

THRUSTER SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN

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As with the other single seat Fighters that Jack had learned to fly, no trainers for Meteors, so it was a matter of reading the POH notes and off you go. He found the aircraft to be fairly predictable and forgiving in flight, but oh so slow and heavy to accelerate, with the take off being a real dragged out affair - and there were no overshoots, because the time taken to spool up the early Derwent engines could be 15 seconds - by which time one had landed - or crashed.

A friend of Jack's, Bob Large, thought that the alarmist stories then beginning to circulate amongst the Pilots concerning the Meteors ability to kill Pilots when an engine failed, were overrated, so he switched off the engines near to the Air field one day and glided in for a deliberate dead stick landing without a problem, but that is not to say that they weren't a bit of a handful at times.

The range was extremely short, with an endurance of only 45 minutes or so, and if you lost an engine below 300mph, it was not possible to continue flying, due to the large engine asymmetry. Also, although they now had a bubble canopy, there were as yet no ejector seats, and anyway it was doubtful that one could bail out, due to the higher speed and high tail. Another of Jacks friends was one of the first on the Sqdn to fly with drop tanks to supplement the endurance. As they watched him take off, they were convinced that he wasn't going to make it, however he did, just clearing the boundary hedge by a few feet, as his machine crawled slowly into the air. One way or another though, they did lose an awful lot of Pilots on the early 'Meat boxes', which was how they earned that nickname.

Another problem was that the fuselage was weak just in front of the tail, and Jack was spotted by the Controller, landing in a full stall attitude, as he did with Spits and Mustangs. A tail strike would have broken the fuselage, so they pointed out the error of his ways, and thereafter in all landings the aircraft was powered onto the deck, which he found to be a bit alien, but he got used to it. Flying these early jets was a matter of trial and error, and they wrote the book as they went along.

Jack and Robin were still resisting Commissions, and together with another NCO, Des Axford, were the only non-commissioned officers in the RAF now flying Jets, and because they didn't share the mess with the Officers, but ate in the Sergeants mess, were odd men out once again.

Fighter types all seemed to have Dogs, and Bob Large used to take his Dog 'Bambi' with him when he flew his 'Meat box', without raising too many eyebrows. He

kept it in the cockpit behind his head. A visiting Test Pilot treated them to an inverted fly-by, close to the runway one day, and then instead of pushing the stick forward to climb out, smacked it in to the runway, in a ball of flame and black smoke. On another occasion, someone landed and started to taxi with the flaps still down. An irate Senior Officer stormed out from the crew hut, jumped up on the wing, reached inside the cockpit without a word, and to the surprise of himself and the Pilot, yanked hard on the U/Cart lever and raised the wheels - still he didn't have as far to step down as he had to climb up, and everyone had a good laugh - except him of course.

Jack meanwhile had resumed the role of 'dogsboddy'. Since he was the only one who had a twin rating he did a fair amount of fetching and carrying in the Squadrons Airspeed Oxford. On one occasion he landed at an Airfield and got bawled out by the Controller when five Dogs jumped out of the Oxford behind him, and on another he had to go and pick up a load of Lobsters in Wales for a banquet.

It seemed funny to Jack that here he was flying some of the most sophisticated Aircraft in the world, at that time, but he had to go into the local Town on the Bus, because he only had a Motorbike licence, and couldn't legally drive a Car, but this was common to many Servicemen in those cash strapped days.

The RAF and Jack parted in 1946, and he went back to Civi street and Illustrating. His time in the Service was undoubtedly made more difficult by his refusal to accept a Commission, but for their own reasons he and his mates didn't want to become Officers. They had joined up to fight an enemy that at the time seemed to be on a roll, and although the odds against them were huge, they pitched in to do their bit. However, once the War was won, even though they loved flying, they preferred to help build the peace.

Jack didn't get to fire his guns at the enemy and never really did anything especially heroic - except he was one of a select band that flew the first Jets - and that makes him a bit of a Hero in my book.

