The Pond. Solo. May 2007.

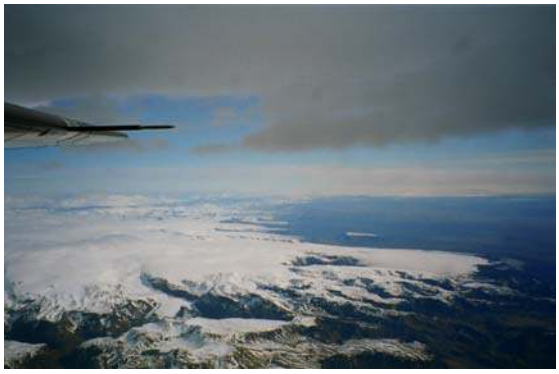
I first tried to fly aged fourteen and nearly all the pilots I have spoken to since then have emphasised the importance of learning. The point so many of them have made is that as a pilot you tend to be getting either better or worse, and when you realise you are getting worse it is usually only a matter of time before you hang up your goggles for good. Perhaps this is the reason I set myself some goals as a pilot.

There had been the same three goals for a long time: first to pilot a light aircraft to Africa, second to the Arctic and then to fly solo across the Atlantic. Over the past three years the first two fell on separate expeditions. This is the brief account of the last.

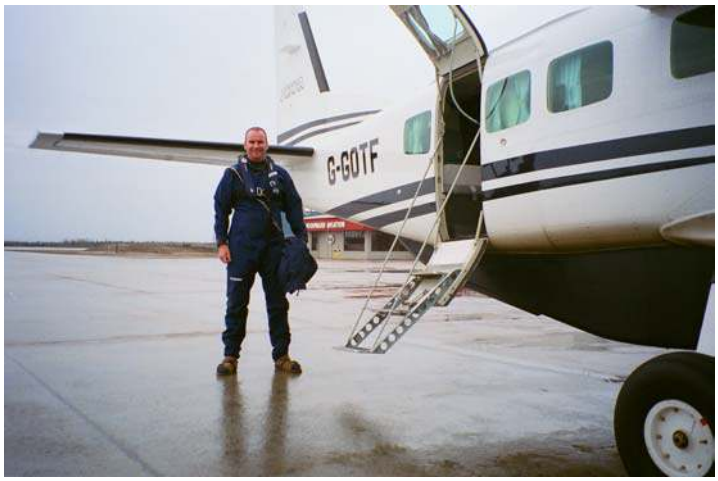
Taking a single-engine aircraft over the Atlantic for fun is not generally done. Deciding to do it twice in the space of four days might be reasonably described as 'eccentric behaviour'. The reason for the two crossings was simple: the added risk of an additional crossing was offset in my mind by the necessary extra learning curve that was required to do it solo without dangerous levels of ignorance. Physically flying any aircraft, not least the proven Cessna Caravan, is rarely more than half of any aviation challenge and in the case of the north Atlantic I would put it at nearer a quarter. The bulk of the challenge lies in navigating into remote ice-covered areas with sharp pointy bits shrouded in cloud. It lies in trying to communicate with people hundreds of miles beyond normal VHF radio range, it lies in admin and logistics and last but not least it lies in looking around you three miles high and surrounded by hundreds of miles of empty freezing ocean, thinking about the single engine in front of you… and not completely freaking out.

Martin Courage, an elite member of a rare group of 'ferry pilots', had agreed to come with me for the first crossing from east to west. We took off from Gloucestershire airport at 10.30am on Tuesday 22nd May. Martin is a character. He knows his stuff. He managed to impart a lot of knowledge about flying amongst a light-hearted mix of the shortcomings of the western world, Africa and other broader topics. He does it with good intentions and the sort of humour that is borne of limited life insurance prospects and flying around Africa, pistol at side, AK47 in the hold and a group of trigger happy African 'diplomats' in the back. Stories of bloated rotting corpses exploding at altitude in the back of the plane were skilfully interwoven with tips on how not to kill myself when solo.

