b) Fitted Fine wire iridium sparkplugs
c) Had the Engine and Propeller dynamically balanced
d) Fitted an engine monitor and GAMIjectors

With the exception of the GAMIjectors, which made a very noticeable change, the other steps made relatively little difference. Even with the GAMIs, the remaining vibration was unsatisfactory. More puzzling still, was that the amplitude of the vibration appeared to increase with airspeed - suggesting an aerodynamic factor such as a sagging undercarriage door. These were all checked early on in the process and no problems were identified.

The punchline of course, is that as I put the aircraft through its paces over Grafham Water on Friday evening, the vibration has disappeared totally. I seem to own the smoothest running TB20 on the planet. How has this happened? Two options seem possible. The first is that the tailcone was already gapping in the airflow before finally parting company with the aircraft on our return from Tours. This is certainly a possibility. I do a lot of formation flying and therefore have many air-to-air photos of the aircraft from various angles. I am still scrutinising these to see if there is any evidence to support the theory. The second possibility relates to the rigging of the ailerons. You will recall that one of the squawks which I asked to be looked at during the annual was the fact that in balanced level flight, whilst the left aileron would be flush with the adjacent flap, the right aileron would fly proud by about 1 cm. This "misrigging" is very common on TBs to judge by *socata.org*, the owners' group. This has now been fixed, and the aircraft flies level with both ailerons in the desired position. Who knows? If anybody out there has a view, I'd be keen to hear from you via the Comments link at the bottom of this article.

My new tailcone - was the departure of its predecessor a blessing in disguise?

Just a single squawk came out of the checkflight, The Outside Air Temperature gauge feed for the Air Data Computer seems to be picking up a bit of exhaust, so the ADC is registering about 10 degrees C warmer than it should. The probe will need repositioning next week - a bit nearer the tail.

Today, the aircraft flew for 2 hours, tomorrow it'll do another couple to Le Touquet and back (Mother's Day!).

It is good to be back in the air again!

March 7, 2005
First Flights - a few bugs to iron out
It is brilliant to be back in the saddle again. As predicted, there are a few bits and pieces that need sorting out, and I now have the luxury of 2 weeks in which to get them sorted out before the off. Things to do, minor and more significant include:

a) A Vacuum pump that looks like it is on the way out. That will be replaced

b) A P1 seat back that looks in need of a some TLC. Good men have died when they suddenly reclined during a critical phase of flight.

c) The aileron trim tabs need a little tweaking now that the ailerons have been re-rigged.

All in all, not a bad crop. Andy and the team will be taking a look at those over the next couple of days.

Meanwhile, the Air Data Computer is continuing to make its presence felt. The complete Air Data, TCAS and Fuel Computer piece are now integrated through the Garmin 530 GPS system. This makes for a powerful flight management tool not dissimilar to an airliner FMS. I thought I'd take a few photos during the last few flights to show you what I mean.

Lets start with the basic map display, the normal mode in which the GPS is used - now enhanced with TCAS and wind data.

In this shot, we are at FL90 in controlled airspace heading towards REDFA on the

FIR boundary with Netherlands. TCAS is showing us another aircraft in our 1 o clock at 1.7 miles 4300 feet above our level and converging. He is squawking 1356. Meanwhile, in the bottom right of the display, the wind arrow is showing us that the winds aloft are right on the nose, at 20 knots.

Now we move on to the Wind Details page

A little bit further on in the same flight, the winds detail page tells us what the Air Data Computer is doing. We are at FL90 where the total air temperature is -5C. The ADC can therefore calculate our TAS (and Mach number if we want to be depressed!) which it compares with our heading and GPS ground track and speed to solve the triangle of vectors for wind speed and direction. Magical.

Meanwhile, the Fuel Page looks like this:

This shot, confusingly, was taken from Sunday's flight to Le Touquet. We have 303 litres on board (from an initial 326), fuel flow is 40.9 Lph (we are lean of peak) achieving a groundspeed of 128 knots against yet another headwind. Subsequent fields give the fuel required to destination, the estimated landing fuel, and... most importantly perhaps, our range and endurance to dry tanks. Given that my maximum hop is 670 nautical miles, you'll see that even in the face of a headwind, the numbers are quite respectable.

Which takes us neatly to the engine data monitor.

This is the state of the Cylinder Head Temperatures and Exhaust Gas temperatures running lean of peak at FL90. Each column represents a Cylinder. You'll note the even-ness of both sets of temperatures - the EGT is the orange column and the CHT is the black line in each column. The numbers underneath, 1455 and 278 are the EGT and CHT of Cylinder 1 (note the dot under the number 1) The numbers for each cylinder are cycled through one cylinder every 2 seconds during flight allowing actual values to be seen. Monitoring itself is in real time and simultaneous on each cylinder. Prior to the installation of GAMIjectors, not only was it impossible to get lean-of-peak, the columns were very badly misaligned, even rich of peak.

So there you have it - one of the best instrumented TB20s on the planet. And all so that I can enjoy views like this one, taken on the way back from Le Touquet on Sunday.

March 8, 2005
Sorting out the last few bits and pieces
It was good to be cautious. It turns out that there was a weld failing on my seat. I like to think that this has nothing to do with my weight - 252 lbs, which the Eagle-Eyed will have seen on my Pilots Licence. In fact Trinidad seats are renowned for this type of failure because passengers climbing in tend to lean with their full weight on the top of the seat backs as they clamber in and out. Mine is probably suffering from many years of this abuse. With the weld complete, it will be back in the aircraft for tomorrow. There is no substitute for flying an aircraft regularly. The engineers only spotted the failing weld once the seat had been stripped down to its frame. By contrast, I felt it over the course of the last few days because it didn't "quite feel right". There have been one or two famous accidents caused by pilots seats either not being latched or failing during take-off. The pilot grabs the first thing he can under those circumstances, often the control column, and the rest is obvious.

Continuing the cautious trend, I am having the vacuum pump replaced. Even though I have a standby electric Artificial Horizon, the pump is an item that you wouldn't want to lose. The vacuum pump drives the master Artificial horizon on my aircraft and the Autopilot takes it's cue from the AI. I'd like to feel that a lost vacuum pump wouldn't cause me to lose control and crash, but it would make the autopilot unavailable for those very very very long straight over-water bits. That would hurt almost as much. So the only other thing I have to worry about is a piece of Aviation Folklore. It is said that Vacuum pumps have a very high infant mortality rate. They either last for a thousand hours or so, or they die in the first twenty. I still think that changing it is the best route. Time will tell.

Yesterday, I showed you some photographs of the Avionics on the way to Lelystad, but I didn't tell you about the trip itself. The purpose was of course to pick up my shiny Jeppesen trip kits for the flight. Peter Mundy had them all boxed up ready to go, and an Air Traffic Controller pal, Steve Le-Vien (better known as Luton Tower) volunteered to come along for the ride. The day was just about VFRable, but for ease we went IFR, heading out across the wide part of the North Sea on the airway between Clacton VOR and SPY VOR in Holland. The flight was that perfect kind of IFR where you break through a solid layer of cloud to cruise in the sunshine for an hour before descending back into the gloop to land. In the event the scenery that greeted us below cloud was good practice for Greenland. We left a green and pleasant England, only to find Holland frozen solid, with most of the many canals and inland lakes covered in serious-looking sheets of ice. Quite eery. Lelystad airport is owned and operated by the same organisation that runs Amsterdam's main Schiphol International Airport. As a result, the little GA airport is unusually well equipped with snow blowers, ploughs and the general paraphernalia of bad weather operations. The clear runway was neatly cleared of snow and the efficiency of the place would put larger airports like Cranfield to shame.

Jepp Trip Kits are a little bit like BMW cars. You buy what you think is a whole car, only to discover that you need to buy lots of other things in order to bring them up to a minimum acceptable spec. In the case of Jepp manuals, the kits come all hole-punched, but without any binders. And... the binders and hole layout are of a one-off design which only Jeppesen sell. Fortunately, I have enough old Jeppesen binders at home to last me a lifetime - and nothing else will fit in them. So problem solved. Peter,

Steve and I filled our stomachs at the same airport restaurant we visited last time - the one where the attractive waitresses come with captains' insignia on their shoulders. And by quarter past three we were back on the ground at Cranfield after another pleasant IFR cruise, and another opportunity to be amazed (and relieved) by the accuracy of the onboard fuel calculations.

A little rummaging at home last night unearthed a motley collection of Jepp binders from different subscriptions I have held in the past. Watching "Celebrity Fame Academy" on the TV for background noise, I decanted the shrink-wrapped piles of paper into the binders. Jepp have taken an altogether more intelligent approach with their US coverage, than they have in Europe. Jeppesen coverage of Central Europe requires no less than five 2" binders to accommodate all of the required charts. These charts are supplied and updated in Alphabetical order. So, any trip, to any country in Europe requires you to carry every single binder, with you, unless you are prepared to overlook the possibility of landing at airfields starting with the letters A-G, for example. The US coverage by contrast, is all grouped by State. This means that whilst my trip kit includes Eastern States such as Ohio and Illinois, I don't actually need to bother putting them in binders, since my route won't take me anywhere near them. Careful selection of the actual states required has allowed me to hone the entire kit down to what you see here.

All the maps a boy could need
Iceland, Greenland and Oceanic airspace - top
The Eastern US - middle
Eastern Canada - bottom

No pruning was required outside the US, but this gives you an idea of how much of the Eastern US trip kit, I don't actually need

This will go into a cardboard box to be carried in the baggage compartment. Because... you never know

A Word About TCAS

Steve Cooper wrote a comment on the bottom of yesterday's entry asking about TCAS - in particular, how does TCAS determine which traffic should be filtered out of the display.

To answer the question, the Ryan TCAD system, fitted to this aircraft, operates in a number of "Shield Modes", which determie the lateral range in which it searches for traffic, as well as the vertical envelope. I cheated to provide yesterday's screen shot, by placing the shield in "Unrestricted Mode", so that I could grab a shot of the passing airliner and its squawk. Normally, the unit steps automatically through Ground mode (restricted range, no audio warnings), through Departure mode (slightly wider range, but ground returns suppressed) through to Enroute Mode. If armed by the pilot, once within a predetermined range (vertically and horizontally) of the arrival airport, the unit will start to pull the shield back in again, going into Approach mode, and finally back into Ground mode.

These modes are controlled by the TCAS unit in response to inputs it receives from amongst other things, the GPS and Air Data Computer. But, the modes and shield sizes can be over-ridden through a dedicated TCAS setup page accessible through the GPS.

I'm more than happy to answer queries of this sort. You'll find the "comments" link at the bottom of each article.

March 8, 2005
Yet another take on the weather
A quick lunchtime post introducing you to another tool I use for making weather decisions in Europe. As it happens, the tool will also provide pretty good decision making abilities much further afield

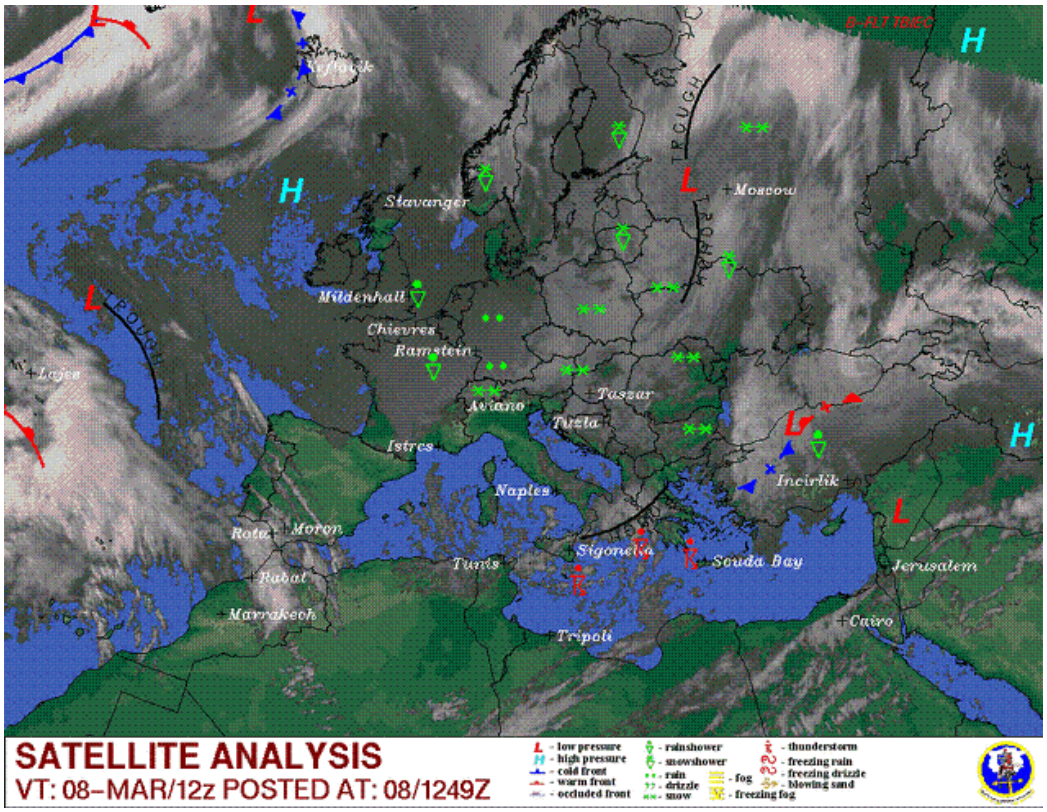
This tool is brought to you by the US Air Force and their Operational Weater Squadron (OWS) in Europe. There are two reasons why what they have to say is interesting:

1) Their presentation style is much more graphical, with rather better use of colour and symbology than the Met Office, requiring rather less head-scratching and interpretation.

2) It is a little known fact that most of the UK's TAFs are derive from a "Met Office Model" - essentially, the thoughts of a very clever computer somewhere near Exeter. This means that UK TAFs tend to be very internally consistent across the country, but lack the local knowledge of the individual forecasters that prevailed in times of yore. The other disadvantage is that when the model gets it wrong, which it does on occasion, all of the forecasts tend to be wrong together, and you can get caught out rather badly. To counter this, the Met Office has developed a rather pessimistic streak in these litigious times, and forecasts tend to be for worse weather than can really be associated with the prevailing situation. Not so, the US Military. Their forecast is independent from the Met Office's, and that provides a welcome alternative take that can occasionally help you to understand things better.

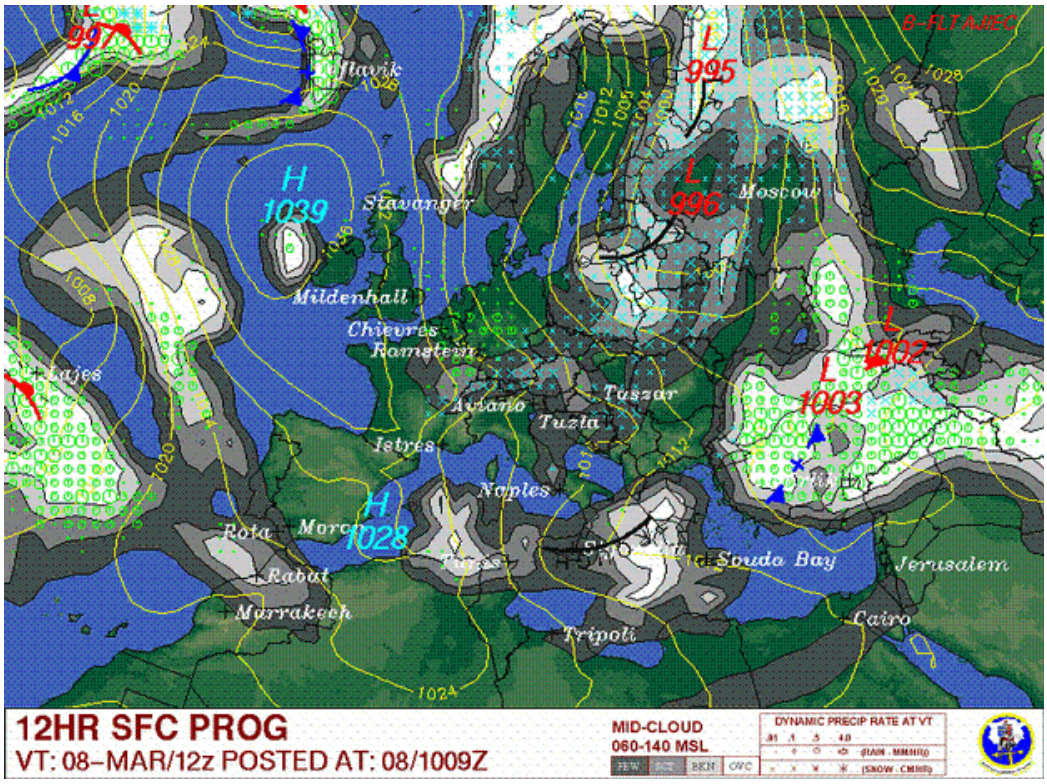
Time spent browsing the US site is time well spent. For my purposes I thought I'd introduce you to extracts from three particularly useful charts.

The first is a Satellite Analysis Chart



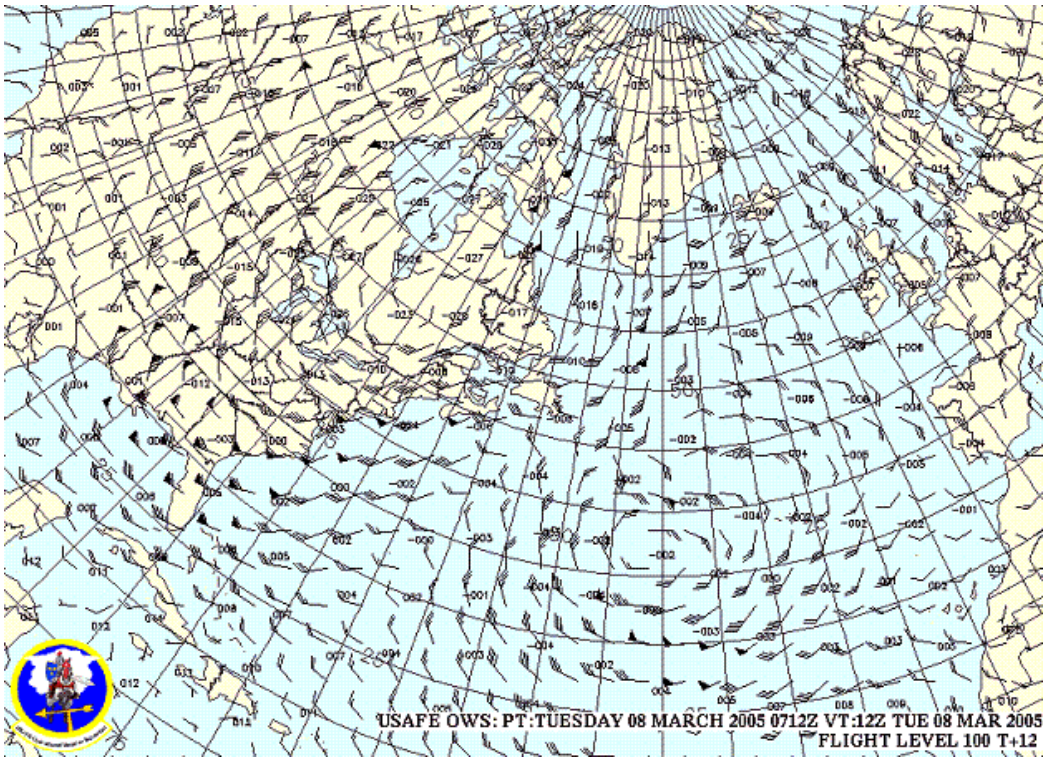
As you can see, this combines a recent satellite picture with superimposed weather symbols indicating the likely conditions to be encountered in the weather depicted, and the positions of Fronts, Troughs, Highs and Lows. The cloud depiction is particularly interesting in that generally, thinner clouds with lower tops are depicted by the dark grey colour that predominates in this example, with higher tops and more difficult conditions depicted by whiter cloud swirls. For flying IFR in the lower unpressurised levels, this gives a great insight into what is do-able, and where you might run into trouble. The chances are that there is plenty of ice in that cloud lying between Iceland and Greenland.

Following on from this, and at intervals that parallel the Met Office Model, the US also produce a forecast chart.



This is the 12 hour projection, valid more-or-less at the time of posting, and covering the same situation as we saw in the satellite analysis above. The really interesting thing about this diagram is that the grey-white shading reflects the presence of cloud cover between FL60 and FL140, just the sort of cloud that I care about. Once again, we see that I can safely plan on getting all the way to the shores of Iceland without being in any significant cloud. Once I get to Iceland though, there is a cold front coming through, and that will demand some care.

The final chart for this session is the US Military's depiction of winds aloft.



This chart uses the same symbology as the Met Office chart, but is much easier to read thanks to the shading (especially when you see it full size, I have reduced them for this website).

Today, the winds look pretty good for a run all the way to Canada. Only the weather fronts would need a lot of care...

There's always a good reason not to fly if you search hard enough.

March 8, 2005
Following the Flight in Naples
A particular welcome this evening to people who found this site by following the new link on the Naples Air Center Website.

The story so far:

In a little under two weeks on March 20th, I will be leaving my home field, Cranfield (EGTC) in the South of the United Kingdom and flying my Socata TB20 Trinidad, N33NW all the way to Naples Florida. This website consists of a sporadic series of Diary entries documenting the preparations for the flight, from visa applications, through route planning, up to the aircraft's recent annual.

With a little luck, after a brief stay in Boston, I should be arriving in Naples on the evening of March 29th. I can already taste the Michelbob's Ribs.

Given an internet connection in each of the hotels along the route, this website will contain daily updates of my progress along with photos of the route.

March 9, 2005
Downloading the Navdata
Despite the enormous popularity of panel-mounted GPS units such as the Garmin 430 and 530, it is surprising how many owners neglect to keep the actual navigation databases current. Jeppesen is the monopoly supplier of electronic navigation data for GA GPS systems, and in part, this neglect is undoubtedly down to the high prices that Jeppesen charges for its services. To judge by the questions that crop up in pilot discussions, there is also an element of technophobia; the fear that once the valid, but expired data cartridge is removed from the GPS, it will never work again. The Jeppesen Navdata products are incredibly comprehensive through, and if you do tour in your aircraft, either VFR or especially IFR, having up-to-date Navdata is like having another pair of hands, as well as making you legal in the latter case.

On a Garmin 530 unit, the Navdata is stored on a small black data cartridge inserted into the front panel, which you can see pictured above. When an update is due, the cartridge is removed from the aircraft and inserted into a card programmer called the Skybound. This unit is a USB device, also supplied by Jeppesen, capable of programming a number of the standard cartridge types found in commercial GPS units. Programming is as simple as connecting to the internet, firing up the Skybound software, providing your username and password, and selecting the data that you wish to download. This choice of data is suitably constrained by the subscriptions that you have purchased.

Programming the cartridge with the American data for my trip

Navdata is made available on a more-or-less monthly cycle, to conform to the internationally agreed issue dates for navigation data changes. With a little over a week before my departure, the relevant data cycle is now available for download. One more task to tick off the list.

If it isn't in America, it is "International", according to Jeppesen.
The flight between Greenland and Canada will require a in-flight swap of cartridges.

March 10, 2005
Cranfield
I've written a lot about the various exotic points along the route without actually saying much about Cranfield, the place that I will launching from in a little over 1 week's time.