A TST does the Bleriot Centenary Bash

In the in very infancy of aviation (in July 1909), Louis Bleriot was the first person to fly across the English Channel, from Calais to Dover. In July 2009, the 100th Anniversary of this important aviation event was commemorated by a re-enactment of that epic flight. A large number of microlight, ultralight and GA aircraft participated in the re-enactment. Ted Snook went along on the re-enactment flight to represent the Thruster community.

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Tom Brearley (pilot of the TST that carried Ted to France and back), out of his immersion suit after the crossing, and looking pleased with himself and with November Uniform - It never missed a beat in over three hours running.

WE CELEBRATE POSSIBLY THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENT IN AVIATION

When I realised that the Centenary of the great man's first practical use of an aeroplane was about to happen, and that the event would be celebrated on both sides of the Channel, I surmised that the event would be marked by a glorious gaggle of Microlights crossing the Channel in the wake turbulence of old Louis.

At least that's how it would probably have turned out if it had been organised by us and the French ULM Pilots – but the French authorities grabbed hold of the event and it was the French Pilots that went over to follow the route, while UK Pilots were allowed to fly over – not the actual route, but to Deal, because Dover was notamed for a UK display by the time that we were allowed to leave - still we all paid our homage to the great pioneer as best we could. Anyway the French individuals were charming, it's only the Gallic authorities that are, as ever, either less than helpful or have trouble organising a p**up in a wine bar.

I had been offered a seat in a TST, that was making the trip, but at the last moment I was let down, so I hurriedly got onto friends who subscribe to the TOSG Bulletin, and Tom Brearley posted an offer which I grabbed on to with both hands – thanks Tom. Nick Brook also came through, but it would have taken a week to organise that one, so reluctantly, I declined his kind offer

We planned to fly over to France on Friday the 24th July, with a return on the 25th, the actual Centenary day. But there was some doubt that the event was going to happen at all, as the weather forecast was a bit dire - ceilings of under 500ft, thunder storms, and high winds.

I had a text message from Tom on my mobile to say that he had got from Exeter to Popham, where he had stopped overnight, but was on the ground still due to low ceilings and thunder storms. I took a 'flyer', as it were, and left by car as the black skies and thunderstorms hit my patch, and the rain absolutely lashed down.

We intending to meet up at Headcorn, so I hoped that the weather Gods were kind to Tom. I was highly chuffed and even a little surprised when half an hour later I got another text message from Tom to say that he and his TST had grabbed a little window in the weather, and they were on their way to our rendezvous, where a couple of hours or so later we met up.

It's fairly amazing what you can pack into a TST – the tent, pots, pans, little camping stove, and so on, were in the wing, with more stuff under the seats, and our sleeping bags and sundry junk strapped securely to the top of the fuel tank, using several metres of B&Q shock cord – I love that stuff – secure and never comes loose. Although we are both around 75Kg, with all the bags and full fuel, we were probably fairly close to the TST's max AUW.

Originally taking part were supposed to be around 190 Microlights from the UK, with 40 from Belgium, plus another 130 from France – not to mention the GA Pilots who would be celebrating the event. Also there would be air displays with the Red Arrows at Dover, and the Patrouille de France over Sangatte, so the Channel was going to be a crowded place - which would be handy if the 'Donkey' died.

In the event though, with the very poor weather forecast, approximately 96 Pilots decided that it was not for them and dropped out. So that left something like 94 intrepid Pilots, altogether 140 intrepid Souls, with their passengers, to make the crossing.

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The low crap was dispersing, but there was still plenty of developing CuNim around, the winds were 20 knots gusting 25, but at least the sky was getting lighter. The blocker to our crossing at that time, however, were the high winds on the other side – 35 knots at Lille and up to 30 at Calais – a bit high for a TST that cruises at 45/50 knots, although it was mainly a tailwind component.

As we waited for a weather window, I drank tea and Tom attempted to eat a burger and chips that had been lightly stewed in oil. Eventually he donated most of it to the bin, where the myriad of Wasps enjoyed it.