The Cessna Caravan is a small legend in the world of 'unusual mission types' and it has on its front a notoriously good engine, the PT6, which drives a solid and solitary propeller out front. In an attempt to lighten one of our morbid discussions I touched on the engines reputation for reliability. Martin responded,



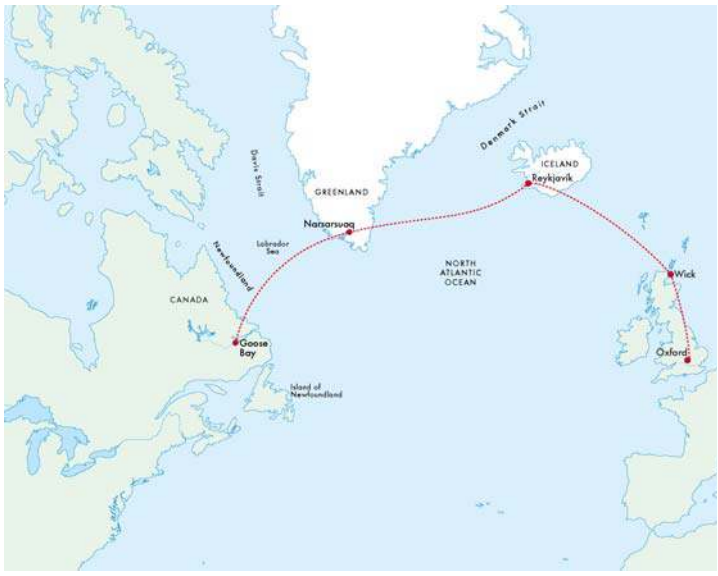
The dark clouds gather



All Set

"That's definitely true, but the truth is also that you've only got one and however unlikely, if something happens, like, say… the fuel hose is touching something hot, there is not much you can do about it… except get wet.' There was barely enough time (in the sixteen flying hours it took us to fly from Gloucester, via Scotland, Iceland and Greenland, to Goose Bay in north east Canada) for us to cover all the devils in the detail of my planned solo trip. Running out of fuel featured highly on the list. A headwind when a tailwind was expected could mean falling into the ocean a hundred miles short of land. Then there is the problem of icing (when the aircraft picks up moisture that forms ice over the wings and leading edges) which can, if mismanaged or not avoided, turn a beautiful flying machine into a fat paperweight with useless wings. CFIT, pronounced See-Fit, stands for Controlled Flight Into Terrain and is a another euphemism for Fast Death. The list goes on and could if dwelled upon for too long take away from the joys of my proposed short break.

When Martin climbed out at Goose Bay in Canada he left me wiser, mildly scared and absolutely ******* knackered. The learning curve that I had enjoyed heading west was every bit as steep as I had expected, but the levels of fatigue that I felt on stepping out of the aircraft caught me totally by surprise. The lower than normal oxygen levels and higher than normal concentration levels left me feeling like someone had locked me in my old school gym and told me to take six A Level exams in



subjects that I didn't know much about without a break. As we pulled ourselves awkwardly out of our immersion suits, Martin mentioned getting something to eat. I tried desperately not to sound off-key as I explained that if I didn't lie down for an hour I would be incapable of keeping my head off the table for long enough to eat anything.

Adrenaline levels dropped a touch that night and allowed me four hours sleep. The following morning I said goodbye to Martin and a couple of other ferry pilots who sat nervously in the operations room at Goose Bay. One of them, a clean cut Yank called Troy, said he was going to sit it out for the day and try the next day if the weather improved. He had some good reasons to be cautious, not least having been forced down by engine problems into the sea 170 miles off the Canadian coast the year before. He survived the impact and described fighting against the water pressure to get the door of his aircraft open as the icy water rose up and onto his face. 'It was cold to start with.' He said honestly. He was rescued by a passing cargo ship. Martin had already told me of the many friends and acquaintances of his, who over the years had not been so lucky. I'm sure he forgave the fact that I was a bit clumsy and shaky from nerves as I fumbled the charts back into my flight bag. Troy wished me good luck and then handed me a plastic bag and told me he would have no need of the sandwich that he had bought as inflight self-catering. I asked Martin to buy him a beer that night with my money. I would happily have bought the small and unattractive frontier town of Goose Bay a beer with my money right then; by the time I would need money again it would probably seem to have some use again.