Cranfield's Control Tower - a Cabair Cougar on the tower apron

Cranfield Airport, ICAO code EGTC is located in South East of England, just north of Luton (voted "Crappiest Location in England 2005")and just to the east of Milton Keynes, a sprawling modern pseudo-city. Despite these inauspicious settings, Cranfield Airport itself is set in the leafy Bedfordshire Countryside on the grounds of what is now Cranfield University, who continue to own and operate the facilities. The airfield started life during the dark days of World War 2, where it served primarily as a maintenance and Operational Conversion Unit (OCU) for all sorts of aircraft. Photographs adorn the walls of the control tower building, and picture such diverse types as Lancasters, Spitfires, Halifaxes and Ansons. The base was mother to a number of satellite airfields of which perhaps the most famous was Twinwood Farm. Twinwood Farm lives on in memory only, as the place where Big Band Legend Glen Miller boarded his final fatal flight in December 1944.

RAF Cranfield (often confused with the still-operational RAF Cranwell) was deemed surplus to requirements soon after the war and became home to a succession of academic institutions which include Cranfield College of Aeronautics, Cranfield Institute of Technology, Cranfield Management School and most recently, Cranfield University, an umbrella organisation covering all of the academic activities on site.

The old RAF base has adapted well to academic life with most of the original buildings and base layout unchanged since its service days. Of the original classic 3-runway RAF triangle, just two runways survive in operational use 22/04 and 36/18. The third, which I remember from my early flight training is now used to provide parking to the airfield's many resident aircraft.

Cranfield Airport is home to numerous flight schools, none more prolific nor persistent than Cabair. Whilst most of the other schools deal with the PPL market, Cabair at Cranfield are primarily interested in tomorrow's airline pilots. Such is the volume of students, even in these tough times, that the CAA retains a flight examination centre on site and on most days, EXAM callsigns can be heard on Commercial and Instrument checkrides.

In addition to the Flight schools, Cranfield is also home to numerous flying-related enterprises, including at least two significant maintenance organisations, Bonus Engineering and International Aerospace Engineering, in whose hangar N33NW lives.

The airfield is exceptionally well equipped, boasting an ILS to runway 22, an on-field VOR (with associated approach procedure) and an NDB off-field, which also provides some excitement for Instrument Rating candidates. Sadly, since the demise of RAF Bedford some years ago, the airfield has no dedicated radar facility, so that all of the instrument approaches are procedurally managed by Cranfield’s own Controllers. Air Traffic Control is contracted out by the University to SERCO, one of the few independent ATC providers in the UK. SERCO itself is not without its problems, but as for the people on the ground, you couldn't hope for a friendlier, co-operative and just plain nice bunch of ATCOs if you tried.

Unfortunately, the experience for visitors is rather less welcoming. Landing fees at Cranfield do not stand up to scrutiny compared to those offered at similarly equipped fields in the area. The airfield additionally charges approach fees for those making IFR approaches and once on the ground, the facilities are pretty sparse. There is an expectation that anybody landing at Cranfield has somewhere else to go; unless you are visiting one of the resident companies, there is nothing to keep you at the place, and no "club" atmosphere. I was recently embarrassed to see a friend in a PA28 charged over £100 for two landings and three instrument approaches. Totally unjustifiable when large nearby radar-equipped fields will offer the same for less than half the price. This and other idiosyncrasies aside, I love being based at Cranfield, and have been pleased to call it home on and off for nearly 10 years.

March 10, 2005
All done
A quick run around the circuit tonight confirmed that all squawks on the aircraft have now been cleared. A new vacuum pump has been fitted, and the indicated output looks much healthier. Let's hope that the high early failure rates of vacuum pumps don't apply to mine! The welding on the seatback was completed overnight, and my seat has never been so solid, so to speak! Finally, the outside air temperature probe has been repositioned to the port side of the aircraft, just behind the baggage door, and appears to be working well with none of the exhaust induced heat wave that it was previously reporting.

Tonight's flight allowed the opportunity to bend the aileron trim tabs to correct for the re-rigging and to test the two GPS data cartridges. Everything fine there too.

The aircraft has never flown better. I really am ready to go now with one week in hand.

March 13, 2005
The Road to the Isles
One week to go, and with a busy week in the office next week, this weekend has provided me with the last real opportunity to exercise the aircraft prior to departure. Saturday included a run to Le Touquet (again) with a friend and lapsed pilot, Tim and his latest girlfriend. Le Touquet may well be a little unimaginative, but from a an aircraft checkout point of view, it is not a bad run. An airways flight that involves a climb to FL100 and a radar vectored ILS at the far end, it exercises pretty much every system that the aircraft has to offer, as well as the pilot. The workload on those brief blasts through the London TMA is never short of frenetic.

Today, I wanted to exercise the aircraft on a rather longer run. In one of those odd pieces of timing, the perfect destination emerged during the course of last week when I heard a rather disturbing piece of news.

Oban airport on the West Coast of Scotland is, on the face of it, a rather unremarkable place. Like so many airfields in the UK, North Connel, to give the place its proper name, is a former military airfield that fell into post-war disuse. The land came in due course to be earmarked for building development, until the intervention of local flying interests, personified by a man named Paul Keegan. Paul managed to negotiate a concession to run Oban as a proper airfield and to sell fuel to anybody keen enough to want to fly there. He put a Portakabin at one side of the runway, tidied the place up, organised hire cars to meet visiting pilots, brought fuel bowsers to the field, and hired Brian, another thoroughly likeable individual, to work with him.

Proof positive that flying and taking photos don't go together!
The approach to Runway 01 at Oban on Sunday

Through a combination of sheer effort and the force of Paul's own magnetic

personality, Oban has gone from being a would-be housing estate into being a thriving airport supporting around 4000 movements a year, ranging from little aircraft like mine, all the way up to Executive Jets, RAF Chinooks and the odd Royal visitor. This, is in addition to supporting a thriving local gliding and microlight club as well as its own small population of based aircraft. It can't have been easy. Oban's picturesque setting amongst the mountains, rapidly degrades into being a nightmare for pilots when the weather turns bad. This makes it difficult to plan to get there more than a day or so in advance, no matter how well equipped your aircraft may be. My own experience over the years has been that bad weather is not just a seasonal thing. You can be clouded out of Oban in July with almost the same likelihood as in January.

The chances are that it is Oban's fundamental unsuitability for commercial operations that allowed it to escape the attentions of Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL). HIAL is the state-owned body that has been given responsibility for owning and operating the vast majority of the other airports in the region - places such as Islay, Tiree and Benbecula. HIAL has benefited from enormous amounts of European Money to turn these airports into proper public transport facilities complete with modern terminal buildings, high-quality runways, and instrument approach equipment. Having created the airports, it then opens them at rather unusual hours, specifically to meet the small number of scheduled flights that link the Islands to the mainland. Their use outside these hours is at pilots' own risk, without fire cover and on payment of £25 to HIAL for an Indemnity. Landing fees reflect the desire to make some money back, and are payable whether or not any service is offered or available when you land. In these security-conscious days, landing outside hours often means shinning over a high fence to leave the airport perimeter, thanks to a locked gate. Quite a contrast to the smiling man who meets his arrivals at any time of the day or night with a plate of "Jammy Dodger" biscuits and a freshly brewed coffee or tea at Oban.

This contrast can be seen both in the affection in which Oban is held by the GA community of the UK. The airport won Flyer magazine's Best Airport award a couple of years ago. The success can also by measured in the movement figures enjoyed by the place; in very stark contrast to the equivalent HIAL airports. Oban is there to provide a service to pilots, pilots might, if they're lucky, be able to pay to land at the HIAL airports.

So to the bad news that I heard earlier last week. Paul Keegan's concession on the operation of Oban airport runs out in November this year. He will retain the contract for fuel supply for many years to come, but this gives him no pleasure. It seems that without any form of tendering process, it is the intention of the Scottish Executive, Scotland's devolved parliament, to give the operation of Oban to none other than HIAL, on the pretext of opening up the airport to scheduled air services between Oban and various of the local Isles. This is a laudable goal. Oban could do with a nice new resurfaced runway, and if it had a terminal instead of Paul's Portakabin, that would be great too. The shocking news for General Aviation is that one would entrust such a development to an authority with a proven track record of opening airports for its own convenience rather than for that of its wider customer base. There are plenty of proven airport operators in Europe, and a man on site with a tremendous personal franchise. None of them have been offered the opportunity to bid in competition with HIAL. From an outsider's viewpoint, it seems that there is a bigger political agenda being played out.

So now you know the background, the flight today provided the ideal opportunity to go up and see Paul and hear about the struggle first-hand. I will work with Paul to put an article together for the next edition of FLYER magazine, bringing the plight of the field to the wider GA audience. In the now-standard strong headwinds, the flight up was a reasonable 2:55, with the flight back at FL130 and 190 knots groundspeed coming in at just under two hours. No fuel was taken on at Oban, and yet we landed with around two hours in the tanks. That is the sort of performance that makes me feel good about Narsarsuaq!

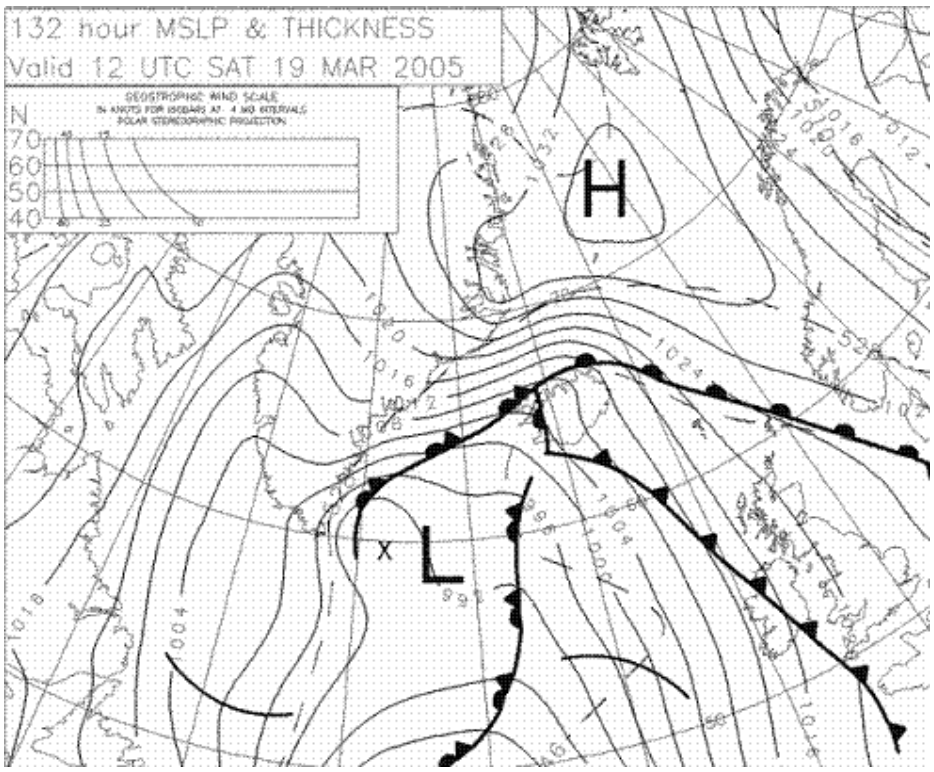
Paul and his wife Shona were their usual friendly selves and lunch was at an excellent fish restaurant "Eeusk", on the North Pier. Eeusk was voted one of the AA's Seafood Restaurants of the Year 2005/6. Highly recommended - and not just because one of Paul's offspring works there. The Oysters were fantastic, and would put the French to shame.

So nothing much to do with my trip, except to say that this weekend has provided two memorable flights, with no snags to report. Visit Oban if you get the chance and do it soon. If HIAL gets to run the airport in the future, a certain unique welcome in the Highlands may be about to vanish forever.

Parked on the North edge of the apron, dwarfed by the scenery

March 14, 2005
Perhaps it'll be an early start
As those who have been following this Blog will know, the exact time of my departure from the UK was always going to be something of a moveable feast. With a nominal kick-off date a week today on the 21st, I was always prepared to juggle things around somewhat if the weather started to look as though it would favour an earlier or later departure. There is little fun to be had sitting in a foreign hotel room on your own as the rain falls outside your window.

Weather forecasts are at best a black art even as little as three days ahead. Once you start looking five days ahead, you really wouldn't want to place too many bets on their accuracy. However, they shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. Here is what the Met Office is predicting for next Saturday:



On the face of it, this is pretty exciting news. This forecast is indicating that rare and beautiful thing, a low just to the west of Ireland holding out the promise of very significant tailwinds to Iceland at the very least, and possibly even as far as Greenland. So for the weeks that I have been scribbling in the Blog about how transatlantic travel east-west is all about minimising headwinds, here we have a meteorological factor that could turn a tough and slow journey into one which might just be a lot faster. Just look at those isobars. Quite a rarity for this time of year.

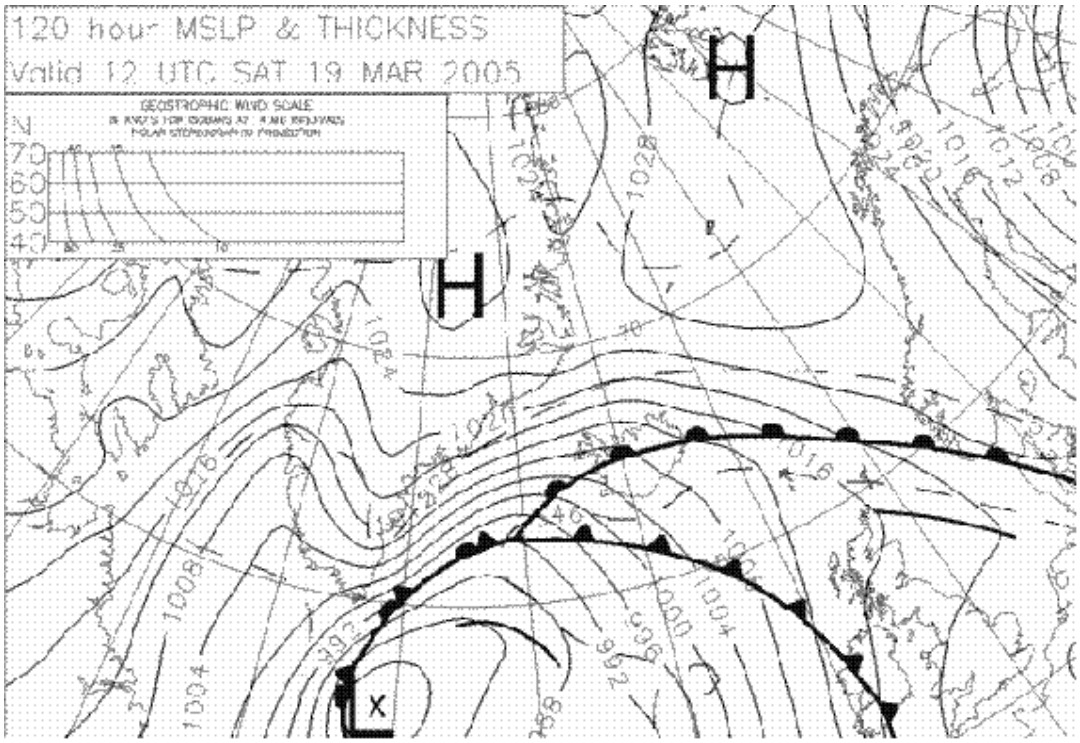
Before we get carried away though, this is a long-range forecast. It is unlikely that the relative positions of the lows and highs will be totally wrong, but the benefit to me could vary significantly depending on where exactly they are centred. The other factor that we have to be exceptionally cautious about is the frontal activity associated with lows. To judge by this forecast, the Low, will be circled by a collection of extremely

significant fronts. Each of these, with the possible exception of the warm front, will harbour weather that could spell icing and turbulence to such an extent that flight would be dangerous. Ironic indeed if the winds were ideal, but the weather prevented flight.

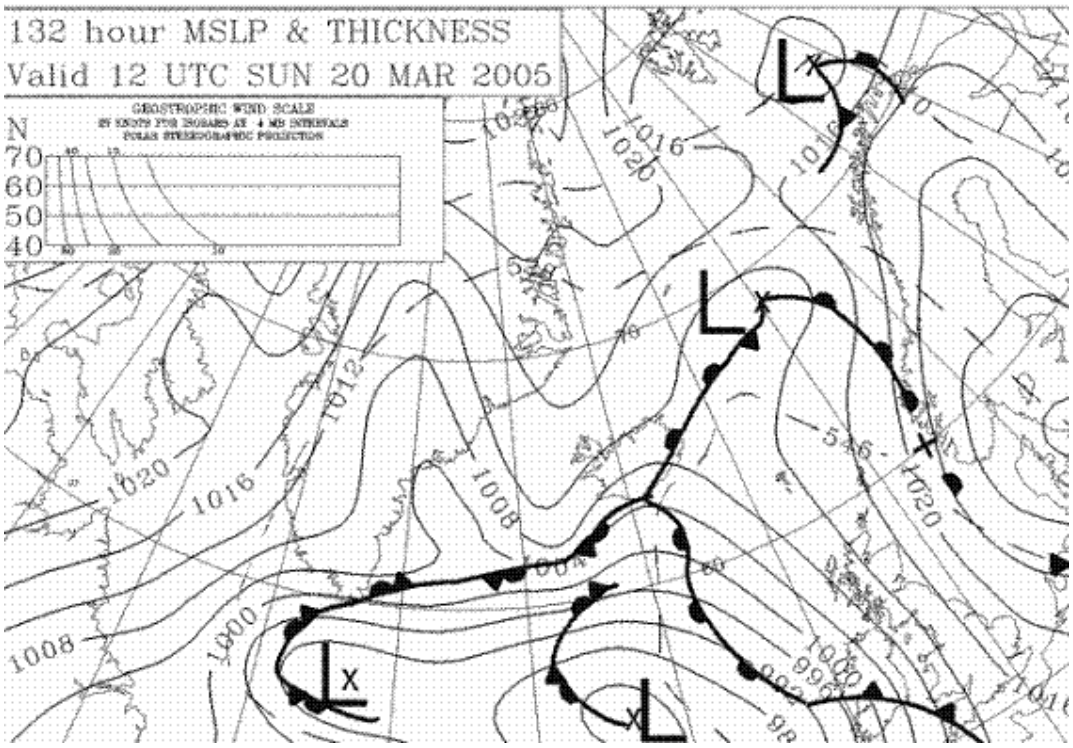
So, I am starting to think in terms of leaving on Saturday, and I'll be watching and reporting on the forecast every day now.

March 15, 2005
Saturday or Sunday, that is the question
It now seems certain that the general wind direction at the time of the trip is going to be at the worst neutral, and very possibly strongly in my favour. That really is luck. Additionally, as one person wrote in a comment on yesterday's posting, the change in wind direction is also bringing an entirely different type of air mass to bear. The weather over the UK at least is going to get quite a bit warmer, and correspondingly, the freezing levels are already coming up from around 1000 feet, where they have been for a while, up as high as 5000-6000 feet. This is encouraging, not because I plan to fly that low, but because having warm air at those kinds of levels provides a last-ditch bolt-hole in the event of a serious icing encounter. With freezing levels on or close to the deck, your options are exceptionally limited.

Yesterday, the best forecast information I had was for Saturday, and that looked quite good. Today of course, I have a view on Sunday. Here is today's view of the weekend.



Saturday Midday Forecast



Sunday Midday Forecast

As predicted yesterday, the basic picture doesn't change. There is still a LOW in the Atlantic, and there are still a collection of highs and lows around it, with various frontal activity. This holds good for both days.

The difference is that whereas Sunday shows confident isobars heading nicely up along the route of my flight, that pattern has not established itself on Saturday - the LOW is not quite in the right position. I won't overanalyse the charts at this stage, other than to say, that hopefully, the contrast between today's view of the weekend and yesterday's makes a valuable learning point.

The other interesting feature to draw from these forecasts is the quantity of frontal weather on or around the route. Sunday's chart, which looks overall the best bet, still shows significant frontal activity over Iceland itself. That could indicate quite challenging weather for the arrival and is worth keeping an eye on. If positioning Highs and Lows several days out is reasonable reliable, positioning fronts at this range is very much guesswork. Once again, it is not particularly productive to over-analyse the fronts - we should simply note their presence and the risks that they carry.

So today's view is that Sunday may be the day, rather than Saturday. Either way the news is generally rather good. As it happens a Saturday is just about the least efficient day to go. Greenland and all its airports close on Sunday, and demand an outrageous fee to open. If I depart on Saturday and end up as planned in Reykjavik, there will be an unavoidable dead day whilst I wait out Sunday. There are worse things in life than a free Sunday in Reykjavik, but I'd rather just get on with the journey once started.

I flew again today. A business meeting to attend gave me another 45 uneventful

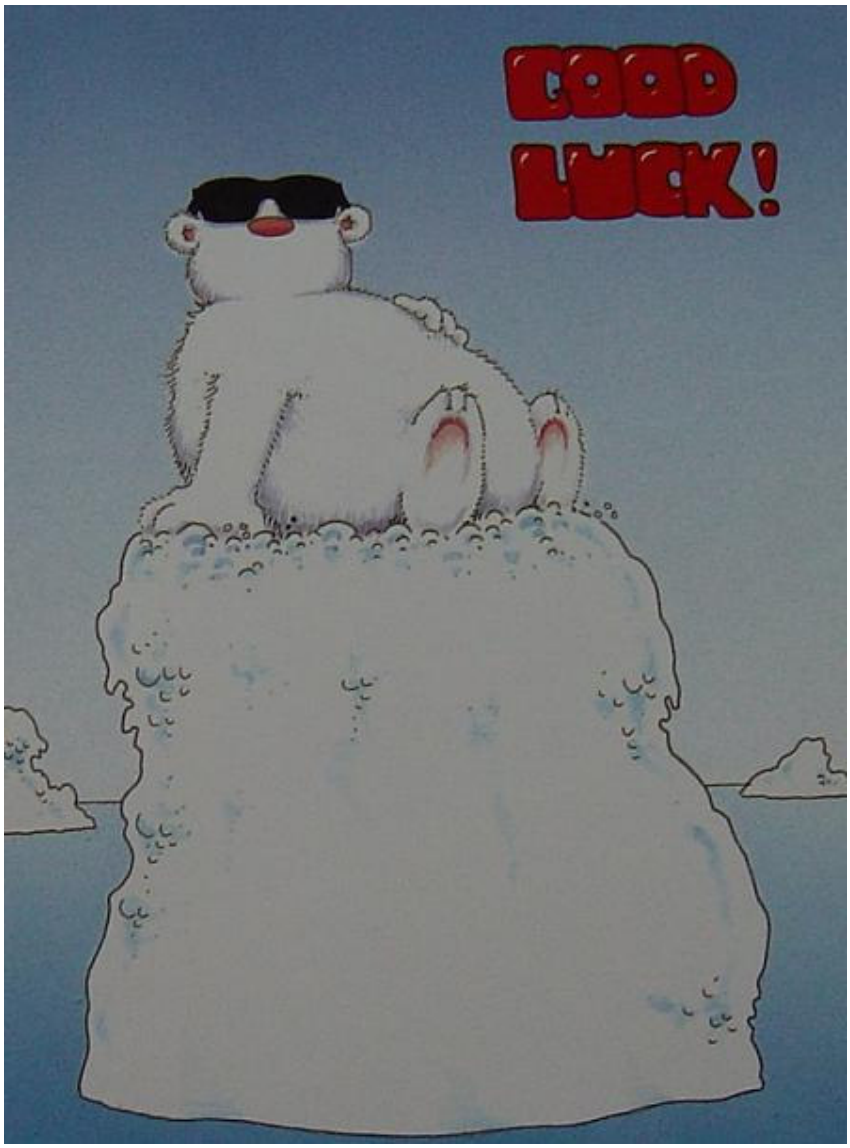
minutes in the air. The wind is already coming round nicely. The northerlies that blew me back from Oban have given way to more southerly flows. Not much longer to go now.

