

Ultralite Single Seat Rally 2010 (USSR)

Richard Whitmarsh

Well it all started earlier in the year when myself and Dan Burton discussed the possibility of competing in this event. Although well experienced in long flights which are our main interest in paramotoring Dan and I have limited experience in competitions so this would be a little different. We have been flying together for about four years and both fly Fresh Breeze Sportix machines under a Paramania Revolution wing, we have adapted our machines to take 21.5 ltr fuel tanks providing about four hour endurance, our wings although different sizes are equally matched for speed so well suited for flying as a team.

Through April and May I practiced navigation flying concentrating on endurance and best speed to fly regarding trim settings. After clocking up almost 1000 miles with two >100 milers over 40 hours flying during April and May I realised the best speed to fly to achieve distance and exactly what my fuel burn will be at different settings and weather conditions, this information would be vital for flight planning the USSR.

During the week prior to the event I had purchased the current CAA 1:25:000 maps and started flight planning. The weather forecast changed on a daily basis from wet and windy to moderate and overcast with wind directions anywhere from Easterly to Westerly with a Southerly forecast on the Monday. However this changed hourly resulting in multiple flight plans in all directions with alternative longer and shorter flights to cater for the stronger winds should this occur.

The competition is divided into four tasks which start and finish at Sywell Aerodrome NE of Northhampton and are to run over 50 hours starting from the time you take off on Saturday 29th May, failure to return in the 50 hour time window is nil points. The tasks to achieve are;

- 1) Furthest straight line point you can fly to from Sywell Aerodrome.
- 2) Longest accumulative miles flown.
- 3) Longest single leg.
- 4) Most number of designated out landings.

Number 4 the most out landings was not on my agenda because I felt that attempting to achieve that would jeopardise the other three which were more distance related tasks.

The third member of the team was Russell Collins our retrieve / support driver and a good friend of Dan Burton. Russell has a keen interest in aviation with fixed wing experience, he teaches advanced Ski instruction in the winter months and turns his hand to many other things during the Summer, he is an ex-serving member of the armed forces commissioned rank, and is fast becoming a well known poet in his own right. He is a highly intellectual person which suits me cos that is wot I am too!! Russell is an expert in the

study of martial arts culminating in the achievement of attaining recognition from the Chinese masters of Kung Fu; he is a practising celibate Monk who has been walking the path for over 10 years now. His knowledge of martial arts, its origins, combined with religious beliefs from many nations is amazing, he is a modest gracious individual and was a pleasure to meet.

On the evening Friday 28th May Dan Burton Myself and Russell met at Sywell Aerodrome for the brief and to camp for the night ready for an early start. The weather was not looking great for the event. We gathered in the bar with the other competitors some flying a microlight aircraft and one ultra light 3 axis machine, a rather fascinating SSSR 'Kid'. This is a sub 115kg 3 axis microlight by the Escapade aircraft company which looked a bit like the aviations answer to a kit car but an aeroplane that fits on a small trailer with the wings folded back. One of the microlights, a 'Chaser' made it to Perth in Scotland on the Saturday returning in 3 hours on the Monday burning an impressive 5 ltrs of fuel and hour.

Dawn broke with sunrise just after 04.30 and shortly after people were up and preparing kit. The forecast was fairly accurate with a SSE wind direction moderate due to increase with a frontal system arriving from the West bringing rain which was due to ground us by 10.00, there was a possibility of clearing later in the evening allowing a second evening flight. Speaking with Richard Shaw (Trans Global Fame) we planned to be airborne early to make use of max time before the weather deteriorated. I loaded Richard Shaw's GPS with all the turn points and routes so Jamie and Richard could follow us if they wanted too. However on waking I decided that we would be better waiting until after 07.00 which would give us more flying time on the Monday to return within the 50 hours allotted time. The weather was due to be better on the Monday so it would be foolish to take off too early on the Saturday which would mean we would miss the chance of a flight in the improved weather on the Monday.

My plan to lay in my tent until 06.00 snoozing was not to be, Dan was up and about tripping over my tent lines and with his distinctive dominant booming voice was determined not to leave me to sleep any longer than he had slept. By 07.00 I was prepared for take off, others had taken off earlier including Richard and Jamie, some were now returning describing that the conditions looked a bit bleak to the North so they decided to return. This was a bit concerning but we decided to take off and have a look for ourselves. Russell was up and assisting our preparations, pre flight brief had taken place and the route had been selected. I had over 50 turn points with multiple routes in all directions but the plan was to fly NNW today then take advantage of the Westerly wind tomorrow to fly to the East coast then head as far South as we can. I worked out that we needed to be within 80 miles of Sywell Aerodrome on the Monday to be able to get back within the allotted 50 hours and before 09.00, weather and wind permitting. Andy Phillips, Mike (Parabumcrack) and Mike Chilvers (Chilly) from the Lemmings had decided to wait until the evening to fly.