Take off was uneventful, which odd though this may sound was unbelievably relieving. Maybe this machine was capable of flight after all? This was one of the more surreal thoughts that entered my head as I climbed up and away from borderline civilisation.

The first hour went smoothly, no problems, according to plan. The next hour started well but then the clouds that I had been cruising above at 11,000ft started to rise in a gentle gradient. Flying through one that crept up on me, I looked out at the wing and spotted a trace of ice. Adrenaline levels which I thought had maxed out rose a notch. Ice that early was not 'nice'. I considered turning back and giving Troy his sandwich back, but decided to try climbing first to see how things were higher up. 13,000ft solved the problem for a while, but then it took 15,000 to be clear of the clouds. I put the oxygen mask on and stared nervously to check that the green valve indicated a flow. Soon I was up to 17,000ft, well over the Atlantic and out of radio range. This was prime freak-out territory, but another surprise came in a feeling of calm. It only lasted a few seconds as my mind started to play tricks. Am I really calm or is this just the first symptoms of hypoxia? Am I becoming euphoric as the oxygen drains from my blood and brain. I looked at my fingertips for signs of blue and seeing none, decided a little cautiously that maybe, just maybe, I was feeling genuinely calm.

Crossing the Greenland coastline

The next three hours passed with routine tasks and a constant vigilance for the dangers of ice. I used a satellite telephone to pass position reports to controllers in warm rooms far away who sounded as enthusiastic about my continued survival as if I had been at a McDriveThru.

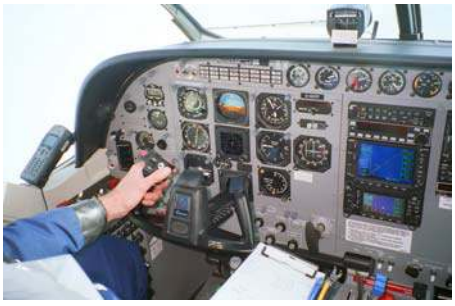
The GPS told me to expect a sighting of land soon and I was not disappointed. The high mountains of Greenland appeared shortly before my first sightings of icebergs. I think it was less than an hour later that I was turning between the cliff faces that rise above Narsarsuaq to position myself for landing. It was the most dramatic five minutes of flying that I have ever experienced and impossible to describe well. Perhaps the only way to explain the excitement of turning so sharply and descending rapidly towards this runway in the middle of nowhere would be to say I have never felt less tired in my life. It is a cliché for sure, but I felt very alive.

Narsarsuaq is so remote that its very existence seems to be a mistake. The few people who live or are based there that I saw have that thousand-mile stare that seems to say, 'Don't ask, just don't ask.' So I didn't.

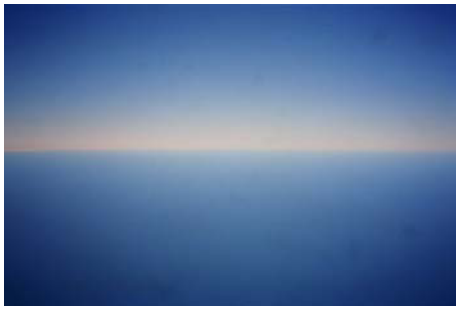
The aircraft was fully fuelled by a friendly local. This usually gives a really nice feeling to a pilot, but it was different for me this time. However nice that refueller seemed or however experienced and wise he may have been, he was human. If he had made a large mistake, like, say, putting the wrong fuel type in, or even a smaller one like not screwing the fuel caps in properly my next five hundred miles of freezing ocean would be a stretch. I checked the oil and then checked the fuel caps for the third time. There comes a point where rechecking makes you more nervous not less and I was getting close to it. I fired up the engine and lined up on the runway before succumbing to any more over-analysis.