Since the wind was pretty much behind us on the first leg, we staggered into the air in a fairly modest climb, but our speed over the ground was nearly 90 mph – not bad for a TST. The turbulence was bearable, but I did had to move my knees a few times as Tom shoved the stick across.

Fortunately the ailerons were effective enough, and as we set forth to cross 'Les Manche' at Dover, the viz had improved to the extent that the landfall on the other side, RP Whisky (near Sangatte), was clearly visible and with the little Rotax 503 purring away contentedly in the smoother air over the water,

we flew on.

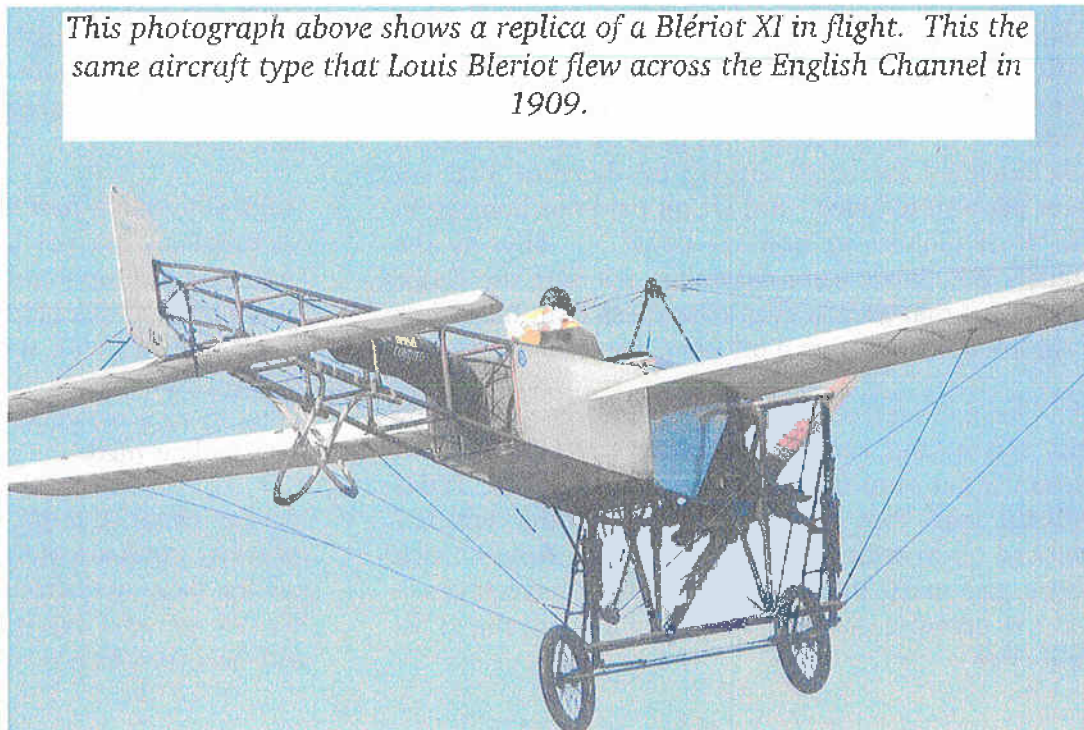
As we contacted Calais Tower, we were given a wind of 240/18 gusting 30 knots, which was right down the strip, so with an approach at 55 to 60, Tom stuck the nose right down to a wheeler landing, with some power on, at a ground speed that I can almost run at, and a ground roll of just a few metres. We taxied to park at about 5mph, with around 20 knots showing on the ASI, but I wouldn't entirely believe that, due to our ground angle. As we taxied off the runway, I had my straps off, prepared to jump out and hold the wing down, but that proved unnecessary.

The area allocated for UK Pilots was full by the time that we arrived, so we parked with the Belgians, who were mainly in 'hot ship' microlights, with a smattering of flexwings, but we had no qualms about leaving all our stuff just dumped in the cockpit – we are a Band of Brothers after all, us Microlighters, so can be trusted not to steal from each other – which is not always the case in our homeland, I am sorry to say.