Dan was a little delayed in preparation and we eventually took off at 07.30 with all the pre flight tension that a competition event creates. The 50 hour window had now begun, we needed to be back at Sywell by 09.30 on Monday. We set off heading towards the darker cloud and rain that had deterred the other competitors but we could see brighter skies beyond so tracked slightly East to avoid the rain and then continued towards our chosen first turn point, a roundabout junction NE of Nottingham near Bingham. We were going to RV with Russell in the support vehicle and fully expecting to be weathered in until the evening. We made better progress than expected, arriving over the turn point we decided to press on to the next turn point NE of Chesterfield about 30 miles further on. This proved to be a little optimistic as we were now heading NW and were rapidly converging with the weather system coming from the West. We opted to land in a large field between Calverton and Uxton for a GPS flight of 63 miles, average ground speed 25.7mph max of 55.3mph. Richard Shaw and Jamie had also followed the route but had landed approx 10 miles earlier nearer to the turn point.



Looking across at Dan as we trek North

Shortly after we landed the heavens opened and the field was filling with market traders preparing for the Sunday car boot sale, one such trader, a large tattooed man, offered us his lorry full of merchandise to shelter inside and store our kit. A few hours later it started to clear so we headed into Calverton on foot to meet Russell and have a welcome fish and chips in the town. The weather still improving we headed back to the field hoping to get another evening flight. As we were preparing we could see Richard and Jamie already in the air heading North and about to over take us, this gave me further encouragement to get on our way. With a fascinated audience of

traders and family members we took off again heading NNW towards Sheffield and then heading North towards a turn point near Castleford, this being our furthest northerly planned turn point. We made excellent progress towards Castleford averaging over 40mph ground speed and decided to press on North to increase the distance away from Sywel. The cloud cover was few clouds broken at <1000 ft QFE with a higher base at approx 2000'. We flew above the lower clouds keeping the ground in sight and the motorway on our right to avoid Church Fenton MATZ. Drax power station was churning out anvil shaped cloud bursting through the lower cloud to meet the higher levels making a dramatic statement and made me feel a little uneasy. We were hoping to land at Wetherby for the night and then head east in the morning between the two MATZ's to fly North abeam York city to maximise distance from Sywell.

About 10 miles south of Wetherby the lower cloud was increasing 6/8ths cover and thickening, we were in danger of losing sight of the ground and were on the limits of VMC so decided to set down 6 miles south of the planned landing on a sports field in the village of Bramham. This chose to be a good decision because conditions quickly deteriorated soon after landing. This second flight we had achieved a further 64 GPS miles averaging 40.5 mph ground speed with a max' of 66.6mph.

Dawn broke clear blue skies, we took off early into a NW wind hoping to continue NNW to Wetherby and E around York but the wind was too strong. The take off and climb out from this sports field was interesting to say the least. We had refuelled to 15ltrs rather than the full pay load of 21.5 to make it a bit easier. Dan took off first and I watched him getting bumped around in the turbulent air down wind of the Bramham, I was nervous on take off and failed my first launch before getting away second attempt to be greeted by the same bumpy climb out. We quickly realised we needed to change plans due to the stronger than expected wind speed and headed South again towards Castleford this time keeping the motorway on our left to avoid Church Fenton MATZ. Arriving at our turn point SE of Castleford we then headed on the original planned route ESE towards Scunthorpe making excellent progress.



Drax power station looking less aggressive than it did the evening before.

Five miles east of Scunthorpe at Brigg we then headed SE towards what was RAF Binbrook. I had deliberately planned to fly over Binbrook for two reasons. I had lived there as a child aged 5 to 8 years 1968 to 1972 when it was a Lightning fighter base and was able to fly over my old house. But mainly because on Christmas Eve 1943 my Grandad (gunner / radio ops, WAG Sgt William Edmond Whitmarsh) took off from RAF Binbrook in Lancaster III LM421 CF-Q, 625 SQN, pilot was Sgt Clark, on mission Ops Berlin, a bombing raid. Like so many before him he did not return. I have a copy of his flight log which was completed in his absence and entered is "OPS – BERLIN (MISSING)". He flew 10 missions in December and on Dec 2nd he logged "OPS BERLIN JU-88 Destroyed", he was 28 years of age. Looking at the runway from the air for the first time brought a lump to my throat and a tear to my eye; this one is for you Grandad, RIP, X.



The remains of the runway in the haze at RAF Binbrook where my Granded took off from in his Lancaster bomber on Xmas eve 1943.