At Cranfield tonight, I learnt that we are to lose one of our lady ATCOs to Coventry. Our loss is very much Coventry's gain. The lack of radar at Cranfield seems to be the source of a gradual trickle of ATCOs away to other units as controllers seek to add the all-important radar qualification to their licences. Controllers are in short supply in the UK and you can't blame them for wanting to further their careers.

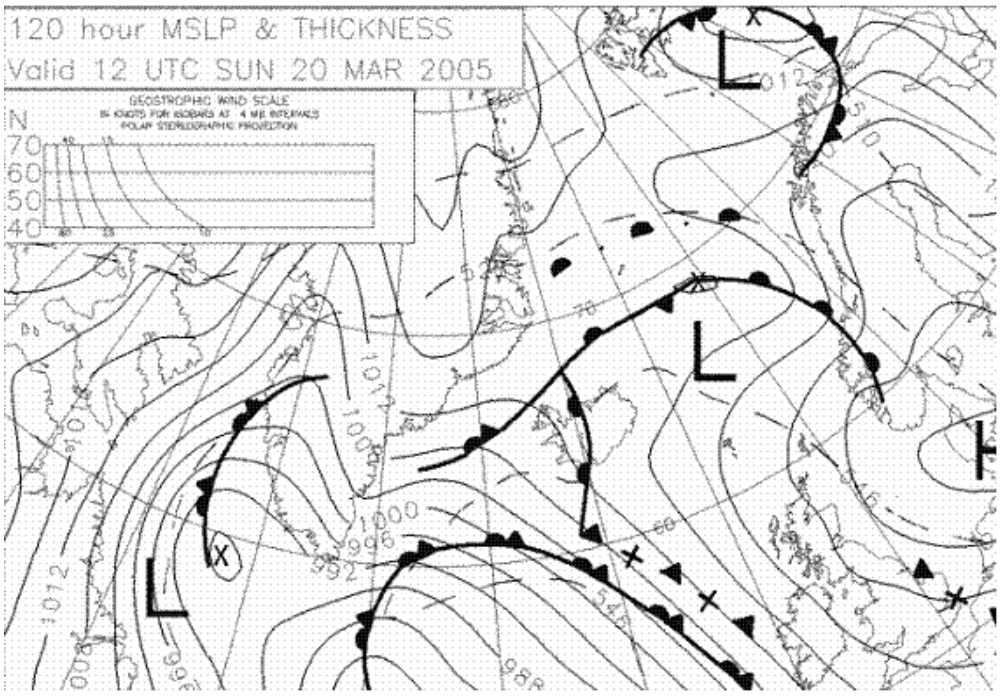
March 16, 2005
A break from the weather
I'll post some more on the weather a little later today once the most up-to-date charts are available, but I thought I would just take a couple of paragraphs to cover a different aspect of this journey.

Since starting on the Blog (an exercise as much for my own benefit as anybody else's), all sorts of people have contacted me with advice, help and offers to meet up along the route. As the day of my departure now looms near, those messages have tailed off in favour of a steady stream of good luck messages more of which greeted me when I checked my e-mail this morning.

One card I was sent particularly tickled me with its dark humour :-)) Full marks to "PH" for finding that one! Thanks also to the crew of **ASCOT 5622**. Hoping to beat you to Goose!!



March 16, 2005
Looking ahead from Sunday
Today's charts are now out, and they further confirm that Sunday is the right day to go.

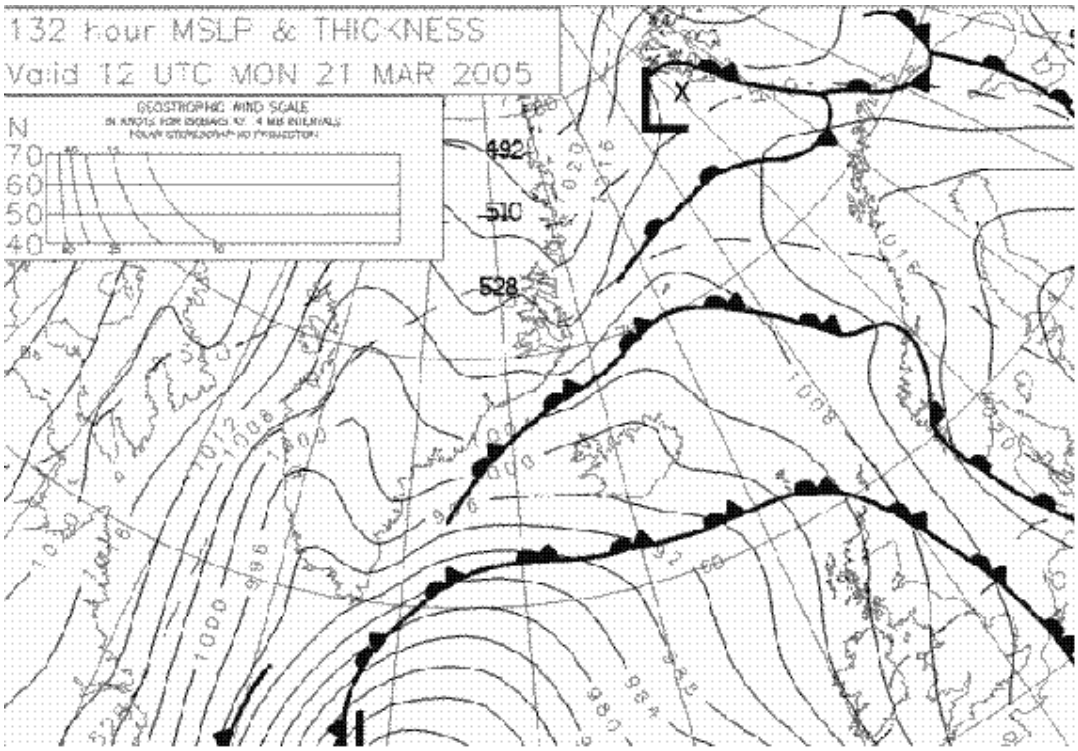


The HIGH over Europe is showing every sign of developing into something of a blocking feature. This is pretty good news for people staying in the UK. The warm weather should stay around for a while. It is also pretty good news for me, because the blocking high over the UK will prevent my precious LOW from escaping the Atlantic before I have had a chance to take advantage of it. Unless there is a significant change in the weather between now and the weekend, it seems likely that I will have rather indifferent tailwinds to Wick, and rather more significant tailwinds from Wick to Reykjavik. More importantly, as the time draws close, we can now start to take the frontal positions slightly more seriously. There is quite a visible risk of bad weather over Reykjavik for my arrival. This is not in itself a show-stopper. Reykjavik airport is well equipped with instrument approaches. However, the terrain around Reykjavik to the South and East is very inhospitable, and ducking low to avoid icing is a no-no. Hofn (BIHN) on the South-East end of Iceland is a Customs field, and comes complete with an NDB approach. On the current analysis, it looks as though it should be substantially out of the weather. Nearby Egilstadir also offers an ILS. These will be my boltholes.

As we move another day forward, the edge of available weather predictions moves too. We can now start to take the first glimpse of what Monday will be like. Monday will be an interesting day. A lot of friends are asking if I am starting to get nervous. The honest answer is no... not yet. I have done this run before, albeit in rather larger aircraft. But if I am honest, the most nerve-wracking day will be Day 2, which looks like being Monday. This is the day where I hop between Iceland and Goose Bay in Canada. The two runs involved, in and out of Narsarsuaq are the sections of the flight that offer the least room for mistakes, and provide the least number of options in the

event of any kind of problem. My odds look a lot better with a decent tailwind, but the two legs remain somewhat daunting.

Here is Monday:



Yet again, this is, on the face of it, very good news. Tightly packed isobars suggest strong winds along the very route I will take. These will be possibly as strong as 40 knots between Reykjavik and Greenland. With my previous caution relating to frontal positions, it would be a mistake to read too much into the gap that exists on my route. But the early signs are pretty good.

I can remember when Kate was pregnant with our first child, it was very difficult for her to think much beyond the actual birth itself, so momentous was the occasion. Once the birth was done, life picked up again and forward planning became possible. I have felt the same way about Greenland, not thinking too hard about the weather in the US, preferring to concentrate on the immediate issue of the Atlantic, its size and depth and temperature.

With things looking a little more upbeat on that score, I received an e-mail from Mary in Boston, one of the many people I want to see on our trip.

Now, a weather warning. We are having a VERY LONG SNOWY winter. The girls are loving it but few adults are. After getting an additional foot of heavy wet snow on Saturday, there are currently 5 foot snow drifts in areas. We are having high 30s and low 40s weather this week (sadly, this is as good as it has been lately) so we should have a lot of snow melting. But we are by no means currently ready for spring. Being New England, this can change quickly. I can keep you posted but I just wanted you to

know that cold weather is still dominating here. Maybe by Easter things will start to warm up!!

Evidence that you can't have things all your own way. When there is a low in the Atlantic, the bad news is that you tend to get a lot of cold air and associated weather fronts rushing down the North Eastern United States. Winters in Boston always have a tendency to drag on, and this year is no exception. So what I need is for the LOW to disappear on Tuesday... Fat chance. But all is not lost. Some of the kindest feedback I have had on this site has been when I've introduced a new source of weather forecast data. So, with tongue firmly in cheek, here is what Weather Underground has to say about next Tuesday in Boston. With a simple comforting service like this, it makes me wonder why I bother studying the isobars. Tuesday is going to be great ;-)

National Weather Service Hourly Forecast for Tuesday at 02101

Forecast data from the National Digital Forecast Database

Jump to: Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday | Monday | **Tuesday** |

1 AM	7 AM	1 PM	7 PM
Temperature / Dew Point (°F)			
36 / 25	34 / 25	42 / 25	39 / 27
Humidity (%)			
53%	59%	38%	50%
Wind (mph)			
15 348° NNW	13 358° North	11 80° East	9 160° SSE
Conditions			
Partly Cloudy	Partly Cloudy	Partly Cloudy	Chance of Rain
Probability of Precipitation (%)			
12%	12%	15%	15%
Cloud Cover (%)			
53%	53%	60%	67%

March 18, 2005
The Last Curry
Fitted around the day job, and thanks to the marvels of the modern portable internet, I am an active contributor to a website called THE FLYER FORUMS The forums provide a good-natured home for all sorts of Flying-related chit-chat and have grown over the last few years to become one of the most popular "virtual" meeting places for pilots on the internet. In addition to the banter, both flying and non-flying related, the Forums have also provided a springboard for any number of "Fly-ins" - events at which a group of pilots all plan to fly into some unsuspecting airfield and get together for real. For many years prior to the arrival of the Internet in popular culture, I rarely spoke to other pilots. I owned my own aircraft, I wasn't a member of a club, and I would simply turn up, fly, and go home. Now, through participation in the Forums and in its technological predecessors over the years, I have a great bunch of flying mates with which I have shared many a Flying Adventure. Of interest also is that amongst these friends are not just other pilots, but Air Traffic Controllers too. I had very little insight into the world of ATC before meeting these people, and whilst I'm no expert, my eyes have really been opened during the course of various visits to ATC facilities, and by having ATCO friends sitting in the Right Hand Seat while I fly.

In addition to setting up Fly-ins, the Flyer Forums are also pretty good at spawning non-flying outings, and Wednesday night was a good case in point. The Internet allows pilots from all over the planet to talk to one another, and whilst the Forums are primarily UK Centric, even within the boundaries of the UK, the participants are widely spread. This led last night to two separate curry evenings being organised in the South of England; one in Epsom, and the other in Hitchin. A curry evening is a fine piece of British tradition in which grown men go to an Indian restaurant (a type which is not in short supply in the UK), and consume curry and drink enormous quantities of beer. The Hitchin event was my closest, so with thanks to Jim and Pat for the lift, last night was substantially spent in Hitchin's Raj Douth restaurant enjoying what some have called, my Last Supper.

Flyer Forumites in the Raj Douth
Johnny, Pete L, Pete S, Pat Dalton (hidden), Jim Dalton, Ace Atco, Me, and Dantruck.

The meal was fine, the beer and champagne (an unusual twist) flowed freely and a fellow *Forumite* Riccardo phoned in from Italy to get closer to the event. Really nice to hear from you!

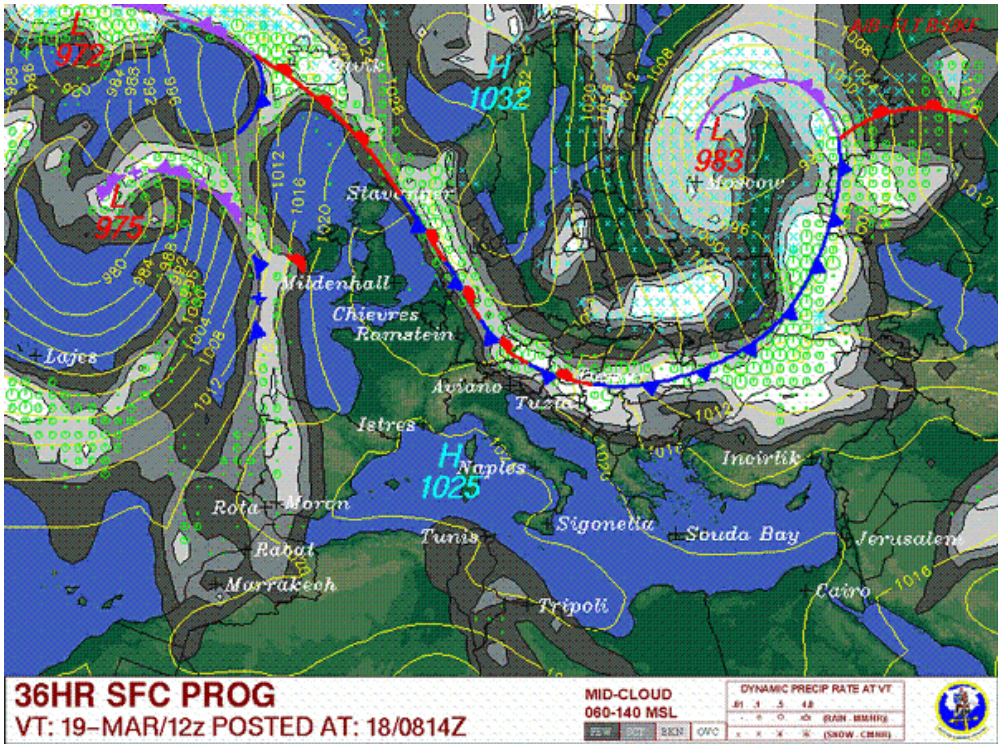
Part of the ritual of a curry evening is that somebody always forgets their wallet and mysteriously requires somebody else to pay their share. Yesterday night was no exception. Graham, better known on the forums as Rotorhead, was last night's culprit - except that after a quick search, the missing item was found. Later in the evening, Graham pleaded work commitments and left a few minutes before the rest of us. It was only when we asked for the bill that the rest of us discovered that he had picked up the tab. Thanks Rotorhead, I owe you!

I won't bore you with yet another Met Forecast this time. Suffice it to say that either Saturday or Sunday is looking good for departure. With the added dimension of Greenland being closed on Sunday, a Sunday departure from Cranfield continues to make the most sense. The frontal patterns between Iceland and Greenland are hardening somewhat for Monday which may throw a shadow over the Narsarsuaq forecast, but at this stage in the game, we'll take that as it comes.

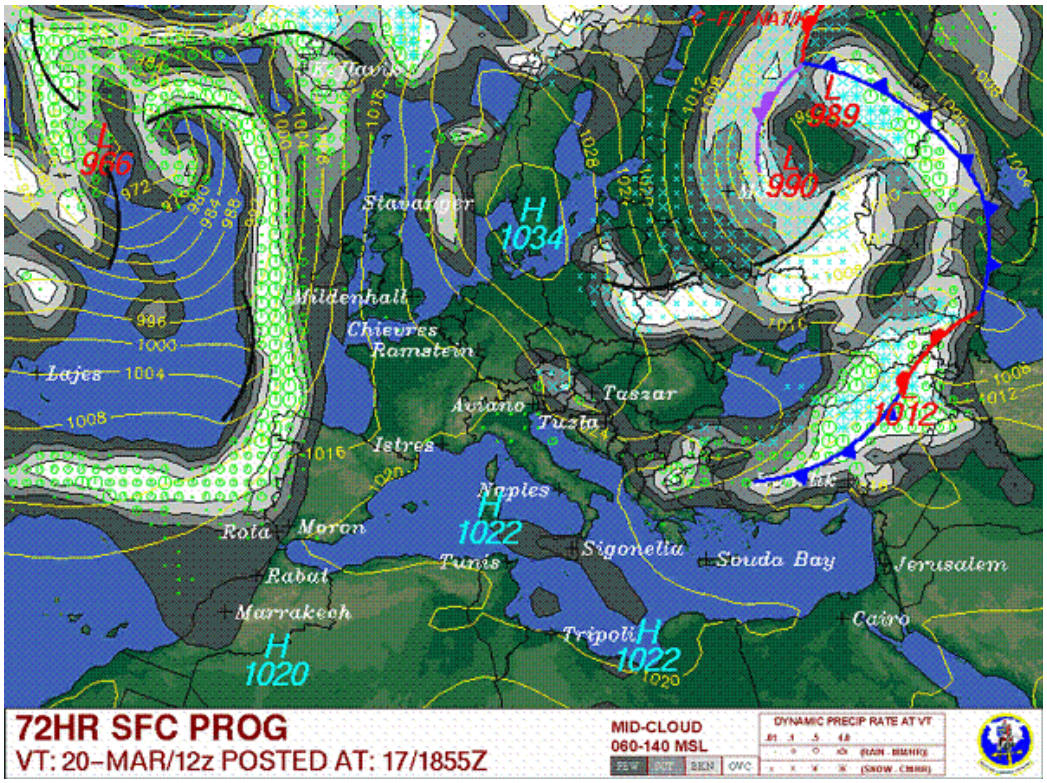
March 18, 2005

Last minute decisions

This morning's updates on the weather charts are starting to appear. Contrary to what I wrote earlier, it would appear that whilst the UK will benefit from a lovely weekend, the same is not necessarily true in Iceland. Take a look at these two charts, covering Saturday and Sunday.



Saturday



Sunday

The first thing to note is that the date of publication of the Saturday chart is rather more recent than the date of publication of the Sunday Chart. There will be a revised Sunday chart in due course. However, it is becoming apparent that the real make-or-break issue is going to be the relative positions of two fronts. A warm one, already due over Iceland by midday Saturday, and a cold one, rapidly following. To judge by the Cloud forecasts on the Saturday chart, the warm front will be a relatively harmless affair as far as I am concerned. The cold front will get progressively bigger, and the Sunday chart over Iceland looks pretty horrible.

So it seems that the way to get to Iceland with the minimum of fuss, is to follow the warm front in, by arriving in Reykjavik late on Saturday afternoon and departing Cranfield tomorrow morning in time for lunch in Wick.

Suddenly, the packing is becoming rather more earnest, there is a hair-cut to arrange, some AA batteries to buy and a hotel booking to modify.

Tomorrow could well be the day.

March 18, 2005
Indecision is my middle name
To those who have been following this Blog, I may have inadvertently given the impression that I am able to read weather charts, reliably predicting the weather from many days out with the merest flick through a pile of Met Office diagrams. Obviously, this is not true, and I struggle to extract meaning from them just the same as everybody else.

So after a bit of a wobble earlier today, heavily influenced by the view taken by the USAF, I started to think in terms of departing tomorrow (Saturday). As the day has rolled on and newer charts have been available, I have come back to my original analysis. **Sunday is the day**. I very much hope to be raising a glass to you all from the Bar of the Hotel Loftleidir in Reykjavik on Sunday night.

Sleep well!

March 19, 2005
At Long Last
So here I am, finally, on the night before departure. In some respects, the last month or so has whistled by, in others it seems to have dragged horribly. You've seen my thinking as it has developed on all aspects of this journey, and now at last the time has come to go.

A flight plan is filed for departure from Cranfield as soon as it opens at 0900 tomorrow morning. The plan is IFR, routing Cranfield, Gamston VOR, St Abbs Head VOR and then direct to Wick. I have filed for a cruise at FL100 (10,000 feet) which should allow me to take maximum advantage of what promises initially to be a rather gentle tailwind. This route take me outside the UK Airways structure, but has the advantage of being rather more direct. The disadvantage is that being outside "the system", I am somewhat reliant on goodwill to allow me to cross the various airways that occasionally protrude into the route. To help me along my way, I expect to be talking to "London Military". These controllers sit at West Drayton, next to Heathrow, and provide a service to aircraft at my sort of level, not participating in the airways structure, but too high to be of interest to the individual civil zones. Since the British military is famed for its inactivity on weekends, obtaining a service from London Mil. should be straightforward enough, and Cranfield will set up the handover as I taxi out tomorrow morning. If all goes well, that first leg up to Wick should take a little under three hours. At Wick I will look to make a rapid refuelling stop, clear customs and pick up my Survival Suit, all courtesy of Andy Bruce at Far North Aviation. This all achieved, I'll be heading out to Reykjavik via 61 North 10 West, and then more-or-less direct - a run of four hours or so in what should be an increasing tailwind.

The weather tomorrow is basically exactly what I had hoped for. The Low is still sitting in the Atlantic pumping air up the UK across Greenland, and down towards Canada. It is sitting somewhat more to the west than originally envisaged, which explains the generally rather slack winds over the UK, and the presence of the stronger tailwinds only as I get closer to Iceland. Still, this is far better than the predominant headwinds that I had been predicting up until last week.

The weather for departure from Cranfield may well leave a little to be desired. The High pressure and slack winds, combined with a rather humid air mass originating from the Azores and below give the perfect conditions for Fog overnight tonight, so the departure may be at risk whilst we wait for the 800 metres visibility required at Cranfield before any ground movement will be authorised. With luck, that won't cause too much disruption. Cranfield itself closes overnight, but we can see the fog threat by looking at the TAF currently valid for neighbouring Luton:

TAF EGGW 191632Z 200018 11004KT 3000 BR NSC TEMPO 0011 0200 FG VV/// BECMG 1114 6000 NSW NSC TEMPO 1418 CAVOK=

In a nutshell, periods of 200 metres visibility in Fog predicted between midnight and eleven in the morning.

Further up the line Wick looks rather better with generally reasonable conditions, punctuated by periods of light drizzle. Wick is served by numerous instrument approaches, so no worries there. As I write, Wick has closed for the night, so no

current Forecasts are available to share with you.

Meanwhile, Reykjavik, as predicted, is going to be suffering from a passing occluded front. This doesn't appear too severe and once again, the TAF reflects the odd passing drizzly shower, but nothing fatal to the flight:

BIRK 191600Z 191818 14020KT 9999 SCT020 BKN030 TEMPO 1818 7000 DZ BR BKN015 OVC025=

And there you have it. The bags are packed, the weather overanalysed, and nothing on the TV worth watching by way of a distraction. Thank you once again to the astonishing number of people who have continued to pass on messages of good luck in ever increasing numbers over the last couple of days.