Having found the other Brits, we set up our tent and put our junk inside, then we waited for a bus to the Mayor's reception - which never came, so we all got a Taxi. The reception venue was in the centre of Calais, so we looked for the Bar and grub like you do, but what we found was a room full of dignitaries sipping Champers, queuing up for Oysters and nibbling little Vol aux vents, made from cream and sugar, which wasn't what us big hairy men wanted.

We wanted cooked animals and chips with all the trimmings, so we left that rather grand but boring affair and made our way to a proper restaurant, where our culinary needs were well served, along with a few

This photograph above shows a replica of a Blériot XI in flight. This the same aircraft type that Louis Bleriot flew across the English Channel in 1909.



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glasses of Red stuff, although I hit the Eau mineral fairly heavily.

Sleeping in Tom's tent was comfortable enough, but there was some guy who snored very loudly, without a miss, the whole bloody night long. So I didn't sleep that well – not only that but Tom had this affliction, so that when I did doze off I was awoken by a bang in the ribs as his arms flailed out. When we finally arose, as the red rays of dawn crept over the field, the snoring Guy was still as voluble as ever, although I was surprised to see that he was at least 10 yards away. Remarking on this to Tom, I found that the bangs in my ribs were from him, he thinking it was me making all the racket, so I called him a Bastard – French - funny, I had thought that we were, but our hosts didn't agree - after all, I didn't want to swim back.



Ted at Callais Airport. The Patrouille de France, all lined up in number order in the background. They were the stars of the show for the

French - funny, I had thought that we were, but our hosts didn't agree -

7 seconds. We were averaging a headwind component that was probably around 20 knots. We weren't the only Thruster there – Rupert Derham made it from Norfolk in his immaculate Sprint, as did Vince Goddard in his Sprint complete, with his cardboard Bleriot moustache – but we were the only TST.

Old Louis would have been proud of us, although a major reason for his flight was the £1000 prize offered by the Daily Mail – probably worth something like a couple of Million then. He took 37 minutes for the 22 miles of his trip, at just over 35mph, but we took a bit longer than him over the water, because of the circumnavigation of Dover and the headwind.

Our stats for the trip were:

- Outbound to Calais – just over an hour, with 18 Litres of fuel used, and
- Return to Headcorn – approx 2 hours, with 29 Litres used - the slightly higher than normal fuel consumption reflected by the throttle opening.

When I shook hands with Tom at Headcorn, wishing him luck on his way back to Devon for the rest of his journey, I felt that congrats were in order – to him for his great landings in tough conditions, and general skill in flying what was arguably one of the slowest aircraft in the event, and to me for sitting there with a camera to photograph the others in the gaggle that never happened, and braving a numb bum. Still it was an adventure, and I wouldn't have missed it for worlds.

We had to go to a briefing in one of the hangers, in order that we could keep up with what the authorities would allow us to do, the ATC people in Lille having gone on strike, which was nice of them. When we returned from Keith's briefing, snoring Guy was still sawing logs. I was all for leaving him, but Tom – kind-hearted Bloke that he is – woke him. Snoring Guy told Tom that he had had a really good night – glad that someone did then - Bastard. Up at dawn on the special day, we got ready for an early take off, since the weather was much better, around 10 knots at 240, but it was not to be that simple. Although the briefing given by Keith Negal, who had organised the whole Microlight affair, allowed us to take off as we would have wanted, Gallic bureaucracy had stepped in and tore up Keith's plans again, with the news that we were to take off at 3 minute intervals, in an order dictated by a number that they had given each Pilot.

No allowance for differing speeds or any realisation that we needed to fly a buddy system over open water – not too safe for us, but it fitted in with their list. They eventually relented to allow closer spacing, still in their groups, but it certainly messed Keith around, who is so good at organising these things - if allowed.

We finally rolled out to take off at around midday (having got up 6 or 7 hours previously) to a fairly slow but uneventful return to Headcorn, with a detour around Dover airspace, enforced due to some twat in a Flexi busting the notam and missing the Red Arrows by 21