The recommended altitude for crossing the Greenland icecap is 13,000ft, so I cruised at 12,000ft. This was no less sensible than the trip as a whole and gave me a chance at better photos.

The mountains & ice in Greenland start to merge



Knobs, buttons and dials



The sea and the sky

Some of the problems of taking pictures whilst flying solo are predictable, some less so. I opened the tiny window next to me and after carefully wrapping the strap around one wrist I poked my trusty fourteen-year old camera out into the air. I wanted a good picture that encompassed the icecap, the mountain tops that stuck out and a glacier. Unfortunately I had to counter this desire with the fact that my bare hands were only in the mood for so much -20°C air rushing past them at 180 miles an hour. It felt like I would lose the use of a hand in seconds, so the pictures are not up to my usual poor standard. That said, I bet a state of the art digital camera would have frozen before taking any.

Greenland gave way to the fractured ice pack and then icebergs and then a lot of sea. When I say a lot of sea, what I mean is roughly as much sea as it is possible to properly see. When you are on the sea in a boat you can only see so far, five to ten miles typically (roughly 1.25 times the square root of your eye level height in feet above sea level, if you really care). When you are cruising in a commercial aircraft at 30,000ft or above the sea ceases to be sea and becomes an amorphous blue blanket. At about 10,000 feet you can still see individual waves breaking and some small details. It is still the sea as we know it and all the more amazing for being so vast.

I picked up some more ice on the wings as I descended in towards Reykjavik. This kept me fully alert. The controller then informed that winds were gusting up to 35kts at the runway. This was not the time to inform him that I intended to land at his airport even if fire-breathing dragons were being reported on the runway.

It was only -1°C in Reykjavik, but the wind chill factor had the customs staff jumping up and down and clapping their hands together for warmth.

'It's cold ya?' One of them shouted as I opened the cockpit door.

'Yes.' I replied, when what I actually wanted to say was, 'Who cares? I'm still above sea level!'

My night in Reykjavik consisted of paperwork, checking-in, sleeping for six hours, breakfast, checking out, studying weather data and more paperwork. A less thorough examination of Reykjavik by a travel agent would be hard to imagine, but I was on a roll. And besides the cost of my hotel room would be incentive enough for anyone, pilot or not, to jump into an aeroplane and take off.

The snowy mountains and black volcanic beaches disappeared under my left wing and again the ocean unfurled before me in generous quantities. The forecast was for excellent tailwinds, but some isolated cumulonimbus clouds with occasional moderate icing. This could be roughly translated as a fast drive through a rough neighbourhood.

Flying down the glacier to the Narsarsuaq runway

The flight to Scotland required lots of climbing and descending to remain ice free and the associated requests for permission to Air Traffic Control. This is a funny business. When you are out of radio range communication can be longwinded, involving relays through other aircraft and satellite telephones. For good reasons it is illegal to change height without permission in controlled airspace and yet sometimes your safety depends on changing height. The trick is as ever to stay on top of things and try to be one step ahead of events.