My hotel room in Reykjavik awaits with the promise of a broadband connection. Look out for a posting tomorrow evening from wherever I end up!

March 20, 2005
Cranfield-Reykjavik
Well, the great news is that I am writing this Blog entry from my hotel room in Reykjavik overlooking N33NW parked on the "Flight Services" Apron.

Cranfield started this morning predictably misty, although fortunately, it never actually descended into the Fog that marked Saturday's early morning weather. After saying my goodbyes, I managed to take-off at 09:10 into a 500 foot overcast that rapidly gave way to brilliant sunshine and bright blue skies just 2000 feet higher up. The winds aloft were exactly as predicted and thanks to a smooth service from London Military I was given immediate climb to FL100 and co-ordinated across the Manchester airways bundle via reporting point GOLES. The cloud layer remained stubbornly solid, some 8000 feet below all the way up to Newcastle, at which point it broke up to reveal the Scottish borders, with the Grampians in the distance. With the autopilot engaged and a long straight road ahead, I amused myself picking up the ATIS broadcasts from the surrounding airports. All looked good until Aberdeen, at which point, airport after airport started going below minima in rolling dense Fog. Soon, it became apparent that the only airport remaining useable was Kirkwall in the Orkneys. A quick work with Andy Bruce at Wick on the "Far North" company frequency revealed that Wick had gone from being CAVOK, to 500 metres in Fog with no distinct ceiling. I took a look for the airfield as I flew over, but it was a waste of time. With Kirkwall starting to report lowering visibility, I headed the extra 30 miles north and landed at Midday.

Kirkwall could not have been more helpful if they tried. Within 20 minutes I was fuelled and fed whilst the desk assistant filled in my GENDEC customs form for me and filed a new Flight plan to Reykjavik. I waited another half hour or so for Andy

Bruce to update the Wick weather, but it became clear that it was a lost cause. So, I reluctantly squeezed into my own unsophisticated Blobby Suit, paid my £12 landing fee and headed out to Reykjavik; taking off at 13:25.

The airways routing to Reykjavik from Kirkwall is basically a straight line and I was cleared to my first reporting point in the climb to FL120 without any fuss at all. Once again, as predicted the 5 knot initial tailwind grew during the course of the next 4 hours to become 35 knots on the tail at its peak nearing my descent point. The view over the Atlantic was masked for most of the time by the low cloud and fog that lay at the root of all the Scottish Airports' problems. In fact, the low cloud only finally broke properly approaching the South Coast of Iceland, some 50 miles south of Reykjavik. I never know whether this is a good thing or not. Screened from the sea by the cloud, you can pretend that you are actually over hospitable countryside. On the other hand, I like to keep an eye open for boats in case things should go quiet up front, and that was a non-starter today.

VHF coverage was sparkling across the entire journey at FL120 with not even the slightest difficulty. Radar coverage drops away for the middle 200 miles or so, and at this point, you are handed to "Iceland Radio", who provide a Flight Information Service - mostly weather and position updates, until you come back within Radar Coverage, nearing the coast.

Despite threatened showers, I finally landed at a dry and quite warm Reykjavik (11 degrees C) at 1725 this evening, after a remarkable pain-free day's flying.

The fuel computer calculated the fuel burn to the litre once again. I landed with a little under 500nm additional range, after a flight of some 670nms. Very comforting. Flight plans have been filed for a 0730 departure to Goose Bay tomorrow, with a 1 hour stop-off at Narsarsuaq. The weather appears to be playing ball so far. We'll see what tomorrow brings on that score.

Meanwhile, in one final twist to the day, Martin Courage, the ferry pilot who provided so much helpful advice a couple of weeks ago, is just 2 hours behind me in the same C340 that was causing so much trouble at Bournemouth. We'll follow one another across to Goose Bay tomorrow, before parting company as he heads off to his destination elsewhere in the US.

Positioning for a Visual Downwind Left 13 at Reykjavik this evening

March 21, 2005
The Effect of Timezones
An early entry for today, Monday. My plan today, was to fly two legs - Reykjavik to Narsarsuaq and Narsarsuaq to Goose Bay, and to spend the Night in Goose. Tentatively, that is two four-hour flights and perhaps 45 minutes on the ground at Narsarsuaq. If I set off as planned at around 07:30 from Reykjavik, that will put me into Goose at around lunchtime, local time. So far, coming all the way round to Iceland, there has been no timezone shift. From Reykjavik to Goose, I gain 4 hours. The plan is therefore, to rest up a while at Goose, and then head down to my next hop, Yarmouth Nova Scotia (CYQI)a very short hop away from Boston. I'll stay in Yarmouth overnight tonight and then drop into Boston Worcester (KORH), my initial destination on Tuesday morning.

A look at the weather this morning suggests that the promised tailwinds are still here, and even conveniently turn the corner at Narsarsuaq to start pointing towards the South - ideal for the next legs. On the ground, there is an excellent chance in these winds of finding Narsarsuaq clear of its famous fog. There has been no appreciable fog there for days because of the winds. Let's hope that today is no exception. The alternate for the run will be to divert up to Nuuk.

On the ground at Goose Bay, things are less pleasant - overcast at 2500 feet with occasional snow and temperatures just below freezing. The forecasts suggest that it will be possible to stay above the worst of the weather until very close to Goose, and to use one of the many instrument approaches to land. No fog or other factors that would make the approach difficult are forecast.

Finally, for the run down to Yarmouth, things open out nicely just south of Goose, with Yarmouth expecting clear skies all day. It should make for a reasonable end to the day.

If things come together, tonight's entry may make it onto the website a bit late. I have no idea about internet facilities in Yarmouth, but with luck there'll be a way of letting you know how I'm doing.

This should be the most interesting day of the flight, and is certainly the one that holds the most aeronautical challenge.

March 22, 2005
Reykjavik- Narsarsuaq
Being young, keen and excited, I was down at the FBO, Flight Services at 0700 sharp yesterday morning. It was all something of an anticlimax really. The only airport in Greenland that had reported weather at the advertised time was Sondrestromfjord - reasonable if not delightful weather. All of the other Met Observers had apparently decided to stay that extra hour in bed.

Heading off to Greenland fully armed with weather forecasts and charts can be a dicey endeavour. Going without weather would be tantamount to suicide. So, I checked out the aircraft, got out the Canadian charts (much better than those provided in the Transatlantic manual) and cleared the cockpit of the detritus of the previous day's flying.

When I came back in, Martin Courage had arrived, to be joined shortly afterwards by another, much older pilot that I shall call "Bob". Martin obviously knew Bob of old, although it became clear that Bob was no longer really in the ferrying game. This time, he said, it was for fun. Why anybody would fly a heavily tanked creaky old Cessna Twin across the Atlantic fun escaped both the two of us and the Icelandic handling agent, himself an ATPL. "Yeah, and I might make a few bucks if somebody wants to buy it when I get back home." Now the real motivation was clear. He'd bought it cheap, and was flying it back to the US to have some expensive work done on it, at which point he would sell it.

At around 0800 the first set of Greenland met reports became available. Interestingly, the became available via Avbrief on my GPRS link somewhat before they reached the handling agent's computer. They were a mixed bag, ranging from Kulusuk on the east coast in dense fog, through to Narsarsuaq, our destination, with a 10000 foot cloud layer, but clear below. That sounds good, until you realise that the enroute altitude approaching from our direction is a minimum of FL140, and even the instrument approach starts at 6800, finishing only marginally below.

Bob greeted these METARs with his now customary misery. It could all go pear-shaped very quickly, and there was bound to be solid icing in the cloud that would go from 6000-18000 all the way from Reykjavik to the Eastern coast of Greenland. For good measure, he then launched into various tales of individuals who he knew that had died going to or from Narsarsuaq. Even the handling agent joined in the chorus at this point. It was a terrible place. Engine failures never killed pilots he said (that's good, I thought), but the weather and bad fuel planning regularly had people swimming - but not for long.

The general mood seemed hard to shake off, and contrary to the FAA's model of group decision making dynamics, everybody decided to hang on until 0850 for the second set of observations of the day, the TAFs (Forecasts), and the Greenland Met Office's superb Synoptic chart.

When that lot came in, nothing had changed at Narsarsuaq, our filed alternate, a few hundred miles up the west coast at Nuuk (BGGH) was open and there was nothing bad in the forecasts. All three of us were going to be on the same route, so we decided to take off in turn, Martin first at FL140, me at FL120 a few minutes behind, and Bob,

some time later at an altitude to be determined. Bob wanted to avoid Eurocontrol charges on his big twin and was determined to go VFR, despite the rather unpromising conditions.

And that, is how my 0730 departure turned into a 0935 departure into a drizzly Reykjavik morning. I took plenty of photos of the departure, but they are far to dark and miserable to publish. I entered cloud passing around 5000 feet in the climb direct to FL120 via a point on the western edge of the Icelandic Terminal Area called EMBLA. Once in the cruise, in solid cloud at FL120, there was nothing much to do except keep an eye open for ice, and watch the GPS make snail-like progress on its 1000 mile map scale setting.

From his vantage point, some 50 miles away though, Martin had some good news. The skies parted at EMBLA to reveal many thousands of feet below and solid undercast, leaving us basking in the sunshine. I managed to snap this shot as I exited the higher level cloud.

The wind component was rather more southerly than easterly at FL120, but the 5-10 not tailwind was still welcome. The fuel computer showed that I would be able to land at my alternate with 1:30 of fuel remaining, and so the FAA IFR reserves were in no immediate threat.

"Hi", came a voice from behind, "This is Bob Speaking". Our third man was now somewhere behind us, transmitting on the Reykjavik terminal frequency. After a hint or two, he found the button, and joined us on 123.45. There ensued a lively discussion as to whether or not he could just ignore Greenland altogether, and go straight to Goose Bay. He had a big twin Cessna full of fuel after all, he could probably make it as far as Chicago. This turned out to be a bad line to use. 123.45 was then blocked for the next few minutes as Bob launched forth once again on how "you can never have too much fuel unless of course, you are on fire", and how he knew "loads of ferry pilots who had died going into or out of Narsarsuaq". The Comedy Channel was never so badly missed. Well before EMBLA, the terminal controllers had lost radar contact with us and handed us back to Iceland Radio, the FIS frequency. They wanted "Ops Normal" messages every hour or so, relaying as appropriate through passing airliners.

Martin watched DVD films, I looked out of the window, took photos and leafed through charts, and Bob presumably did whatever Bob does on long flights.

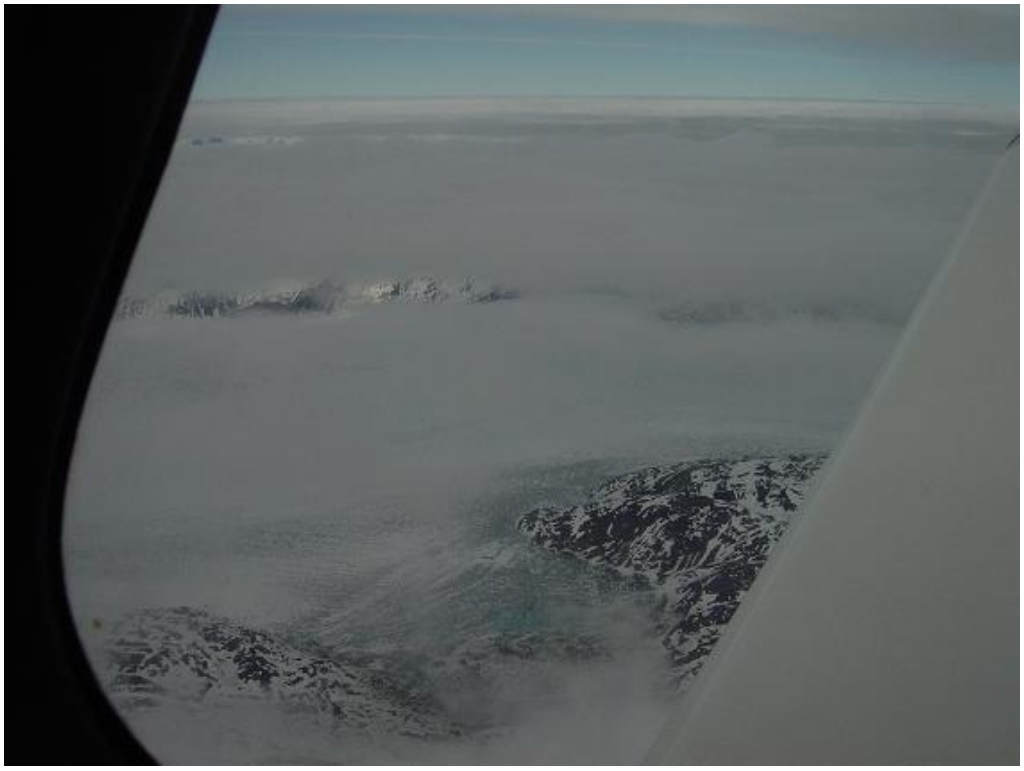
Gradually, as predicted the winds started to come round onto the tail, and then developed a more northerly component, pushing us much harder than they had in Iceland. Bob as tail-end Charlie managed to use the last few minutes that he had of radio-contact with Iceland to get the next hourly update on the Narsarsuaq weather. Bad news. The dew point and temperature gap had closed (a precursor to fog), the wind had dropped (a precursor to fog) and there was now a cloud layer at 8000 feet,

down from 10000 (a precursor to... you get the picture). With the co-operation of an Air India Flight above, we managed to confirm that whilst Narsarsuaq was not looking good. Our alternate remained fine for a landing.

With about 200 miles to run to Greenland Coast, the higher level cloud returned and all of us found ourselves back in the cloud. This stuff contained some small traces of ice, but nothing unduly threatening. The freezing level on the East Coast of Greenland had been reported at 5000 feet, so a bolt-hole was available. With 100 miles or so to run to the coast, VHF returned in the shape of Gander Radio in Canada. They have a remote relay in Greenland, and whilst the reception wasn't good, it was good enough to be able to be able to update them on our positions and estimates directly, rather than going through yet another understanding Airline Captain. Gander was also able to pass us the great news that conditions were back to the previous report at Narsarsuaq, it was open.

The Minimum IFR Altitude available westbound across the Greenland Icecap is FL140 (despite the Safe altitude being 11600 feet), so as the coast neared, I climbed to Fl140 relaying what I was doing to The Greenlanders via Gander Radio. Greenland Airspace at that level is uncontrolled airspace so you do what you need to and relay your intentions to whoever is in a position to pass it on.

I could have been anywhere as the GPS map told me that I had crossed the coast. The cloud was solid. Fortunately, the ice had now gone, and shortly afterwards, the clouds parted occasionally to reveal the peaks and glaciers of Greenland.



Martin was now landing by this stage, having picked up Narsarsuaq's FISO (a somewhat lesser form of Air Traffic Controller - used at some quiet airfields).

Shortly afterwards, Bob, who had managed to overtake me, called descending through the overhead, and then it was my turn.

Descending through the overhead, and down into the fjord

Finally, to land at 1410, a little over four and a half hours after departure

March 22, 2005
Narsarsuaq-Goose Bay
On the ground at Narsarsuaq, all three of us uploaded many litres of the most expensive fuel on the planet. The boys at IAE will be delighted to know that the fuel computer is still accurate to the litre, I was even more delighted.

Martin, who had touched down some 30 minutes or so before me, was already set to go, and was planning on the briefest of stops in Goose Bay before heading off with his aircraft towards Chicago. We would part company at this point. Never having done this route in a small aircraft before, the luck of having coincided with Martin's flight was a huge help. No matter how much you think you know, There is a lot more to learn, and Martin's being around made the process somewhat easier. You have to respect somebody who does this kind of thing day in day out. For me, doing this in a small aircraft is a big adventure. For him, it is the "day job".

With the temperature at +1 on the ground, Narsarsuaq airport was actually very pleasant, with the usual icebergs in the fjord now reduced to little more than an accompaniment to a very large G and T. The fjord is emptied into by a number of massive Glaciers leading directly from the Icecap, and you could watch the next crop of ice being dumped into the water in real time.


The approach to Narsarsuaq with Glacier behind.

Narsarsuaq doesn't get many visitors and therefore charges those it does get to levels that rival Heathrow. Handling was a little over £250, and this to add the fuel costs of around £2+ per litre, double the usual, and quadrupal the price in the US.

Flight Services in Reykjavik had filed my onward flightplan, thereby saving me some

time on the ground and additional expense. So with the fuel done, I said farewell to Bob, who was investigating a strong smell of fuel in his cabin, and took to the skies once again at 1515 after a little over an hour on the ground

Greenland acts as something of a natural weather barrier, so whilst the East coast had cloud and fog pretty much down to the surface, the west coast and tip were largely clear. With another 5 hour journey ahead of me in rather indifferent winds, I was able to snap one last shot over my shoulder of the opening of the fjord structure that leads of Narsarsuaq, with the Icecap dominating behind

The route to Goose bay is almost a straight line, but because of the lack of radar cover, separation of traffic is procedural. Everybody gets an assigned level and routes via defined locations. My route to Goose was via 59N 50W and a point called LOACH on the edge of Canadian Airspace. Once again, I chose FL120 for the cruise. Just 100 miles or so away from Greenland there was forecast to be solid cloud with ice in it from FL80 down to the surface, and the surface temperatures were well below freezing. This appeared in due course, preventing any view at all of the surface for the better part of 3 hours.

Once out of the way of the immediate Narsarsuaq area, I was put back onto Gander Radio once again -this time, much clearer than before. They have no radar, but wanted full IFR position reports for each step along the route, as well as an "Ops Normal" message confirming that all was well every hour on the hour.

To my surprise, it proved possible to talk to Gander Radio all the way across with

little difficulty. As before, I monitored 121.5 (emergency) and 123.45 (Comedy Channel) re-establishing contact with a distant Martin briefly, before "Bob", made it back. "Hi, this is Bob".

"I think I loaded more fuel than I needed back there", said Bob. "It's real expensive. But you know what I always say, you can't have enough fuel, except when you're on fire. I know load of ferry pilots who have died....."

I thought for a moment about feigning radio failure, but was saved by a couple of airliners who were also listening in and were keen to find out what these small aircraft were actually doing all the way down there. With thanks in particular to a Lufthansa and a Cargolux aircraft, we soon established that whilst Goose Bay was giving light snow, broken at 3000 feet, the cloud layer actually came to an abrupt halt at Goose, with the rest of Canada all the way down to the US being clear skies.

With that good news brightening our day, Bob and I discussed who was going where next. Yarmouth was out. The East coast of Canada was suffering ceilings below IFR minima in driving snow. Despite my forecast landing at just before 2000 hours Reykjavik time, Martin's parting words of advice had been to avoid staying overnight in Goose Bay. There was nothing to do, nothing worthwhile eating and the hotels were no good.

Bob had a plan. His recommendation was Sept-Iles in French-speaking Quebec, a couple of hours or so south of Goose. So, with Bob's promise of good French cooking, and an empty belly, the plan was hatched to land at Goose, and do a "Gas and Go", down to Sept-Iles.

Finally, Goose Bay appeared, as promised, and staying high to avoid the last fragments of the ice-bearing cloud, I ducked through to fly a visual for runway 08, just as Martin was taking off on his next leg down to Bangor. The flight had taken 4:35.

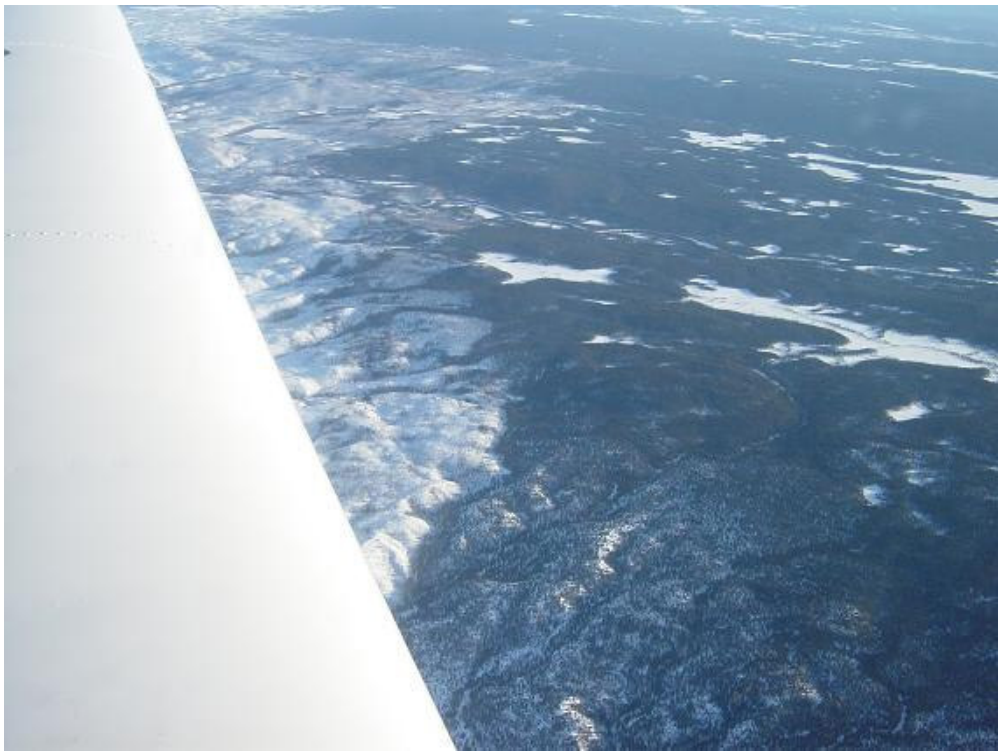
I parked up at the handling agents, Woodward’s, to be greeted by a Canadian Customs Official. I had called the CANPASS toll-free number from Narsarsuaq with all my details, so he probably already knew that I wasn't going to be much trouble! He just wanted to see my passport and welcome me to Canada. It was all very friendly. So in the -7C of the tarmac at Goose I watched the fuel go in, before nipping into the terminal to file a flightplan to Sept Iles, call my wife to let her know that I was down safe, and dropped a note to this Blog.

The skies over Goose cleared as I paid the very reasonable handling fee, got a Sept Iles hotel recommendation from Martin who had radioed in to see how things were going, and made my reservation. Two rooms, one for me, and one for Bob. Deep joy.

Despite the now prevailing VMC conditions, I am only armed with Instrument (IFR) charts, so I filed IFR at 6000 feet down the unchallenging direct route to Sept Iles, taking off just 45 minutes after having landed.

March 22, 2005
Goose Bay to Sept Iles
After the exploits of the day, the run down to Sept Iles was a breeze. The winds had now come fully round from the North, caused by my lucky Low pressure system that has sped me across the pond against all the odds. I should have had headwinds all the way. The worst I have seen has been as 5 knots on the nose in all the way here.

Goose Bay is not connected to humanity in any way shape or form, save for the airport, a former Air Force Base. Between Goose and the rest of Canada lies mile upon mile of forests and lakes, all of which are frozen over and covered in snow.



Still on the high from having got the water crossing over with, I wasn't really as concerned as I should be about the prospects for a forced landing on that terrain. Lots of tempting white fields were in fact all frozen lakes of unknown strength.

After the previous flights of the day, Sept Iles appeared extremely quickly, with the strangely incongruous sounds of heavily accented French being spoken by pilots and Montreal Center alike. This is a country where speaking French is very important.

Bob and I managed to land within three minutes of one another at the tiny little airport, where we were promptly refuelled (because you can never have enough fuel!), grabbed a taxi, and headed to our hotel, Les Gouverneurs.

By the time, we checked in, it was 23:30 by our body clocks - just 6:30 in the evening local time. I flew a total of a little over 11 hours of fun packed flying, sustained by little more than a cup of tea - you don't want to drink too much on those flights. I was starving.

Bob and I got changed and met in the bar. Two well-earned Beers were consumed before we sat down to eat. Moules Marinieres and a Veal Escalope, washed down with a St Emillion. Not exactly the wine buffs' choice, but the whites were not that great, and red felt more appropriate.

Sadly, the pace all got a bit too much for Bob, and at around 1 in the morning, Reykjavik time, he fell asleep, mid-sentence at our table, much to the amusement of our waitress. It took some shaking to wake him up to pay his share of the bill. As I write this on Tuesday morning Canadian time, he is still sound asleep.

Today's flight is a three hour or so direct one, down to Worcester, just outside Boston. Once there, I'll be hanging up my Flying Goggles for a few days, seeing friends, revisiting former haunts, and awaiting the arrival of my family on Saturday evening.

As I write, the actual outside looks like this:

CYZV 221000Z 03008KT 20SM BKN120 M07/M15 A3008 RMK AC2 SLP189=

Cold!

Worcester is little better,

KORH 220954Z AUTO 29011KT 10SM CLR M01/M08 A3004 RMK AO2 SLP184 T10061078 TSNO=

But the skies are clear between them and the winds aloft are behind my tail. It should be a nice flight.

March 22, 2005
Sept Iles to Boston
Once again, the good news is that I am writing this entry from a Hotel room in Worcester, just outside Boston. Step one of the journey is now completed. I'll be here for a week visiting friends and relaxing, before heading down for the next leg on Tuesday, down to Naples Florida.

So the chances are you want to know how today went?

After writing my last blog entry, I called US customs at Worcester to let them know of my arrival. With 3 hours notice required, this was going to be no problem. More problematic was my B1 Visa - the one I had gone to the trouble of arranging back in January. It turns out that US Border Protection, Worcester, does not have the appropriate stamp to endorse a B1 Visa-equipped passport. As a result, I was going to have to go to Bedford Hanscom Field on the outskirts of Boston. There, I would be able to get my passport stamped before making a quick bounce the 20 miles or so over to Worcester. I called Swissport, the handling agents at Worcester, and they arranged a car and a hotel booking for my arrival. Everything seemed set.

I checked out of the hotel at 08:30 as planned. As it happened, my travelling companion Bob hadn't appreciated that Sept Iles is the full 5 hours behind UTC, so he had been ready for some time. He sat in reception clutching his kitbag, with his hat already on. In fact, he sat very much alone on a sofa; three or four other guests sitting on seats at the opposite end of the lobby. It was only when I approached to say good morning that the reason for his solitude became apparent as I was met by a wall of AVGAS fumes. "Turns out that my ferry tank had been leaking into my bag all during the flight", said Bob without obvious emotion. "All that fuel has totally soaked my clothes." Now that he mentioned it, his shirt did have the unmistakable blue tint of AVGAS. "Damn ferry tank", he continued. "the duct tape holding the vent tube came off during the flight and emptied fuel all over my bag". "I wondered what the smell of Gas was during the flight into Goose". His bag looked and smelt like a bomb. "I tried to dry my clothes overnight on the air conditioner, but I don't think that the smell has totally gone yet". It totally hadn't, but I didn't share that thought with Bob.

Between us, we had many currencies, but the taxi ride in had completely depleted our combined supply of Canadian dollars. The front desk were kind enough to advance us $20, and we were in business. The French-speaking taxi-driver expressed some amusement at Bob's unusual perfume and Bob gave him the benefit of the story too. After 10 minutes or so, and well before the climax of the tale, we mercifully arrived at the airport and checked in with the computerised Flight Briefing facility. The weather was basically fine, although a band of cloud was now stretching from the coast of New Brunswick inland across the route, with some icing forecast. Cloud bottoms were around 4000 feet and tops at around 9000. Once again, I filed my now customary 12000 foot IFR flightplan in a straight line to Bedford - 518 miles.

I left Bob filing a VFR plan to Quebec - his next stop enroute to Chicago. As I called for start and received the IFR clearance, I saw him walking across the ramp to his aircraft. Like a scene in a spy film, I had visions of Bob turning the ignition on and the aircraft exploding in ball of flames, so I rapidly taxied to the relative safety of the holding point.

"Montreal Center clears N33NW to the Bedford Airport as per the flightplan via Direct, squawk 6517, and the Sept Iles 1 Standard Departure... Do you have the Standard Departure?". Without waiting for my answer, the controller continued. "Actually, it is just to climb ahead to 5000 feet on the runway heading".

At 09:40 local (14:40UTC) I launched into the crisp Quebec morning.

Montreal Center picked me up on the climbout and cleared me to turn on track to Bedford and up to my filed cruise of 12000 feet. In due course, the clear skies gave way to the cloud layer that had been forecast. Also as forecast, I was nicely above it. The tailwinds of yesterday had now given way to a 15 knot crosswind. No real problem, but no help either. As I settled down to watch the countryside go past through the gaps in the cloud layer, I amused myself by tuning the second radio into the various local frequencies of the airfields passing below. A whole world of tiny snow-bound communities served by equally tiny but superbly equipped airfields with GPS approaches, any one of which would be looked upon as a major GA facility back in the UK.

On crossing the line into New Brunswick, I was handed to Boston Center. Of all the moments on the flight so far, this was the one that had the biggest significance to me, pressing the button and saying for the first time "Boston Center N33NW, maintaining 12000 feet". Here I was in the aircraft I regularly fly to lunch at Kemble in, or over to Le Touquet - and together we have made it to the US, unmodified and with totally undeserved ease.

As New Brunswick gave way to seemingly endless Maine and then finally New

Hampshire and Massachusetts, I was handed from Center frequency to Center frequency, before finally, catching sight of the Boston skyline as I was handed over to the Arrivals Controller. For just a while, he was working two aircraft on his frequency. Me, and the Speedbird British Airways flight in from London. A nice touch.

Boston through the haze

Landing at Bedford was 13:20 (18:20 UTC), after 3:40 in the air. Not a high-speed run, but there had been some vectoring for Boston and the winds had ultimately turned against me slightly.

Customs couldn't have been easier. I bought my Customs Decal for $25. This November registered aircraft had never been to America before, and the $25 fee saw it entered into the system for the first time. That will greatly ease the flights to and from the Bahamas next week. After saying thanks and goodbye to the Customs Officers, it was away to Worcester VFR for the last leg of the flight, just 15 minutes in the air.

Swissport, the handling agents had the car waiting and the hotel booked, and now I am settling down to unpack, with an invitation to visit Mary's for drinks tonight, and another invitation from a Local TB20 owner to come and eat with his family one night too.

The response to this Blog has been far wider than I had ever anticipated, and it will take me a while to respond to the enormous number of notes, emails, SMS messages, and other communications I have received. Thanks a lot, they are appreciated.

So now, things will go quiet for a few days, whilst I cease and desist from any serious flying and meet up with friends. The story picks up again a week today, next Tuesday when I plan to head down to Naples, Florida.

Parked outside Swissport Worcester

March 23, 2005
A visit to Hyannis
Some may find this odd, but when I woke up this morning and remembered that I was in the US, with my own aircraft, a shiver ran down my spine. This is the land of no landing fees and the land where AVGAS costs less than half of the UK price. So, I am sorry, I couldn't help myself, and I decided to go flying again.

Obviously a quick daytrip out is not going to be of enormous interest to those primarily interested in reading about Transatlantic flying, so I've created a separate "Daytrips" section of the Blog into which this kind of tale can go.

Whenever I've found myself in the US and in need of a flying destination, I've turned to a website called the Hundred Dollar Hambuger. As the name suggests, this site is full of recommendations from pilots for restaurants within close proximity to an airfield. The Michelin Guide uses Stars to rate restaurants, the $100 Hamburger uses... Hamburgers - as recommended by fellow pilots. My eye was naturally drawn to a couple of "4 Hamburger" restaurants, one of which "DJ's" in Hyannis (KHYA), seemed to combine location with food. My plans were complete.

Having told the good people of Swissport that I wouldn't be needing the aircraft for a day or two, they seemed strangely unsurprised when I turned up at 10AM saying that I wanted to go flying. The fueler topped off the tanks with lovely US AVGAS - less than half the price of UK AVGAS, while I called 1-800-WXBRIEF to file an IFR flightplan. The weather this morning was fine, I filed IFR because I don't have the VFR sectional charts yet for the area and it would be a big mistake to wander into a restricted area for want of the right charts. Filing IFR offers a certain degree of protection there.

As I walked out to the plane, the line man removed the heavy padlocked chain from my propellor, an airport precaution taken in the light of 9/11, and I was free to go.

At the hold, runway 33 at Worcester

Cruising IFR from Worcester, the route takes you over the tiny state of Rhode Island and its capital Providence, served by what in British terms would be a major airport, but with a fraction of the traffic that such an airport would attract in Europe.

The City of Providence, Rhode Island

A little further on and we cross over back into Mass. and after 10 minutes or so arrive over Cape Cod, possibly the most distinctive feature of the Eastern Seaboard. Hyannis, is a delightful seaside town that bustles in summer, but right now, is relatively quiet. From the air, it is dominated by its airport, but the noise doesn't seem to intrude thanks to carefully drawn up noise abatement procedures.

Left base into Hyannis

The Hundred Dollar Hamburger is designed to ensure that pilots don't get too hungry walking unduly far to find their food - so true to form, it even advised which FBO (Fixed Base Operator) to use in order to minimise the walk. Air Cape Cod. This little operation combines Engineering, a Flight School, a charter operation and parking for visiting aircraft. All free of charge for visitors like me. I took the opportunity to buy a local VFR sectional map and Airport Facilities Directory before walking across the road to DJs

DJ's turned out to be built on the site of the old Hyannis Railroad Station and was designed to look like a line of railway coaches. A great effect that would not be permitted in the UK on grounds of "good taste". Not only does DJ's serve good food, they deliver too, courtesy of the "Wing Bomber", a great variation on the "Spotty Youth on a Moped" delivery services back home.

And so to the food. Well... it was fabulous. They say that a picture speaks a thousand words, so here are a couple of thousand words worth to keep you going.

All in all, a very relaxing 45 minutes or so flying, in total and a great way to waste a day when you have no particular place to go. Look out for another daytrip tomorrow, if we are not buried under the 18" of snow forecast for tonight!

N33NW sleeps soundly in her hangar.

March 26, 2005
New England Air Museum
Having arrived in Worcester, I thought that there might be a risk that I would never again want to bring my Buttocks back into contact with the left hand seat of N33NW. Funnily enough though, having enjoyed my $100 hamburger on Wednesday, I was still keen for more on Thursday. Once again that website came to be assistance, bringing to my attention the splendidly named "New England Air Museum".

The Museum is based at the nearby Windsor Locks, Bradley International Airport (BDL). As with many "International" Airports in the US, as far as I know, the only flights that go foreign go to Canada, but you can't blame them for talking the place up. The airport is huge, think in similar terms to Gatwick or Stansted - Boeings and similar are constantly in and out. The good news though, is that like most US airports there is absolutely no landing fee. Of the many GA Handling Agents or "FBOs", I choose Signature Flight Support - a familiar name amongst the Exec Jet Set in the UK. I call them ahead of time. "Could I book your services for a visit by a light Single Piston today please?". "Well yes you can sir, but... you do realise there is a ramp charge don't you?". My heart sinks. Bradley is about 45 minutes drive away, or 15 minutes in flight. The decision to fly is already pretty indefensible. "How much is it?" I ask, fearing the worst. "Well Sir, let me see now, it'll be $23, but we do waive that if you uplift some AVGAS.". "Ha!!!" I exclaim out loud, "I come from the land of high landing fees. I couldn't land on a dirt strip back home for $23 of your Yankee Dollars" - well I didn't say that last bit out loud. And so I flew to Bradley International, vectors from take-off to touchdown - Bradley Approach looks after Approach Control at Worcester Airport.

The New England Aviation Museum is located on one side of the airport itself.

Presumably, at least some of the exhibits were flown in. I walk into the lobby at Signature, having self parked and wandered across the apron between the Gulfstreams, Falcons and Learjets - no hi-viz jackets here. "Could you possibly order me a taxi to the NEAM", I ask in my best British accent. "No problem sir, I'll drive you over" says the man behind the desk. "and if you want picking up later and running to a good restaurant, just call this number, and I'll come right across and take you to a restaurant". The Signature guys seem genuinely embarassed at the forthcoming "Ramp Fee", they are going to ask me for, and can't do enough for me.

And so to the museum itself. This turned out to be a bit of a disappointment on two levels. Firstly, and most trivially, having found out about the place in the $100 Dollar Hamburger, I had assumed that it would have a restaurant. After all, part of the motivation for being there at all was the offer it held out of being able to engage simultaneously in two of my favourite pastimes, Eating and Flying. Sadly, the extent of its gourmet possibilities was a collection of three rather sad-looking vending machines in a "vending area". Lunch came to consist of a packet of chocolate covered peanuts and a coke. Not quite what I had had in mind. The second disappointment was, if I am honest, the museum itself. Coming from England, I am accustomed to aeronautical museums such as Duxford and the Shuttleworth Collection. In both cases, these places really have far too many exhibits for the display space available, and give the impression of having crammed every artefact possible into their hangars. At NEAM, the opposite was true. Whilst there were a few interesting exhibits, the museum's enormous premises were really built around an unduly small number of genuinely interesting aircraft, and much of what else was there was scraping the bottom of the barrel. Much space was given over to a J3 Cub and a Rutan VariEze, neither of which really merited the room.

As I look through the collection of photos I took, I struggle to know which to show you. Perhaps this one is worthy of comment:

To British eyes, this is a German V1 missile, that has for some reason been painted yellow. The museum informs us that this is a Republic JB-2 "Loon". The Loon, it transpires, was invented by a "Brilliant team of German Rocket Scientists who decided to assist the United States with its Rocket Program in 1945. These heroes went on to mastermind the Apollo program". It conspicuously fails to inform the visitor that "These heroes" were hard at work designing an ICBM targeting New York at the time of their capture, and sudden conversion to the Stars and Stripes.

So I leave the NEAM, strangely unfulfilled. "Is it true that you flew that 'thing' all the way from Eng-er-land" asks my enthusiastic young driver. "It is", I reply. "Wow sir, I bet they would love to have your airplane in their museum" he enthuses.

They certainly need more stuff to fill the space.

March 26, 2005
A visit to Washington
Having been deeply unimpressed with the New England Air Museum experience, I desperately felt the need to visit somewhere aeronautical of a rather more fulfilling nature. With only a couple of days to go until my family join me, my window of opportunity to indulge myself is rapidly closing. So, on the basis that if you are going to visit a museum, you might as well visit the biggest and best, I decided to fly down to Washington DC to visit the Smithsonian. Whilst the main Smithsonian is right in the centre of the nation's Capital, a newer facility has been opened at Washington's Dulles International airport - the catchily named "Steven F. Udvar Hazy Center". Don't let the name put you off though. This museum is, unlike the NEAM, crammed to the gunnels with "real" historical artefacts.

But first, a word about flying into one of the US's biggest and most busy airports in a tiny single-engined aircraft. Dulles is far bigger than Heathrow, and whilst I suspect it has slightly fewer movements per day, is still exceptionally busy, as you would expect. Additionally, it sits in the middle of an incredible secure zone established in the light of 9/11. Miss a radio call here, and you will find yourself shot down before you can say "Say again, I was on the landline".

Once again, the trick is to pick yourself a handling agent. I was impressed by Signature at Bradley, so once again, seeing that Signature are here too, I call them up. There is obviously a standard drill, "You do appreciate that there is a ramp charge Sir?". This time, it turns out to be $26 dollars. Stifling the laughter at the lack of airways slots, ground slots, and outrageous fees, I arrange to be there for 11. The Flight from Boston down to Washington takes about 2:15 in N33NW, but what a way to spend the time. From Boston, the route takes you South down across Long Island Sound and down Long Island itself, all the way to JFK which you cross directly overhead, before hopping down into New Jersey, Philadelphia, and Delaware, finally crossing over the City of Baltimore and into Washington DC.

For the first time ever, and from the comfort of my hotel room, I used AOPA's Real Time Flight Planning Tool (mentioned earlier on in this Blog) to file my Flightplan directly via the Internet - free of charge. With some trepidation, I called for the clearance some thirty minutes or so later, only to find that things had worked like magic. The clearance was immediately forthcoming and away I launched once again into the skies with my 40p/L AVGAS. The Met Briefer had warned that the clear skies overhead Worcester would give way to an undercast in the New York Region, and unfortunately, he was not wrong. So with camera poised, I watched the skies over long Island gradually close underneath me to completely hide JFK itself and Manhattan. Next time, I'll try and do better. You have to marvel at the New York TRACON (Terminal Radar Approach Control) guys. Like the London TMA controllers, they have the unenviable task of dealing with all arrivals and departures into one of the busiest chunks of airspace anywhere in the world, and yet the job was accomplished without any visible problems, and with a lot of humour. Unlike their British Counterparts, there seems to be a genuine and widespread curiosity about the aircraft they are controlling. Whilst there are Trinidads in the US, they are sufficiently unfamiliar to raise the odd question from time to time, particularly when they see that this one is, in their terms, "Glass Cockpit and Mode S equipped".

Navigating down to Washington is very straightforward, with my filed routing remaining unmodified in any significant detail. A couple of waypoints have me scratching my head and scouring the Jeppesen Map. CRAWL turns out to be KROLL, and the one I copied, and read back, as WILLY turns out to be WOOLY. Two countries divided by a common language. Fortunately, both of these potential embarrassments, I manage to spot, before they are needed.

In due course, I am vectored for a visual final onto runway 1R (they drop the leading "0" in America) which, fortuitously brings me almost overhead the Museum, seen here bottom left. The weather is drizzly and the overcast is quite low, so the photo quality is not as good as I would like.

Without the hint of a high-viz vest - the Marshallers don't wear them either - I wander into Signature, and sign the forms. They have N33NW down as a Lear Jet based in Van Nuys, California. I point through the window and security fence to disabuse them of that idea.

"...And you say that you brought that over from Eng-er-land Sir?", my host asks in disbelief. "Well, I don't think we can charge you a ramp fee then! Would you like a crew car to take you over to the museum?". I say Yes, and he tosses me a bunch of car keys. "Sign here Sir, and you are good to go. What time do you think you'll be back". I tell him that I expect I will be three or four hours and he is fine. So, with my totally, completely, utterly, free car, I drive round to the museum, realising just how long those runway are. It takes about 15 minutes to get round to the other side of the airport to visit the place that I have only just flown over.

Now this is more of a museum! Crammed full of genuine historical significance. In this shot alone, you can see an Air France Concorde, the original Boeing 707 prototype, Bob Hoover's famous Aerocommander, and behind them all, *the* Enola Gay. Admission, unlike the NEAM, is Free of Charge, and it has a branch of "Subways" in one corner of one of the hangars.

I start my visit by viewing a Film "Fighter Pilot", in the IMAX theatre. This 45 minute production is rather schmaltzy - "My Dead Grandpappy is my hero - he was a fighter pilot, just like I am today and I always feel that he is right there as my wingman, looking after me... Here's to you, Grandpa... etc etc". But once you get past the sickly sweet commentary, the film, an exposé of one of the Nato Red Flag exercises, is absolutely breathtaking.

Being the Smithsonian, this museum hosts Space artefacts as well as Aircraft. One of the newest exhibits is the Space Shuttle "Enterprise", used for flight demonstrations during the early 80s prior to the initial Shuttle launch. Many remember it strapped to the back of NASA's modified Boeing 747.

This Museum was like a breath of fresh air compared to my previous experience. Signature were a breath of fresh air compared to UK handling agents. Feeling the urgent need to emigrate to the US without delay, I dropped off the car, paid no handling charge, thanked the Signature guys profusely and headed back up the route I had come down, back to Worcester.

Aviation out here is fantastic, and once again, I realise how lucky I am to be enjoying it with my very own aircraft, all the way from Eng-er-land.

March 28, 2005
New York City
With the arrival of wife and kids on Saturday, a slight change of priorities has been established. Flying is still OK, but flying to aviation museums or burger bars is less OK. I was starting to get used to the life of the single man too...

Kate hasn't been to New York in years, and the kids have never been, so today, after checking that my house-sitting nephews have not torn our home apart, we headed toward the Big Apple.

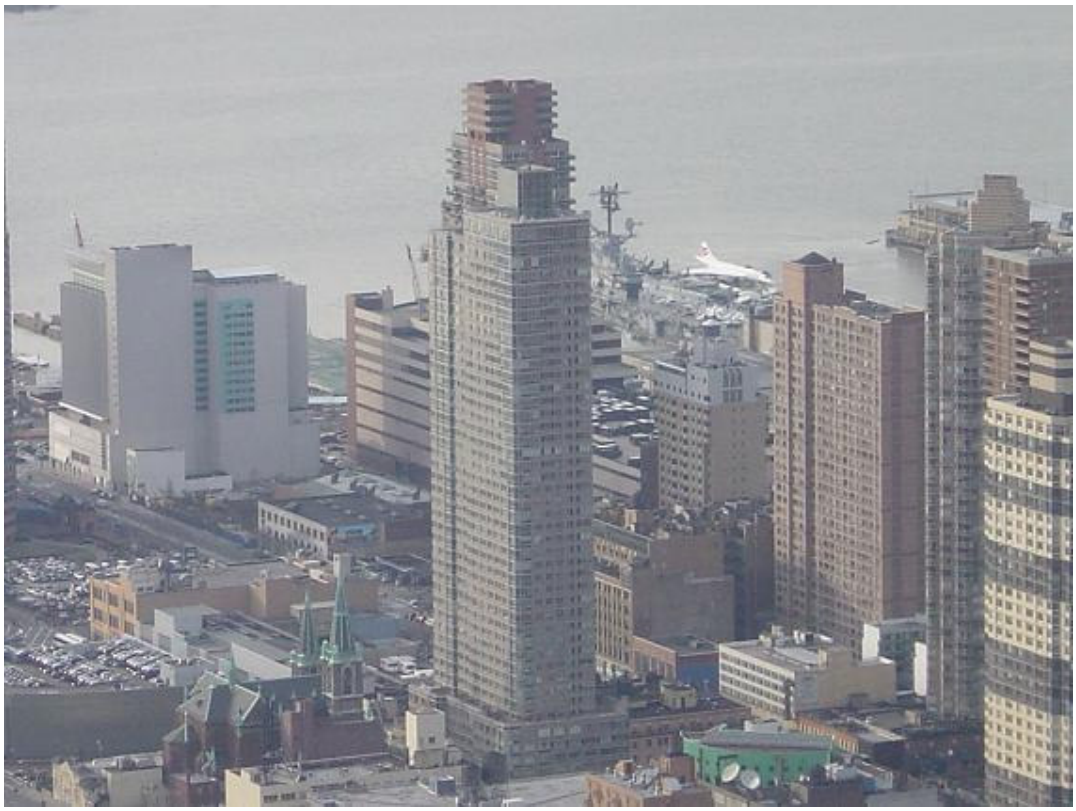
There is actually nothing to stop small aircraft from landing at JFK, Newark or La Guardia, but unlike even Washington, all of these airports require landing slots, and raise handling costs that start to fall into the same range as the UK. For this reason, most people opt for Teterboro airport, just across the river in New Jersey. If you are lucky with the traffic, it takes considerably less time to get to downtown Manhattan from Teterboro than it does from JFK.