The flight from Reykjavik to Scotland also contained a moment of near-desperate hilarity, although it was not funny at the time. I had spent so much time and energy planning the navigation, communication and fuel for this leg that I forgot one small, but vital ingredient in planning. I forgot to go to the loo before heading out to the plane. After a couple of hours in the air and in a rare moment free from other distractions I realised that there was absolutely no chance of me lasting the remaining two and a half hours of flight without relieving the pressure on my bladder. I faced a stark choice: either fight my way out of my kit at 15,000ft and make use of a plastic water bottle or wet myself in my kit. In a bid to retain the dignity that most pilots kid themselves that they have I opted for the former. I knew it would be difficult, but was shocked at the sheer physical ordeal that confronted me. The method turned out to be as follows: check the flight instruments, take some deep breaths of oxygen then lift off mask, undo five-point harness and life jacket, replace oxygen mask and breathe deeply, check the instruments, remove oxygen mask, remove sunglasses and headset, breathe some more oxygen, fight my way out of my tight rubbery immersion suit, pant desperately at the oxygen, check the airplane is still the right way up, undo trousers… I'm sure you get the picture. After filling a plastic water bottle to the half way mark I reversed the procedure and got my kit back on. The whole thing took over fifteen minutes, during which time I regularly considered giving up and just going for it in my trousers.

Safely on the ground in Nararsuaq

The first sighting of icebergs

Even when I'd completed this Herculean task it was not over. As I descended from fifteen thousand feet towards the Scottish coast I heard a strange creaking and cracking sound. Terrified that the aircraft was breaking up around me I lifted off the headset to try to detect the cause of the sounds above the din of the engine. The 15,000ft air in the half-full bottle of urine was being compressed as the plane descended. I was worried that it was going to crack and cover the floor. The sensible thing would have been to open the top and let air into the bottle, but I was occupied with flying priorities again before thinking of that and was happy to find it half-crushed but now three-quarters full on landing in Wick.

Wick is a five hour drive north of Aberdeen on the north east coast of Scotland. You know you have been to some desolate places when Wick feels like home to a Londoner. It was great to be on British soil again and this ecstatic feeling could not be dampened even by Barclays who refused to let me buy fuel with my own money.

'What is your mother's maiden name? Name a street near where you live, but not your home street. What is the name of your dentist?' Were honestly some of the ridiculous fraud-busting questions they asked me. I tried to explain to them that after thirty hours intense piloting in four days they might have to settle for my name, the numbers that my still-vibrating eyes could read off the debit card and nothing else. They finally conceded that it was me and that this therefore gave me some right to use my own card.

After so many hours over the Pond British airspace felt crowded. Even so the flight back down to Oxford was uneventful until I was five miles away when a fast and strangely familiar shape shot down my left side.

'Be aware that there is a Spitfire operating out of Oxford and manoeuvring in your vicinity.' The controller said.

'I'm aware.' I replied and turned to land.

There was a small and totally unexpected gathering of people at Oxford to welcome me back with a bottle of champagne. I thanked them for their kindness, took a sip of champagne and enjoyed the feel of the ground. Then, when no-one was watching, I surreptitiously took a plastic bottle to the gents.

Soon after landing I turned on my mobile phone and gave my wife a call to let her know I was back safely. Next I called Martin,

'I don't want to go flying ever again.' I said. I could hear Martin chuckle at the other end, so I clarified things, 'I fully expect this feeling to last until at least tomorrow lunchtime.'

Tristan Gooley. 26th May 2007.

Concentrating at 17,000ft

My thanks to my wife and family for supporting and enduring such shenanigans and to Mark and the team at AirMed, Martin Courage and a lot of people in strange places who made this trip possible. To the ferry pilot community and other unhinged fringes of aviation!

Broken icepack and mountain ranges

Trip facts and figures:

Westbound route (Dual):

Gloucester – Wick (Scotland) – Reykjavik (Iceland) – Narsarsuaq (Greenland) – Goose Bay (Canada)

Eastbound route (Solo)

Goose Bay – Narsarsuaq – Reykjavik – Wick – Oxford.

Total mileage in four days: 5494 miles (Equivalent to London to Johannesburg)

Average speed: 160kts (approx 184mph)

Total flying time: 31 hours.

Total solo distance: 2751 miles

% of all flying over the north Atlantic ocean: more than 80%.

% of total trip time spent in the air: 40%

% of total trip time spent asleep: 21%