As with most larger airports in the US, Teterboro requires you to appoint a handling agent before arrival. The ubiquitous Signature Flight Support were my first call, having had such pleasant experiences with them in the recent past - sadly, nobody there could be bothered to pick the phone up. I have a recollection that there's was the FBO building damaged by the recent crash of a Challenger jet at the field, so perhaps they are temporarily closed for business. Running down the list of available FBOs in AOPAs Airport Directory, the other one that catches the eye is Jet Aviation. They too are a large international chain of FBOs and the standard is normally pretty good. A quick call to Jet secures handling services.

Weather conditions for the 45 minute flight down to Teterboro were not ideal for sight seeing with the New York area in haze and 2800 foot ceilings. Nonetheless, the New York skyline was reasonably visible on short final into Teterboro.

Once in town, we did the usual tourist things, including a trip to the top of the Empire State Building, and a looooong visit to FAO Schwartz, an unbelievably large toystore, that for the first time ever when in New York, I actually had the excuse to visit.

From the top of the Empire State Building, I managed to revert briefly to previous form, spotting one of the BA Concordes in its new home, the Intrepid Air and Space Museum



By the time we had enjoyed the sights and sounds of New York and the kids were flagging, night had fallen and it was time to head back to Teterboro. The current fixed price taxi fare from JFK into the City is $45 plus tolls and tips. In the case of Teterboro, the number is $70, or in the current climate around £38. The handling charge, not waived on this occasion, was $73 dollars and the service was excellent. Unlimited coffee and cookies for the family in a rather posh setting.

With a decent tailwind, we were back to Worcester in a little less than 40 minutes, despite some fairly aggressive vectoring to get us out of the New York Terminal area.

No flying today (Monday), but Tuesday sees the trip down to Naples and the completion of the second major ambition of the trip.

March 30, 2005
From Boston to Naples
So yesterday, the day finally dawned to head down to Naples, the furthest extent of the trip away from Cranfield. Even the Bahamas will be closer to Cranfield, by virtue of their position to the east of the Florida peninsula.

The US has been experiencing quite a severe weather system over the course of the last few days, which looked like it might cast a shadow over the vacation aspects of the trip. Over last weekend, Florida was hit by a major storm system associated with a Low Pressure area and Naples and Orlando were drenched. That storm system has been working its way north east over the course of Sunday and by Monday, it had it Massachusetts. We hadn't planned any flying, and it was just as well. I am normally happy to fly in most weathers, but the rain and resultant low visibility on Monday was enough to stop anybody in their tracks. With Worcester being 1000 feet high on a hill, everybody else's bad vis is dense fog at Worcester.

As we got up and pulled back the curtains on Tuesday morning, things didn't look a lot better. A quick look at the Nexrad (national rainfall radar image) via the AOPA tool brought the good news that what we were seeing was no more than the tail end of the system, and that I would be "on top" by around 6000 feet and out of the weather altogether by the time I was down in the region of North Carolina.

So with this cheery thought, Kate dropped me off at Swissport, the Worcester FBO and headed with the kids to Logan to pick up her Delta flight.

My clearance was the now familiar one, down from Worcester, via vectors to the Norwich VOR, thereafter to follow airways V16 and V1 all the way down to North Myrtle Beach in South Carolina - my fuelling and rest stop. V1 is THE airway that runs down the entire East Coast of the USA - a sort of aviation version of the M1.

In still air, this would be a 4 hour run, but my luck continues to hold and the Low Pressure system associated with all these storms had just coasted out overnight into Tuesday. As a result, I benefited from the generally North-South flow on the western side of the Low and had winds as strong as 45 knots at times, right on the tail. This brought me into Mertyl Beach in about 3:20.

The approaches to Mertyl Beach

The FBO at Mertyl Beach, Ramp 66
No sign of the Massachusetts Weather

The only remnants of the nasty weather from up north was the exceptionally gusty winds on landing. A 130 degree sheer between 3000 feet and the surface thanks to the complex combination of the upper winds off the low, and the sea breeze effect.

A bottle of Coke, some AVGAS and a packet of peanuts later, and I took to the skies on the last leg of the journey. The good people of Georgia (the State below South Carolina) have managed to negotiate for V1 to pass their State about 5 miles out to sea, so having coasted out at the bottom of SC, the next 100 miles or so were spent running along the gorgeous coastline, with the warm blue sea below looking inviting for the first time on this entire trip.

The airway coasts back in again at the northern edge of Florida at the Craig (CRG) VOR. Not far to go now. Entering Florida and talking to Jacksonville approach, it became apparent that my originally cleared route was going to take a dive in favour of a rather more circuitous route around Central Florida's enormous set of Military Operations Areas. Across to Ocala, then down to Lakeland, and on down to Lee County and in to Naples.

The Florida skies were crystal blue, except for some enormous smoke plumes that trailed across the entire state. At first, I had no idea what these were, then the opportunity came to see one at close hand.

Stubble burning in Central Florida

Fortunately for me, the noxious smoke was held at bay by a well-defined temperature

inversion at around 4000 feet. I only finally descended into it as I finally approached Naples - a visual approach onto runway 23 and yet another noticeable wind sheer as I descended through the diversion.

*

It is difficult to describe the feeling on finally arriving on the Naples Air Center ramp. All that preparation, planning and anticipation, for what was actually a remarkably straightforward series of flights, made all the more straightforward by some remarkably helpful weather, the absence of any mechanical problems and some great company, earlier up the line.

Today, I am popping across to Fort Lauderdale to visit Socata America for an oil and filter change. Tomorrow, the choice is endless, Disney, Key West, the Bahamas. Decisions..

March 30, 2005
A trip to see Socata
Apologies for the silence over the last few days. Now that the family have joined me, I have rather less time to be antisocial and shuffle off into a corner to write this Blog. However, Sunday being the day of rest, I've finally managed to tire them out - so here is a bit of an update.

Leaving aside the various daytrips conducted out of my Worcester Base, it took me a little over 28 flying hours to get from Cranfield to Naples. Including the 20 something hours flown before departure and since the annual, it was really time to get the aircraft looked at. The American regime doesn't provide for a 50 hour check, just the annual, and remarkably similar 100 hour check, but I have always chosen to get the oil and filters changed at 50 hours, just as if the aircraft was on the UK system. Many US owners do the same - some with older engines, even go as far as to change the oil and filters every 25 hours.

Socata aircraft are not as well-known in the US as they are in Europe. In fact, there are plenty of places in Europe where the arrival of a TB in a maintenance facility will cause much sucking of teeth by Engineers. As luck would have it, the US main Socata distributor is based in Pembroke Pines, Florida, just outside Fort Lauderdale. Philippe Santoro, their Technical Support guy is a very active and helpful participant in the independent Socata TB Users' Group at Socata.org. It was following an invitation from him that I found myself making the quick bounce across the Florida Peninsula to KHWO on Wednesday morning, with the offer of maintenance for the aircraft and lunch with Philippe in the offing.

I hesitate to tempt fate by saying that N33NW has been utterly reliable throughout the journey so far, but it is true. I have not had one single mechanical or avionics fault on the entire journey -so it was with some trepidation that I watched the Socata engineers take the aircraft apart for a once-over that went well over and above the usual 50 hour check. The team was very complimentary. The aircraft had "obviously been well looked after", it was in "great shape", and more importantly for me, the oil and filters were clean. A sign that I have not been unknowingly risking life and limb for the last few hours.

Whilst the aeroplane was receiving its TLC, I was also being given the grand tour of the Socata team, shaking hands with Michel, Bruno, and Stéphane; all of which fine body of Frenchmen then took me out to lunch whilst the aircraft was re-assembled.

Discovering that I am a French speaker, Lunch was friendly and convivial, and in French, the conversation was wide-ranging, from the superb TBM700, through to any potential plans for a reborn TB range. Stéphane, the President of Socata US was very keen to ensure that next year's "around the world" trip is conducted in a TBM. I reassured him that it would be in "this Trinidad".

And so back to the aircraft. The aircraft had got as far as Florida on W80 oil. This stuff is like hens' teeth in sunny Florida, and Socata were recommending a multigrade oil - something which seems to be rather more prevalent across the US. I've heard the usual array of nasty stories about Multigrade oil in the past, but at Socata's strong suggestion, I am now trying it. I'll let you know how I get on.

Flying back into Naples that afternoon, the oil temperature was noticeably lower than it had been with my W80 and nothing fell off, so all told, a good result. Time to find out what Kate and the kids had been doing.

March 30, 2005
Venice - disappointments come in threes
Naples has loads of fun things to do to entertain kids of all ages, but over my last few visits, I have also come across plenty of venues in the surrounding area that I have really wanted to share with the family.

One such venue is a picturesque restaurant called Sharkey's, perched on the pier at nearby Venice. Having been away for the day with Socata, a flying destination for the evening was a good way of earning back the lost brownie points.

The first disappointment was that Sharkey's didn't accept reservations for the evening. Knowing that it was a popular place, we resolved to head out there early. An evening departure for the 30 minute flight up to Venice would give a beautiful view of the sunset over the Gulf of Mexico - it didn't disappoint.

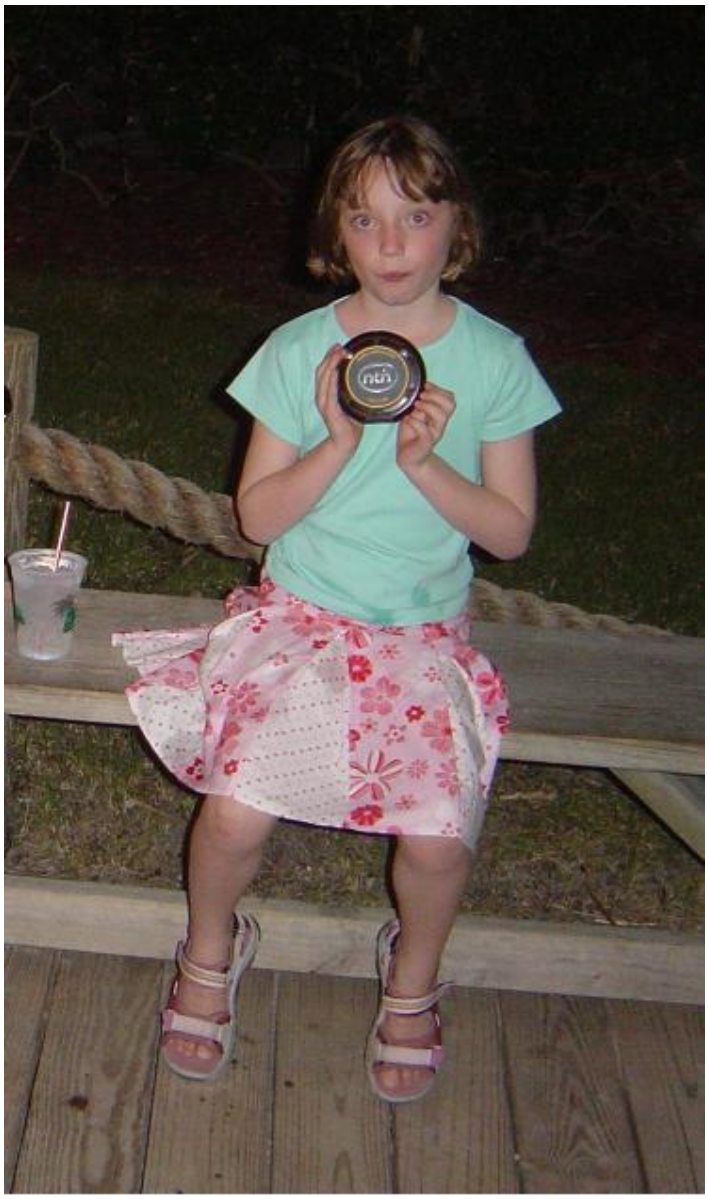
One of my pet rants back in the UK is the overcontrolling of small airfields by demi-controllers known as FISOs (Flight Information Service Officers). Venice is an example that often comes to mind when I think about how this might otherwise function. Venice is a busy training airport (the 9/11 bombers learnt to fly at a school there) with two runways, GPS instrument approaches, an automated ASOS (ATIS) and Pilot Controlled Lighting, all achieved without any kind of person on the ground. As we approached on Wednesday evening, there was a Mooney shooting practice approaches, a helicopter on the ground, and two of us approaching the field VFR (at night). Through careful self-announcement on the published frequency, we all integrated faultlessly and within 10 minutes of our first call, we were taxiing onto the Triple Diamond Jet Center ramp, our FBO for the evening.

After such a short flight, we weren't going to be topping off the tanks, so this FBO was going to be getting no money at all from us - and yet they still seemed delighted to see us, and happy to phone for a taxi to take us the short distance to Sharkey's. We would be back after the FBO closed, but once again, they provided us with the gate code so that we would be able to access our aircraft, and depart later.

Unfortunately, on the taxi front, nothing was going to be available for 40 minutes or more. Sharkey's is only a mile or so from the FBO and it was a pleasant evening, so we decided to walk it, arriving at a packed Sharkey's very shortly afterwards with two tired and hungry kiddies.

Then for our second disappointment of the evening. The friendly greeter informed us that the wait for a table was going to be "95 minutes sir". Had we been anywhere near civilisation, with any prospect of a taxi, we would have gone somewhere else at this point, but lacking any means of going anywhere, we were a captive audience.

The greeter handed us a wireless Frisbee which would glow and bleep when our table was ready and invited us to sit on the deck and wait our turn. And there we sat for 95 minutes, the kids becoming increasingly fractious and the adults nerves under growing pressure.



Number 1 daughter with the Frisbee - before the novelty wore off

They say that disappointments, like deaths, come in threes. They are not wrong. It turns out that Wednesday night is "live music night" at Sharkey's. This consisted of what Lawyers would call "an alleged Singer" performing doubtful county and western hits at volume setting 11 -sufficient to cause blood to come out of the ears and adults having endured 95 minutes wait to lose the will to live. Achy Breaky Heart - you'd better believe it.

We all yelled at one another for the next 45 minutes or so, before finally, we asked for a taxi home. That would be another 45 minutes, Sir. So we started to walk back to the airport. The kids, despite everything were holding out well and there were no complaints to be walking home. They will obviously grow up to be music lovers.

As we walked home, everybody's spirits were lifted by the passing of numerous police, fire and rescue vehicles, seemingly heading towards Sharkey's. Perhaps the

mob had rioted.

As we walked along the airport perimeter road, we were accosted by a young man anxious to find out what the emergency services were doing. "I think there has been a plane crash he shouted, my friend took off and I think he crashed". We reassured him that we had heard no plane crash (not that the noise of a plane crash would have won the unequal battle with Sharkey's Singer) and continued our walk to the access gate. The kids were now talking about plane crashes and the adults were hoping selfishly that if there had been a crash, there would be no restrictions on our departure back to the relative civilisation of Naples. It was now approaching 11 in the evening, and it would be pushing midnight by the time we were home.

With a few clicks of the PTT switch, the previously dormant Venice airport leapt into life - the power to control all of the lighting of a large airport so easily makes one feel almost as powerful as an ATCO ;-)

We departed runway 22 making all of the customary blind calls, and climbed away into the inky darkness. Despite being a good VMC night, the 22 departure takes you straight out over the sea where there is absolutely no light and no horizon. If you were not instrument qualified, you could certainly get into trouble. The TCAS showed us accurately where the police helicopter was now hovering - but nobody was giving any hints away, either on 121.5, or on the airport frequency. We remain none the wiser as to what happened, but hope that it involved Sharkey's singer and a pointy object.

March 31, 2005
Glass Bottom Boats in Key West
We've always been rather keen to keep my daughter from untutored browsing of the internet. This dates from an unfortunate experience a few years ago when I was helping a teenaged niece with her homework relating to "Prince Albert" and Queen Victoria. The results produced by the search engine were unexpected to say the least and whilst it may have widened her education, it did nothing for her homework mark.

However, something useful that Google did turn up for my daughter was a great reference to a Glass Bottom Boat tour available down in Key West at the far tip of the Florida Keys.

So that was Thursday's trip settled then. Key west lies about 45 minutes south of Naples. You can think of it as being something of an American equivalent of Blackpool, mixed with an element of the Costa del Sol. Most of the time, it caters for cruise ship loads of Geriatrics doing their grand tour, but during student holidays, it also plays host to some notorious "Spring Break" antics. OUr timing was such that as we arrived on a beautiful sunny day, there were elements of both still very much in evidence. A heady mixture!

Unlike most FBOs in the US, Key West's Island Air Services exploits its monopoly position by making a ramp charge... $10. Outrageous. In exchange for this, they'll book you a taxi, let you file your flight plans and provide full internet and weather access. Less good value is the $40 taxi ride into the center of town, aggravated by the season and the fact that we are four bodies.

The Glass Bottom Boat hit the spot perfectly and kids got to see the Barracudas, Clown Fish and other residents of the Coral Blue waters up close and personal. Once again, we returned to Naples after dark with two tired but happy kids. A much better result than the Venice fiasco.

April 1, 2005
Titusville and the Kennedy Space Center
Another day, another daytrip - this time to Kennedy Space Center, considerably to the North of Naples and on the East coast of Florida. I've got the appropriate VFR sectional charts for Florida, but to be very honest, it is just too darned easy to file IFR in America and be looked after from take-off to touchdown.

Kennedy is of course equipped with a rather magnificent runway designed to accommodate the odd passing Space Shuttle, but since 9/11, that is not even available for touch-and-goes; a must do part of the Florida Aviation experience in years gone by. Instead, the airport of choice for visiting aviators is Titusville (KTIX) which in an attempt to cash in on its proximity to the tourist attraction has rechristened itself Titusville Space Coast Executive Airport.

Short range IFR flying in the US is the kind of pleasure that should be possible in Europe. You nominate an altitude, and if you are "G" equipped (IFR GPS on board), you simply file "GPS Direct", and allow ATC to revector you as necessary. Absent any weather, I am tending to cruise at around 6000 feet (transition all over the US is FL180). This allows the air temperature to drop to comfortable levels for sweat-free cruising and normally takes you high enough to be above the almost constant inversion layer and associated ever-present light chop.

The 45 minute run up to Titusville is uneventful, and we are looked after by the good people of the "Space Coast Jet Center". They were so efficient that they even had a taxi waiting for us on arrival to speed us the few miles (and $35) to the Space Center visitors center. Even the drive their doesn't disappoint. Our driver, a retired New York Police Officer knows all the best locations to spot Aligators and the kids are treated to several glimpses of these magnificent beasts lolling in the water. The final causeway onto the cape gives us our first sight of a Dolphin in the bay and a closer look at the monumental NASA Vehicle Assembly Building, the building originally designed to allow construction of the Apollo Saturn V rockets. The VAB had been visible from the air for 40 miles prior to our landing at TIX.

Kennedy never fails to please, with its IMAX cinema and guided tour of the launch facility. We returned to Naples with two very happy kids... and therefore two happy adults. I am amazed how well the kids have coped with days involving 7:30 starts and 22:00 bedtimes. There is nothing that holiday time and a little sunshine can't do for you.

April 2, 2005
Nassau and the Bahamas
Nassau and the Bahamas. Names which to the unfamiliar conjure up images of millionaires, yachts, recording studios and things exotic. The reality was rather different when Kate and I visited Nassau for the first time many years ago. Instead, we had grown to think in terms of run-down, seen better days, tourist trap, frequent power cuts, hotels in need of rejuvenation, hot, dusty and a million other uncomplimentary thoughts.

A year or two ago, shortly after achieving my Citation type rating, I had had the good fortune to fly a Bravo to Nassau for a daytrip and had been amazed at the extent to which things appeared to have changed. Frustratingly on that occasion, I was there for the aviation, and the many tempting brochures in the FBO came back with me in my flight case.

It had therefore been something of a personal ambition to include Nassau on this trip with the family; in my case, to see the changes, and in the case of the kids, something new for them to experience.

Departing the US under a VFR flight plan is all a bit too much like hard work, so once again, I reverted to the relative comfort of an IFR plan. Flights outbound from the US are not required formally to clear customs, so our routing was IFR direct from Naples to Nassau. That involves another "GPS direct" routing towards Fort Lauderdale, before following the more formal structure of the "Bahamas Routes" into Bahamas airspace. Our assigned route took us overhead the tiny Island of Bimini before heading directly towards Andros Island and thence to Nassau on New Providence Island, the capital of the Bahamas. This involves a total distance of somewhat greater than 100 miles over some of the most inviting water in the world.

The Island of Bimini just before sunset on the return leg

The Bahamas are noted for their laid back approach to everything, and air traffic control was no different. Once of the most relaxed controllers on the planet quietly took charge of our flight from the edge of Andros island as we entered Nassau control area and issued us with vectors for descent along with a couple of Lear Jets and a scheduled 737. His even more laid back mate had recorded the ATIS.

"Welcome to Nassau. This is information Whiskey. The weather is lovely with 3 knots winds from 190 and an outside air temperature of a just perfect 31 degrees. Our Altimeter setting is 30.01 inches and the runway in use is 9....We are digging up runway 14/32 at the moment, so make sure you pay particular attention to the taxi instructions..."

They don't do it like that at Cranfield ;-) I suppose it is difficult to sound *that* cheery about 8 degrees in light rain and a 300 foot overcast.

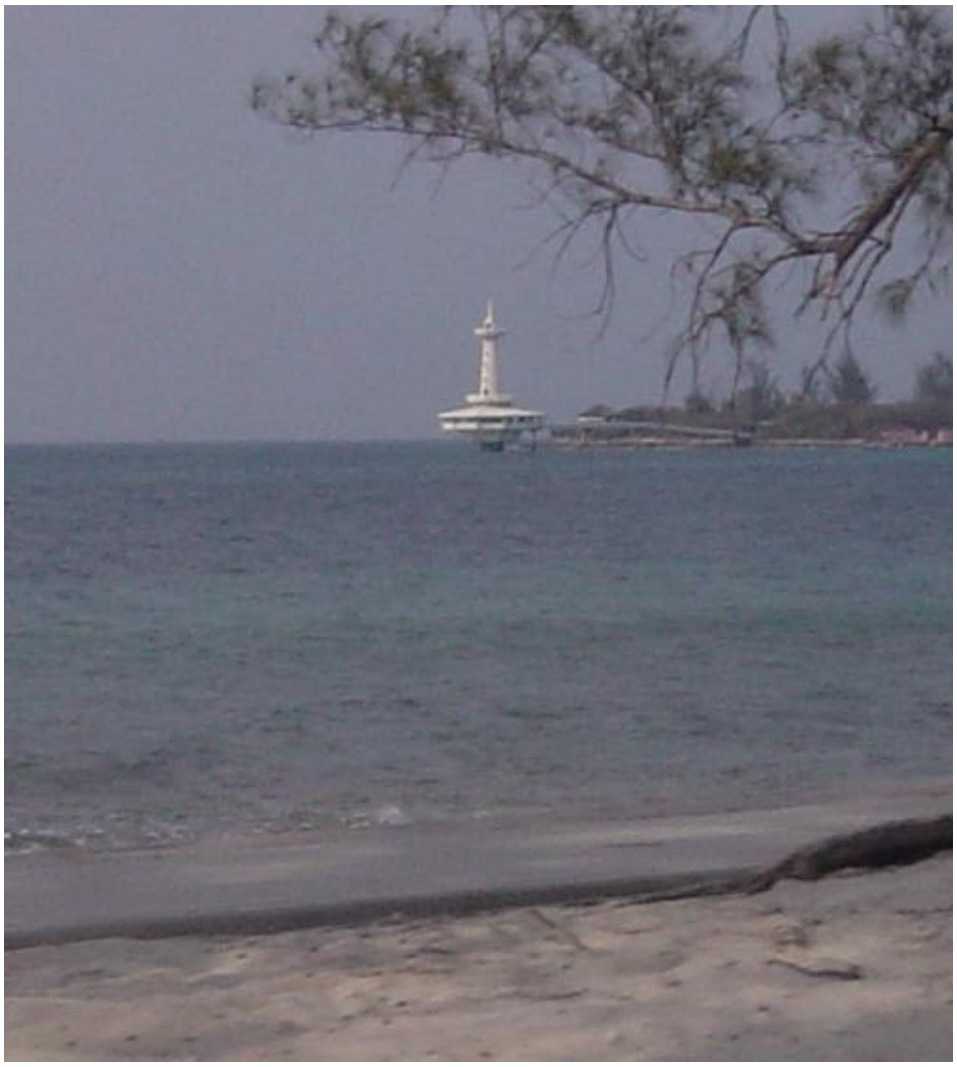
On arrival we are met by the handling agent at the state FBO and guided towards customs. I get us topped off with fuel and we hand over our paperwork to a jolly black customs official disguised as a rear-admiral. Richard at Naples Air Center had been kind enough to provide me with most of the customs forms that I would need (some in triplicate) prior to our departure, and I had whiled away some of the 90-minute flight filling them all in. As a result, the Admiral had little to do, but check that I had filled the forms correctly, before stamping a piece of paper and directing us to his colleague sitting next door in immigration. As we walked in, she got up and turned her television off before promptly losing two of the forms that we had presented to her. A quick and slightly anxious moment later and we discovered them in the pages of a gossip magazine that she had shut quickly closed on the way back from the television.

These are clearly busy people.

After a little more time-wasting as she closely scrutinised our passports and the forms, insisting that the children signed their own immigration forms, we were free to enter the Bahamas, providing we didn't engage in any employment. Nothing could have been further from our minds.

The customs officials are granted rooms within the handling agent's own luxuriously appointed offices. Once through customs we were able to settle into a couple of large soft sofas whilst seemingly hundreds of staff did nothing in particular, except for the one who was looking for a taxi for us. All around strode the various captains of executive jets looking for their clients or attempting to cajole the locals into anything resembling action.

Our taxi was in fact, a large minibus, decked out in the colours of Jamaica with a massive colour bow on the radiator grill. It was driven by an enormous and very friendly black lady with an accent that lent itself perfectly to shouting "Thomasssss! You is one bad pussy cat!" We told her that we wanted to go to "Atlantis". More of which in a moment. For now, it was time to enjoy the views as we were driven along the dusty broken roads from the airport, over to Downtown Nassau, some 10 miles away, passing as we went, such famous names as Cable Beach and the famous Sandals resort. As we expressed our surprise at each new building that had sprung up since our last visit 12 years or more ago, our friendly guide launched into a mini tour, clearly delighted that we could see and appreciate all of the changes that the tiny island has undergone in the last few years. The once largely deserted road to Nassau with its tumbledown shacks selling Conch shells and fruit have substantially been replaced by shiny new buildings headquartering banks, insurance companies, "business centers" and suitably high-class villas. It is much nicer than it once was, without necessarily being a change for the better.



For the most part, the road into Nassau runs along the water's edge, where locals can be found stretched out in the sun, seemingly unbothered by the burning hot sunshine. From time-to-time you pass a curiosity such as the one pictured above - "Coral World", an undersea observatory belonging to a now-abandoned oceanographic park. The reason, for the abandonment, our destination, Atlantis.

Atlantis sits on a small island to the north of Nassau town, romantically named Paradise Island. It has only had this name in recent times, its original Piratical name being "Hog Island". Paradise Island was developed heavily during the 70s and 80s by American TV magnate, Merv Griffin, who at least during our last trip had managed to lend his name to everything on and around the Island. Merv Griffin's Island was host to Merv Griffin's Paradise Island resort with its own airport and airline, with direct flights from Miami - all for an Island less than a mile long and a quarter mile wide. It used to be standard practice for the cruise liners to pull into Nassau harbour before disgorging their loads of American Geriatrics into boats across to their All-American resorts on Paradise Island. The Brits would arrive at Nassau international and would go to their resorts on Cable Beach. Nassau town itself has long been reduced to being an increasingly run-down daytrip away from the havens of gold plated luxury. This is a shame, one wonders how much the locals actually benefit from the thousands of

tourists that besiege the Island each year.

The late 90s saw the splendour even of Merv Griffin's Paradise Island start to look rather old and tired and in the gap between our last visit, a new God has arrived to replace poor old Merv. His name is Butch Kerzner. You get no further clues as to his nationality!

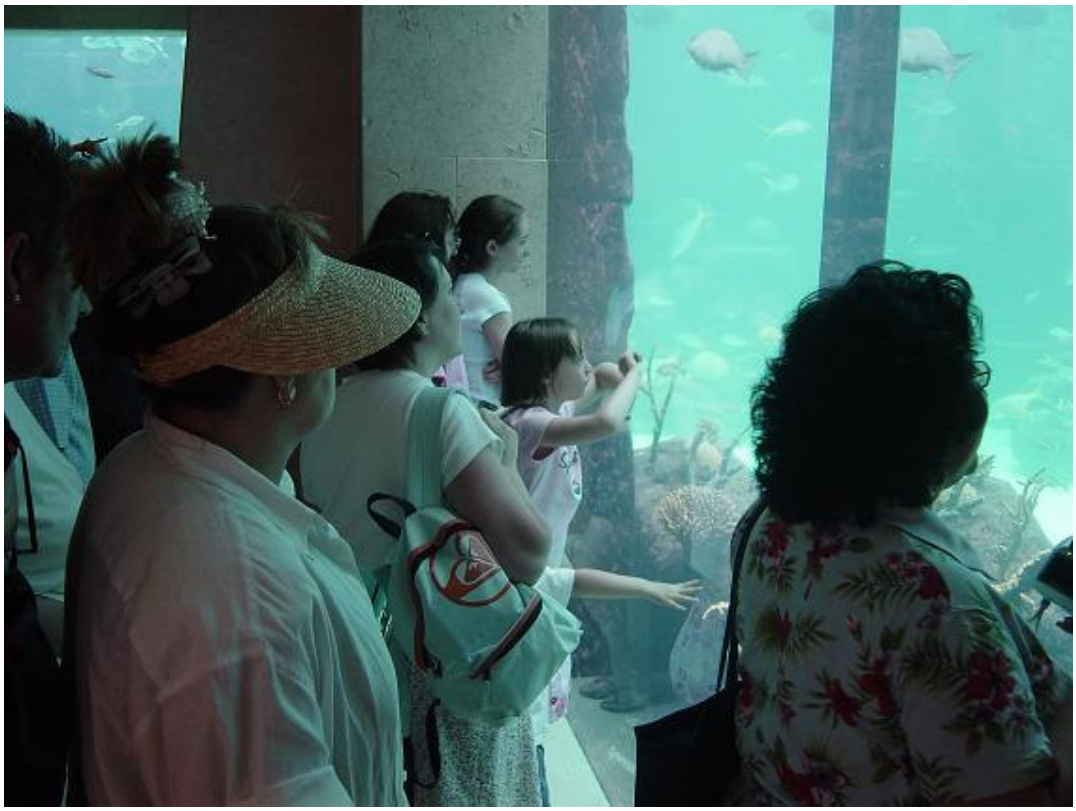
Butch and his Daddy have ploughed an estimated $2 Billion dollars into Paradise Island, essentially levelling Merv's legacy, closing his airport and shutting down his airline. In its place, they have built ATLANTIS. Themed as a giant Gothic recreation of the lost world of Atlantis, this towering resort built on and around the water is on a scale to rival the worst excesses of Vegas. We just had to see it!

Entering Atlantis

You enter Atlantis over a large drawbridge structure next to a marina harbouring some of the largest yachts you have ever seen. Once inside, you find yourself in a marble cathedral that would rival any creation of the European Middle Ages. I think that I am well travelled, and this is larger than any hotel I have ever been inside.

Just a small part of Atlantis' large open plan Lobby

Down from the lobby is a whole lower floor which looks out onto one of the world's largest open form fish tanks. Every wall is made of glass and faces out, James Bond-like onto an aquarium containing sharks, Groupers, Tuna and fish of all sorts, including most notably, a fully grown Manta ray.



We spent some time wandering around the resort open mouthed. We "ate all we could", we taunted the fish, we marvelled at the old folks tipping their savings into the fruit machines in the adjacent casino, and we noted the money that was dripping from every corner of the building.

Once we had enjoyed all we could, we left in another taxi back to downtown Nassau. Such is the control that Butch Gerzner, his Dad and his money have had on the authorities of the Bahamas that Nassau has embraced a policy of "All roads lead to Atlantis". The main street, "Bay Street" has been made one way, and leads to the new bridge to Paradise Island. We spent some time wondering around the tired old shops and visited the locals' Pirates of Nassau museum, but nothing lives up to the splendour of Atlantis. More now than at any other time, Nassau itself is nothing but shanty town, clutching to the edges of Atlantis. Merv Griffin's era may yet be seen as a Golden Age for the town itself. We tried explaining some of this to the kids, who instantly lost interest with the revelation that Merv is uncannily close to the French word for "Snot".

The Portside in Nassau Town - locals mill around whilst tourists head back to their liners

It was getting late, and we managed to persuade another laid-back taxi-driver to take us back to the airport. Flight plan filed and fuel-paid for (at American prices), we handed in our customs forms and walked out to the aircraft.

Nassau Clearance Delivery is rather more laid back than is ideal. From strapping in to getting our clearance took a little more than 30 minutes, and required several corrections of callsign and insistence that a flightplan had been put into the system.

Once cleared to start we found ourselves in a looooooonng line of aircraft sitting on runway 14 queuing for departure off Runway 27. The executive jet boys were fine in their air conditioning, we were dying in N33NW. The Aztec in front was taxiing along with the right hand engine shut down and the door wide open. Another half hour passed before finally, we were airborne, at about the time I had told US customs we would be arriving in Fort Lauderdale international.

The reason for the flight to Fort Lauderdale is the requirement for aircraft inbound to the US from the Bahamas to pass via an airport of entry. Fort Lauderdale came highly recommended as being less officious than many. The sun set as we gently cruised inbound along Bahamas Route BR57V.

Fort Lauderdale customs were as quick and easy as advertised. My B1 visa was stamped up once again, and Kate and the kids travelling under their visa waiver were accepted without question, because they still had their green counterfoils stapled into their passports. The permitting of this slight flexing of the conditions of entry on a Visa Waiver seems to be common practice by the US INS.

Finally, we made a quick VFR hop to arrive at Naples for another late night. I am not totally sure that I will be rushing back to Nassau again. I know the kids loved it, but there is something rather sad about the way that an entire Island has been subverted into supporting one man's enterprise.

Fort Lauderdale climb-out by Night.

April 6, 2005
The Party's Over - Time to Head Home
The last two days have been spent bouncing quickly and easily between Kissimmee Gateway Airport in Orlando and Naples. The reason, Kissimmee and its excellent FBO, Marathon Flight Services, are the place to go to for easy access to all things Disney. You can hire a car for the day for less than the price of the taxi from the airport, and in 15 minutes from landing you are driving through the purple-signed gates of the Disney estate, ready to spend money at a rate faster than you could possibly imagine.

Where MGM very nearly hit the spot on the first day, EPCOT was perfect yesterday and on the World Showcase section in particular, there really was something for everybody.

Kissimmee is yet another example of an airfield that, whilst it formally closes at 2100, remains available through the magic of PCL - Pilot Controlled Lighting - at all hours. Even an IFR departure clearance is available, being secured by a remote relay to Orlando, accessible on the ground. More magic even than Disney, to the eyes of a UK pilot.

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And now, the time has come to turn our tracks back towards the UK. The journey home starts today. In an hour or so, I will leave the Naples Area northbound one last time as I fly up, via Grand Strand Merytl Beach once again, to Worcester Massachusetts. Tonight's entry should be written to you once more from that neck of the woods. There is a gentle high off the east coast of the US - just as it should be - giving me indifferent winds, with the occasional light tailwinds home. I'll be sad to be leaving.

Leaving Naples to the north one last time

April 7, 2005
From Naples back north to Worcester
I have had a spectacular time in Naples and achieved all of the ambitions that I set out with when I left Cranfield nearly three weeks ago. Yesterday morning though, it was time to leave. Kate and the kids dropped me off at Naples Air Center with a TB20-load of the toys, clothes, buckets, spades and other bits and pieces that we have somehow accumulated during the stay. They said their goodbyes and headed off towards RSW and their Delta flight to Logan.

I decided on the easy option and simply reversed my route down from Worcester. A still-air 3:30 leg to Grand Strand North Myrtle Beach, and a 4:00 leg to Worcester. My continuing love affair with the North Atlantic Weather patterns held up once again, and with a modest high-pressure sitting off the eastern seaboard, I looked set for gentle tailwinds and clear skies the whole way up.

The humidity has picked up in Florida quite markedly over the last few days and the evidence made itself felt as I climbed out of Naples for the last time. I filed for 7000 feet and passed through the so-called mixing layer - where the thermally heated air from the surface bumps into the cooler air above - at around 4000 feet. This layer will rise during the day, and in this humidity is marked by small mushroom-like clusters of baby cumulus clouds. Once through the layer the ride quality improves quite dramatically, and the lower-level thermally-driven wind patterns are replaced by the true "winds aloft". 25 knots on the tail - very satisfying.

I have come to love these trans-America legs. I love them for their variety, and for the unexpected surprise of the occasional overflight of some household name that you never quite realised was on route. I love them too for the enormous variety of controller accents that you meet. You never know whether the next controller you meet will be Boss Hogg, Daisy Duke or Huggy Bear. I've spoken to them all on this trip.

After Departure, I work my way through the now-familiar controller sectors - Fort Myers Departure, Miami Center, Orlando Approach, Orlando Departure. Orlando vectors me through their airspace. Small fry flying below "the flight levels" must be a real pain for them as they thread us through their multiple heavy-jet arrivals and departure, but if it is, they are kind enough not to let on. I get another great look at Disney from above as I get vectored through the EPCOT overhead, and am then vectored to the north and into the hands of the waiting Daytona Approach (famous for the raceway), Jax Approach (Jacksonville), and leaving Florida, Savannah Approach. I always associate the name Savannah with porn stars for reasons I can't entirely explain. Savannah Approach turns out to be a lovely sounding Southern Girl (which probably means that she is large and in her late 50s) and as I sit there in autopilot following the airways to STARY and TYBEE with a 30 knot tailwind, things couldn't be better. I'll be into Myrtle Beach after only 2:30 at this rate.

The mixing layer clouds come to an end abeam Savannah and the visibility drops as the QNH rises. Some otherwise great photo opportunities are entirely ruined by the crud layer which I am now comprehensively sitting below. There is undoubtedly a temperature inversion above, but there is little to be gained in attempting to climb past it.

In due course, Mertyl Beach International appears on the nose, and its smaller cousin, Grand Strand looms out of the murk a minute or so afterwards. In weather like this, all of the IFR approaches are "vectors to a visual". The approach controller will point you at the airport and unless you volunteer that you can see it, will give you increasingly aggressive hints. Wise pilots don't claim to be able to see the airport too early. Once the controller issues the phrase "Cleared for the visual...", you are responsible for separating yourself from other aircraft. They will clear you from 30 miles out given half a chance, and in this murk you need all the help you can get to avoid other aircraft.

I land at Grand Strand just 2:30 after take-off from Naples. Ramp 66 is ready and waiting with the fuel truck and a "follow-me" Golf Buggy as I taxi onto the ramp. In 20 minutes flat, I have fuelled, bought a bottle of coke and some peanut M and Ms for lunch (the healthy option), filed IFR to Worcester, received my clearance, and become airborne again. Ryanair would be proud.

Georgia is a wedge-shape with the narrow end facing the coastline. This combined with the fact that the airway passes Georgia out at sea makes the State pass very fast. By contrast South Carolina and in particular North Carolina seems to go on and on for ever. My impressions are doubtless unfair, but with the exception of the coastal resorts, both states seem to consist of mile upon mile of isolated villages punctuated with clusters of fields and absolutely enormous forests the size of an entire British County. The natural resources of America are unbelievably vast, and an aerial tour like this makes you see the place in an entirely new light.

On we roll into Virginia, overlying Norfolk's enormous naval dockyard, and getting a tantalising glimpse through the murk of the CIA's headquarters in Langley. The bay at Norfolk appears to be spanned by an enormous bridge, perhaps 20 miles long. Something to look up on Google when I get a chance.

A brief affair with Delaware and we are in New Jersey talking to Atlantic City Approach. Atlantic City, the place where a million New York Pensioners go to spend their money on the Vegas-like Casinos. You can see the resort hotels lining the beach front from miles away. My attention is drawn on my left to some old but enormous and unusually shaped hangars at a large airport. I know exactly what thye are. Being based at Cranfield, you get used to the shape and size of Airship hangars - the field is adjacent to Cardington, home of the ill-fated R101, where the hangars survive to this day.

The hangars that I am seeing out of my left hand window have a similarly tragic history. This is Lakehurst Naval Air Station where in May 1937, the Hindenburg exploded following a transatlantic flight.

And now finally back into New York. This time there is no cloud, just smog. For the first time ever, I get to see JFK airport from the overhead. On the ground amongst the many large aircraft are a BA Boeing 747 and a 777. How many tens of times have I been a passenger waiting for one of those flights, or in previous times for the Concorde Flight. I love *not* being down there now. The rat-race is overrated.

Leaving the New York area I am handed to Bradley Approach - the home straight, or at least it would be were it not for some unfortunate instructor with a stuck microphone, who is treating much of Connecticut, Massachusetts and Northern New York to a lesson in basic aerobatics.

I reach for the Jepps and look up an alternative frequency. The increasingly overworked controller is being joined by a growing army of irate pilots.

And then, I am down again, landing on Worcester's runway 15 just 3:30 after departing Grand Strand. Swissport know me now. There is a cheerful greeting on arrival and it feels like I have come home. It is good to be back.

I have pressing business both in London and New York. I need to invest some time today working out which I need to do first. I may be coming home a little earlier than expected. There is also bad news about Narsarsuaq. Rumour has it that they have sold out of AVGAS and won't have any more until April 20th. I may be forced to take the northern route home.

April 8, 2005
I'm going to let you in on the new Grand Plan
OK. Some thinking has been going on since I wrote my last entry. My business in New York needs to take second priority to an opportunity which has popped up back in London. The family is leaving to go home on Friday (tomorrow for me) so I will take the opportunity to leave as well.

Here is the plan.

Tomorrow (Friday) I will leave Worcester at around 10:30 (15:30 in the UK) and fly directly to Goose Bay. The winds are with me in some force if the charts are to be believed - potentially to the tune of 50 knots on the tail. Whilst I don't need that in order to get directly to Goose, it won't hurt to be helped. In the event that things fail to work out as planned, I'll have Sept Iles as my enroute alternate. I've contacted Woodward's in Goose and they are now expecting me. They have also booked me a room in the Hotel North - the only game in town.

The plan will be to make a very early start on Saturday (you'll remember that Greenland closes on Sundays). If Narsarsuaq has any AVGAS and if the weather looks good, I will route via there and onwards to Reykjavik. Saturday night will be in the Loftleidir. If Narsarsuaq is without AVGAS, something it should be possible to pin down for sure tomorrow, then I will be doing a long day on Saturday, to Iqaluit in northern Canada, and thence to Sondrestromfjord and then to Reykjavik, arriving somewhat later in the day on Saturday.

Hopefully, unless the weather beats me, I'll then be heading down to Cranfield in time to arrive on Sunday afternoon.

That, is the new Grand Plan. I'll write and let you know what sort of shape it is in when I get to Goose tomorrow evening.

April 9, 2005
Worcester to Goose Bay

Imagine the scene. We are in the Bank Manager's office. An eager young man is pitching his business idea with great aplomb. Very high quality cookies, to be distributed exclusively in the sort of places frequented by high-net-worth individuals. Everything about this product must convey quality, class and good-taste. The Bank Manager seems to be going along with the idea. This businessman may be young and eager, but there is clearly nothing wrong with his judgement. "What you need is a brand name", says the Bank Manager, "something that encapsulates the entire high-quality-cookie concept". "Yes yes!!", says our hero, "I've thought of that. I have decided to brand my cookies.....

"OTIS SPUNKMEYER QUALITY COOKIES"

At which point, he is doubtless shown the door...except that as I sat in the Swissport FBO this morning at Worcester Massachusetts, waiting for the filter to be changed on the AVGAS bowser, Otis Spunkmeyer Cookies were right there, staring me in the face.

"You want to take a few of those cookies for the flight", says Sue, who has looked after me splendidly during my two stays with Swissport. "You'll get hungry going all that way up North". I overcome the name, and grab a handful of the admittedly delicious cookies. And that is how, a little after 10:30, my good friend Otis and I, are leaving behind Massachusetts climbing away towards the north-east, towards home.

Otis doesn't make it as far as Portsmouth New Hampshire, and I regret not taking a few more. They are very good. Still, this should be a reasonably quick flight, so far as any flight spanning a distance of over 800 nautical miles can be described as quick.

You'll recall that when I made the same journey in reverse, I felt the need to split it in two at Sept Iles. From a purely technical point of view the split wasn't necessary, the aircraft has the legs to do that sort of distance. The Sept Iles stop was prompted purely by the desire for some French cooking, and the bad press that Goose Bay had received as a night stop from Martin Courage, my trusted advisor.

This time, the objective was rather different. The earth's rotation is working against me and each timezone I cross shortens the day. If I am to avoid an overnight in Canada because of Greenland's Sunday Closing policy, I need to get as close to Greenland as possible today, with a view to jumping over Greenland and reaching Iceland if at all possible on Saturday. A night in Goose is the way to go, and it makes sense to get there as early as possible.

Whilst there is nothing to stop you filing "GPS Direct" on IFR Flightplans in the US, the practicalities of transiting terminal areas at unpressurised altitudes mean that your "Direct" will rapidly be transformed into a clearance along whatever standard routing the terminal controllers prefer. For that reason, for my flights up to Worcester from Naples, I used AOPA's tool to file genuine airways flightplan routings. The routes proposed by the tool were accepted "as filed", and flown pretty much as filed too. Unheard of in Europe.

Leaving Boston to the north, there are very few terminal areas of note. Perhaps the largest is Bangor Maine, and that could hardly be described as busy. For this reason, I felt able to try my luck with a "GPS direct" all the way from Worcester to Goose. To put that into perspective, that would be like filing GPS direct from Newcastle to Cannes. And my plan almost worked, with just one small modification. It seems that the Canadians don't want US aircraft just "appearing" out of nowhere from the US FIR. I therefore got away with Worcester direct Bangor direct Goose Bay at 11,000 feet. That was the navigation taken care of.

The second interesting feature of the flight today was the wind. At 5000 feet I would have had a modest headwind all the way. By climbing to 11,000 feet, that headwind had become a tailwind, as strong as 40 knots at times, only becoming a headwind of 5 knots in the last 100 miles to Goose. It pays to think carefully about the altitude you fly.

So there I am at 11,000 feet over northern Massachusetts thinking about things to tell you. Perhaps the first thing of note is the progress of the thaw. When I arrived in Worcester from Sept Iles nearly three weeks ago, the hard snow and ice was continuous all the way down from Goose Bay to the top of Long Island. Now, Massachusetts' lakes are largely thawed, what snow there is on the ground is there because it has been ploughed into huge dirty piles in the corner of parking lots. The frozen lakes don't start to become a major landscape feature again until I reach the north of Maine.

A Lake caught mid-thaw on climb-out from Worcester

I have to say, the journey from Massachusetts into New Hampshire and Maine is horribly tedious. The ground that has now been exposed from under the melted snow

is brown and dull and all of the scenery looks the same - lakes, forests, interstates and wasteground. Maine in particular appears to go on and on without end. More to the point, there are few options in any of those states for forced landings away from airfields. Even landing on the freeways is fraught with difficulties thanks to the Americans' habit of never burying utility wires. Every road is zig-zagged with telephone and electricity cables that you really wouldn't spot until it was too late to do anything about it.

Boston Center works me all the way up to the border with Canada. We are entering New Brunswick... remarkably similar in many ways to Maine. Were it not for the customs plaza on the freeway, you'd never know that you'd swapped countries. Moncton Center takes me on, but apart from confirming that I am navigating "direct Goose Bay", and reading me the current Altimeter Setting, doesn't bother me any further.

The interest level picks up a bit entering Quebec an hour or so later. With a sense of irony that could only be French in origin, the border between New Brunswick and Quebec is over a frozen river estuary and bay known in French as the "Baie des Chaleurs", loosely the Bay of Warmth. I'll let you draw your own conclusions.

A distinctly arctic-looking "Bay of Warmth"

The Quebec controller spends 90% of his time in informal chatter in pseudo-French with other French speaking pilots. Just as occurs in France, the French pilots are provided with copious traffic information on all other aircraft, whilst the English speakers get next-to-nothing. It is a comfort of sorts to have a TCAS screen to look at.

After 45 minutes or so in the care of Montreal Center (pronounced Mon Rayall Sontruh), I am told that I am leaving controlled airspace, and that I can contact Goose bay when I have 100 miles to run - in about 200 miles time. Au revoir.

I amuse myself listening in on 121.5 and on the various flight service frequencies and I use the time to obtain a Weather update on Goose Bay; you can't be too careful. As it happens all is well. The clear skies that I have enjoyed thus far will continue, as Goose is offering Overcast at 25,000 and few at 4,000. The slight forecast headwind is starting to make its presence felt, but nothing to cause alarm. I will land with nearly 2 hours fuel in the tanks.

Finally, after nearly 5 hours in the air, I am able to establish two-way communications with Goose Bay's approach facility Gander Center. The weather remains as advertised, I am radar identified, and I am number three to land - despite being 100 miles out. Not much happens at Goose.

Five mile final to 08 at Goose Bay

After 5:30 in the air, I land on runway 08, just as I did nearly three weeks ago, and am warmly greeted by the people of Woodward Aviation, the FBO. They have filled in the customs documentation, got my clearance number, booked me a hotel room and are happy to drive me over to the hotel as soon as I am ready.

In addition to a rather nice HS125 on the apron, there is also a brand new Cirrus SR20 heading the same way as me. Its pilot, a Brit meets me in the FBO and we start chatting. He is taking the aircraft to Holland for the Dutch Cirrus Distributor, and has already made some arrangements at Narsarsauq. They have 357L of AVGAS, my "friend" in the Cirrus has pre-purchased 200L of it. The 157L that are left will not

really be adequate for my needs, so whatever else happens, I won't be going via Narsarsuaq tomorrow. A lesson learnt, perhaps I should have pre-purchased the fuel...

So here is the newly considered plan as I sit in the Hotel North in Goose Bay. I really want to try to get through Greenland to Reykjavik tomorrow. If I don't I will be stuck in either Goose Bay or Greenland itself until Monday, because of the Greenland Sunday closing problem. If I have to route up to Iqaluit and across via Sondrestromfjord, the extra time required and the loss of timezone advantage might strand me in Greenland. As a result, my destination in Greenland will be Godthaab (BGGH) just 40 track miles or so more distant than Narsarsuaq further up the West Coast. They have a localiser approach (something that Narsarsuaq cannot offer), and appear to have no fuel issues. The routing to Reykjavik from Godthaab is not substantively longer than the route from Narsarsuaq, so nothing lost on that side either. The other advantage to the Godthaab option for me, is that it gives me something new to look at and write about. This is supposed to be my midlife crisis after all, not a commercial ferrying operation.

So with the thinking out of the way, it is time to sit down in my room and write to you. Contrary to what I had been led to believe, and purely on the basis of three hour's experience, there are many worse places to be stuck in than the Hotel North in Goose Bay. The rooms are newly built and nicely furnished, there is free Wifi access in all the rooms, the adjoining restaurant is reasonable, the staff are friendly, and all the key fobs and room numbers have little polar bear logos on them.

Pickup tomorrow morning is at 06:30 Local, on or about the same time that the first Godthaab TAF should be out. If it is any good, I'll be off. I am reasonably confident that the weather will allow the jump to Greenland. Less certain is the nature of the large cold front sitting between Greenland and Iceland. I could yet be stuck in Greenland for the night.

April 10, 2005
Goose Bay to Reykjavik
What a day this has been. I'll avoid any suspense by telling you right at the start that I am writing this entry from the fourth floor of the Loftleidir Hotel back in sunny Reykjavik. They are understanding types at the Loftleidir. Since the international flights all come and go from Keflavik, some 40 miles away, the Loftleidir is somewhat dependent on the flow of ferry pilots passing through the City airport. They have therefore built up an understanding of the pilot mentality, and when a room is booked by Flight Services, you can be sure that it will be facing out over the apron. There is something tremendously comforting about being able to look out over your own aircraft at night! I would bother you with a photo, but since it is now dark, the results wouldn't do the view justice.

Today started at 05:30 in the Hotel North. In hotels which do not offer an internet connection, I reckon that I can be bathed, shaved, dressed and out in 30 minutes. Where an internet connection is available, that time doubles - there is always something to look at.

It had snowed overnight in Goose Bay. Nothing serious, just a light dusting, despite the -4 temperatures outside. My pickup, courtesy of Woodward's was at 06:30; my mate in the Cirrus was staying further away in a Guesthouse and he would be picked up first. Ferry pilots tend to quote a fixed price for delivering an aircraft from one side of the Atlantic to another, and every little bit saved represents profit on the job. The Hotel North was hardly expensive, but the Guest house was apparently even cheaper.

Not the Ritz, but not nearly as bad as some had suggested

Walking into Woodward's luxurious facility, easily the equal of places like Signature

in Teterboro, Cirrus-guy and I were joined by another pilot, a Frenchman, delivering a heavily tanked Bonanza to Luxembourg. The three of us each represented different aspects of the Piston ferrying game. Bonanza man with his tanks was planning on heading directly to Reykjavik in one hop. He would be there mid afternoon. I was planning on Reykjavik too, but with a stop in Godthaab (would have been Narsarsuaq had it not been for their limited fuel and the foresight of Cirrus man). I should make it by early evening. Then you have Cirrus Man. Not a posh, high-speed SR22, an SR20 with no tanks, limited endurance, no ice protection and a relatively slow cruising speed.

Unusually for this trip, the winds are not with any of us. Fortunately, they are not against us either. We will all experience around 25 knots across the nose the whole way. This doesn't worry me or Bonanza man. We both have plenty of spare range. Cirrus man could be in trouble. He may well have bought all that fuel, and be unable to take advantage of it... today at least.

Cirrus man is scratching his head and reading the weather charts, Bonanza man is in no hurry, so I get fuelled and file my flight plan. This is efficiently taken care of by Woodward's, and I am airborne within two hours of my alarm going off. The winds are as indifferent as predicted and thanks to the frighteningly cold outside air temperature; I reach my 11,000 foot cruising level with ease. It is -25 outside and the heaters on the TB20 are struggling to keep up. The contrast with sitting on the tarmac at Nassau just a few days ago, dying in the heat could not be more marked.

Once you are verified as pointing in the right general direction, an intersection called PORGY in my case, Goose Approach can't wait to get rid of you. "Contact Gander Radio on 127.9, given standard position reports and Ops Normal reports every hour on the hour, See Yah".

Four and half hours of flying in a straight line face me, with nothing to look forward to in the immediate future, but the next opportunity to bother somebody on the radio with a position report. Even the weather is pleasant. I am wafting in and out of some altostratus, but with an OAT of -25, there is no real danger of ice, and none predicted. My destination, more properly referred to as Nuuk in these PC days is giving scattered at 2000, broken at 4000 and a temperature of -4, dew point -5. Those last two numbers are a bit close for comfort. It wouldn't take much to give rise to a for risk. Fortunately, Narsarsuaq, my alternate is looking much better. I could always land there, use the fuel that Cirrus man hasn't pre-purchased, and edge around to Kulusuk on the Eastern Coast of Greenland, if it came to it. Still, both TAFs are excellent, and as I enter the dead-zone, out of VHF contact, the latest Nuuk actual is pretty good.

I manage to relay a position and "Ops Normal" report during my time in the dead zone thanks to Speedbird 279. Otherwise, with nothing to look at, for the very first time on the trip "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" got an airing. The experience isn't totally satisfying. I am not used to diverting my attention away from the aircraft, so after three hours or so, I am only 50 pages into the book.

Approaching Narsarsuaq from Goose Bay, you are approaching the very tip of Greenland, and so there is not a lot to look at until the last few minutes of the flight. Not so with Nuuk. I am approaching Greenland at quite an acute angle, and are

therefore running up the coast getting closer and closer for nearly an hour. The scenery here is absolutely stunning. Just a tiny sample is posted below.

The tiny community of Nuuk, Greenland's Capital taken on final runway 05

Nuuk (I'll keep using the local name, rather than the Danish one, since that seems to be what the locals prefer) is a relatively small airport with just a 900m runway, by comparison to Narsarsuaq. In contrast, its relatively open approaches do allow a localiser approach, something which gave me some degree of confidence had the weather gone to pot.

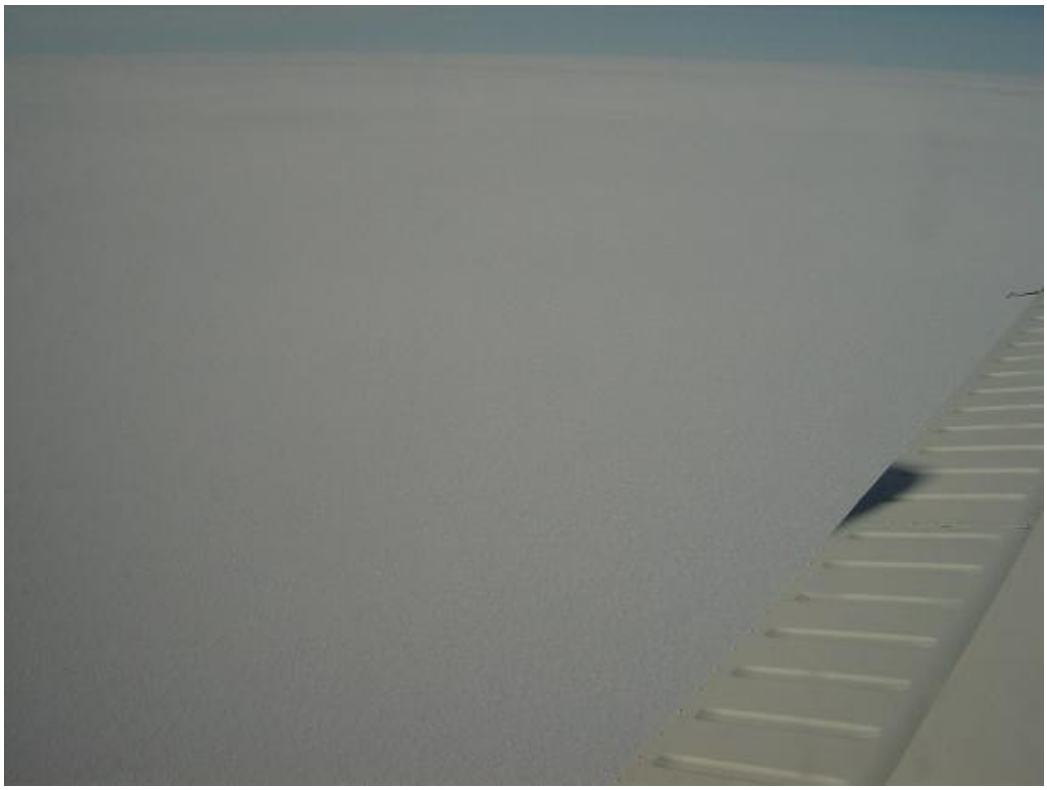
I landed with 2.5 hours endurance, after 5 hours flying, having not gone overboard on the lean-of-peak. LOP does stretch the range and endurance, but at the cost of airspeed, and therefore time. Because the timezones are against me today, airspeed is king, second only to safety.

By the time I land at Nuuk, the forecast has become few Cirrus at 20,000. The air is clear, the winds are light and I really get the impression that I am seeing the place at its best.

Sondrestromfjord Information were kind enough to let me file an airborne flightplan to while away the time on the final leg into Nuuk, so having landed at 15:30Z, I am flight-planned straight out again to Reykjavik at 16:00Z. The ground staff know this, and really shift to ensure that this happens. The flight to Reykjavik, unaided by the winds will be a long one, around 5:30. Most importantly of all, whilst the airport at Reykjavik is open H24, the restaurant at the Loftleidir closes at 22:00Z, and I have eaten nothing all day. Having paid my dues (at the same horrendous rates as Narsarsuaq), I make a quick phone call to my wife to check that she made it home (she did), and to Flight Services in Reykjavik to ask them to book me a room. As it happens, I needn't have bothered. They saw the flight plan, recognised the registration, and everything was already taken care of.

Unlike Narsarsuaq, sitting at the tip of Greenland, a flight from Nuuk to Reykjavik requires you to fly for a couple of hours across the fattest part of the Greenland Ice Cap, You can think of Greenland like a large saucer of frozen water, gently overflowing its edges. All of the centres of population are down by the sea, nestling on the ice flows, above them by 9000 feet and more is a large solid cap of ice, oozing glaciers down hundreds of fjords into the sea.

On an overcast day, the climbout from Nuuk would have been a worry. Today, it was easy, gently picking my way up through the glaciers to my cruise of FL110 above the ice cap.



Those aren't clouds below, that is solid icecap

Once above the icecap, there is total whiteout. Snow extends as far as the eye can see in every direction, and you simply have to trust your instruments. I follow the preferred routing ASVID-SOBSTORY-ASTAN-DA which takes me across the cap to Kulusuk on the east coast, before heading out across the Atlantic to Reykjavik.

You are probably wondering how a reporting point like SOBSTORY got its name. So am I. ASVID and ASTAN were totally unremarkable points on the icecap. As SOBSTORY loomed up, a tiny black spot appeared on the ice, getting larger and larger, until as I overflew the reporting point, the clear shape of a Doppler Radar station emerged. A job for Google later.

SOBSTORY - a welcome break from the total white

Shortly after SOBSTORY, the clear skies give way to an undercast once again, and I only get to see Kulusuk over my shoulder. As I do though, I am treated to another nice surprise.

"N33NW, did you go to Naples", comes the question from Sondrestrom Radio, totally out of the blue. I reply that I have.

"Ah well, I have been reading your website. I too, went to Naples Air Center last year to fly".

What a nice coincidence. We chat for a little longer, and the conversation ends with an invitation to come and visit. I'd love to, and thanks once again for the friendly service.

As I enter the Icelandic FIR, remarkably close to the Greenland coast, I feel that I am on the last leg. The wind is gently coming round and I am starting to pick up a light tailwind. Just 5 knots or so, but it is the thought that counts. Speedbird 287 and the US military's Reach 2105 are kind enough to provide further relays as I drop out of VHF range until finally entering the Reykjavík control area via GIMLI at 20:30Z. I am now in and out of a stratus layer, and the ATIS confirms that Reykjavik is under a 3000 foot broken layer with a number of other layers in between me and the ground. All of them potentially containing some ice.

I defer my descent to the last available moment, and drop rapidly down to self-position for a Localiser 13 approach. Landing time 21:15. I am marshalled into position in front of the hotel by the same chap that was so helpful on my outbound trip. We chat, I clear customs and walk across the car park to the hotel. I check in with 30 minutes remaining until the restaurant shuts. A good result.

Bonanza man's aircraft is two rows behind me, he arrived a couple of hours before me. Cirrus man doesn't appear to have left Goose bay. He'll be lucky to make any money on this ferry flight - he'll be stuck in Goose now until Greenland re-opens on Monday.

The plan is to take-off tomorrow at around 08:30Z, with a view to clearing customs at Oban's beautiful little airport. From there, it is a short 2:30 airways leg down to Cranfield. I won't be arriving much before closing time at 16:00Z, but with luck, there will be time for a cup of tea in the tower.

I'm looking forward to being home.

April 10, 2005
Reykjavik to Cranfield in one Easy Step
You don't exactly suffer from jetlag flying small aircraft slowly across the Atlantic, but there is a definite jolt to the system when you change timezones. The flight from Goose Bay to Reykjavik had taken me from UTC-3 to UTC in one day, and whilst I was tired from all the flying last night, my body was still telling me that I was trying to go to bed at 8PM. Perhaps as a consequence of this, and perhaps also through the excitement of the anticipation of being home today, I didn't get a great night's sleep in the Loftleidir. This turned out not to be an entirely bad thing. In still air, the flight from Iceland to Scotland, and the follow-up flight to Cranfield could easily take a total of 7 hours with as much as an additional 90 minutes lost in landing, fuelling and mucking around in Scotland. With the UK operating on UTC+1, you start an hour behind the game, and with 8 or more hours involved getting to Cranfield and Cranfield closing at 17:00Z, there is a real risk of arriving after the airport closes. I have an out-of-hours indemnity form (a concept unheard of in America, despite their litigation culture), but really want to get home during normal hours.

The weather I wake up to at Reykjavik is a bit of a mixed bag. Aloft at FL100, there are 70 knot westerly winds. Not totally on the tail, but I can expect to benefit to the tune of at least 20 knots. What is more, the winds curve round a high pressure system near the UK and therefore look set to stay with me all the way home. The bad news is that it is pouring with rain from a dark thick overcast here at the airport. The outside air temperature is just 4 degrees. There will be a significant risk of icing on climbout.

Rainy Reykjavik this morning

There is more bad news. The best information I have is that the west side of Scotland is suffering from some horrendous weather; low ceilings and rain. Oban is strictly

VFR only. I rapidly re-plan for Kirkwall on the Orkney Islands, a very minor change. Flight Services put this new plan into the system for me, and with the fuel loaded at 08:15Z, I am airborne by 08:35. The clouds have broken up significantly in the hour it took to wait for the fuelers to arrive and for the revised plan to go into the system and the rain is now falling much more lightly. In the event, I pick up a fairly hefty dose of rime icing on the way up to FL110, but with the cloud tops in sight at around FL80, I keep going and am soon frosty, but through the zone of risk. Clear of the cloud tops, the rime ice slowly starts to sublimate off the airframe, encouraged by the defroster, the TKS propeller system and the bright sunshine above the cloud layer. I lost sight of the ground within a few minutes of lift off. It turns out that I won't see it again until level with Perth in Scotland.

The last sight of Reykjavik, just before picking up the ice

Which brings me to the question of the route. My departure instructions from Reykjavik had been incredibly helpful - Climb to FL110 and route to RATSU. RATSU is a point close to the UK/Iceland aeronautical border and in an almost straight line for Kirkwall. The combination of my icy wings and the climb had given me a very depressing groundspeed in the climb. This slowly improved as the ice sublimated off, but the winds aloft were not initially as strong as the charts had predicted, only 25 knots total, with about 5 on the tail. So this remained for the first 100 miles or so to RATSU. Then, things started to change. Slowly but surely, the wind speed increased to a peak of 90 knots, and its direction came around to give me 50 knots on the tail, a groundspeed at times up to 200 knots.

This turn of events occurred during yet another rather tedious chapter of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, and during a break in the VHF coverage between the domestic

terminal controller and Iceland Radio's outlet in the Faeroe Islands. By the time another 50 miles had passed, I had worked out that I could actually bypass Kirkwall and route directly to Cranfield... If

a) I could get the route of my choice approved; and

b) I could inform Reykjavik early enough not to have to burn too many redundant miles routing towards Kirkwall.

I had been pushed so far so fast at this point that even in still air, I was now in a position to be able to make Cranfield with legal FAA IFR reserves. The charts suggested that I would have a healthy tailwind all the way.

As soon as I could re-establish contact with Iceland Radio, I put my request to them. There was a pregnant pause. Finally, my proposed routing came back accepted. "Route from RATSU direct STN (Stornoway), then St Abbs for Cranfield" Hurrah. I would now reach Cranfield after around 6 hours flying, with at least an hour or so's fuel remaining and plenty of places enroute that would serve as a diversion if for any reason, things didn't work out. Iceland would co-ordinate to ensure customs clearance for my arrival at Cranfield. What a way to finish this epic journey.

RATSU is sufficiently distant from STN for Scottish Control not to be accessible at FL110, however, from 100 miles out, I was able to estblish contact, and to my relief, they were aware of my changed plans and reconfirmed my clearance. Furthermore, they knew I needed as many shortcuts as possible and offered a further refinement. STN direct to Newcastle. Another 10 minutes saved.

As I crossed into Scotland I was climbed to FL115. The East Side of the UK lies largely outside the controlled airspace structure and FL115 was the correct quadrantal level for such an IFR flight, outside the system. My first sight of land since leaving Reykjavik occurred at Perth, half-way down Scotland. I flew to the little airport there many years ago in my Baron for the Scottish PFA event, happy memories.

Crossing the border near Edinburgh, I was handed to Newcastle approach, who in turn handed me London Military who were kind enough to co-ordinate my transit of the airway bundle near Gamston. Finally, after 5:30 of flight, I reached "top of descent" and it was time to call Cranfield. There had been some doubt created by the change of flightplan enroute, and it took a question to establish that I was actually inbound direct from Reykjavik.

I haven't been number 4 in the circuit since leaving Cranfield, and the great weather in the south of England ensured that this situation was soon fixed. Number 4 to land in a circuit consisting of a Seneca, a Diamond Star a 152 and various other training aircraft. During the downwind, I am congratulated by a reader of this website, sitting in the 152 that is following me downwind. Thank you once again.

Finally, after 6 hours and 5 minutes aloft, and with 1:30 remaining in the tanks, I land on runway 22, 3 weeks and 6 hours after departing for Kirkwall at the start of this trip.

I get my free tea in the tower thanks to Adrian and Helen, and I am shortly joined by

Mike, Julian and Tom, friends who have been following my progress and who have flown in to meet me.

It really is good to be back.

I'll write about the learning points for me in a subsequent posting. In the meantime, to everybody that has been following this Blog, thank you for sharing the experience with me. Thanks also for the countless notes, SMSes, cards, letters and e-mails of support. The level of support has far exceeded any expectations I had when I made my first entry into this diary.


HARRY POTTER