Passing Binbrook we then headed SSE towards the coast for a planned landing five miles East of Boston, however wind conditions had increased and we were being thrown around. At one stage I turned into wind at 900ft QFE to allow Dan to catch up and noticed that my GPS read 4mph, however on looking at my knee with the road below I could see that I was travelling 4mph backwards, I was not looking forward to the landing but wanted to be down before the wind increased any more. The plan was to find a piece of ground in a basin or behind a smooth hill sheltered from the wind and without any up wind obstacles that would create turbulent rotor, but the terrain was as flat as a pancake. My approach into a huge field between Stickford and Stickney under Coningsby MATZ pan handle was a very lively affair. I was able to penetrate into wind below 300 ft which was reassuring however the bumpy ride to earth was not pleasant. Dan arrived safely shortly after me making it look easy, both of us glad to be on the deck. The average speeds for this flight was 40.5mph ground speed, with a max 66.6mph. The GPS info' for todays flight was 89.1 miles flown. With approx 70 miles to go to reach Sywell Aerodrome and goal all was going to plan so far.

Soon after landing we were greeted by the farmer who was delighted to see us and our strange flying machines. The field turned out to be a newly built free range chicken farm due to open next month. The farmer Michael Rhodes gave us a tour of the super modern chicken factory then invited us into his house for tea and home baked cakes, we spent some time discussing old British motorcycles, life, and general chat as we looked through Michael's photo albums; lovely. Russell caught up with us and we retired to the local

pub for a Sunday roast. Michael the farmer came into the pub to inform us that if conditions remained un-flyable we were welcome to bed down in his caravan, he had just prepared it for us to sleep in with electric hook up etc and would leave his house door open so we could use his toilets and make tea etc. How amazing is that, what a wonderful warm welcome.

Indeed the weather did not change and remained very strong all day, if we were to follow our planned route we were still 120 miles away from Sywell, a more direct route would reduce this to 70 miles, so a more direct route was planned. Andy Mike and Chilly had made the coast at Skegness and like us were pinned down for the night due to wind. They were only 10 miles or so away from us.

Sunrise was 04.40 so we set the alarms for 04.30 and planned to prepare for flight as the light improved, however on lifting my head from the pillow it was obvious from inside the caravan that the wind was far too excessive. Dan set the alarm for 06.00 where we would further assess conditions. There was now a chance that we would be unable to cover the final 70 miles back to Sywell Aerodrome, I was so tired that even this major concern didn't prevent me from falling straight back to sleep. The 06.00 alarm rang and things sounded different, still windy but a definite reduction from 90 mins previous. I went out to assess speed and direction, it had swung to the North which was good news as this would provide slight down wind element to the majority of the flight back and give us a chance of arriving at goal before 09.30 but it was still gusting and cloud base was <1000ft with dark rain filled cumulus. It did look to be brighter in the direction of Sywell and with the wind reducing we decided to prepare.

I guessed that we needed to be airborne by 07.00 if we were hoping to cover the 70 miles before 09.00. I was unsure of exactly how much of a down wind component we would have and was unsure if we could achieve the required average 30mph ground speed. At 07.00 cloud base had lifted a little, the wind had dropped off again and we took off at 07.10 unsure if we were going to achieve the task. Russell and Michael the farmer were there to wave us off. This is not the sort of conditions that one would choose to fly in for pleasure but this was not a flight for pleasure, this was a competition task, one I was unsure if we would be able to complete. Later we learnt that Andy, Mike and Chilly were stuck in fog on the coast, fortunately for us 10 miles in land we did not have that problem.

Once airborne we were achieving over 40mph ground speed which meant that this was achievable, we could complete the planned task and have a good chance of being in the lead, we were unaware of anyone else who had flown as far as we had, but we still had to return by 09.30. Heading towards Spalding cloud base was at 950ft QFE which meant we couldn't over fly the town so had to route around it, the same for the large town of Peterborough where the weather had deteriorated further and we were also having to fly around rain showers, there was a very real chance we would have to land if the weather didn't get better. We flew a route South of Peterborough then headed SW hoping to still have some down wind component to assist the

journey to goal. Leaving Peterborough behind the skies became lighter and cloud base lifted, achieving 35mph ground speed we realised that we were going to make it back to goal with approximately 30 mins to spare. The last 10 miles went in the blink of an eye, with five miles to go and Sywell Aerodrome in sight we were able to relax for a few minutes before a descent and an uneventful landing at the aerodrome and a huge feeling of relief for a task well done, a clean sweep claiming all four elements of the competition. Well done to Dan and Russell, excellent support and team work making it a success, looking forward to next year already.

GPS information for the whole route:

Four flights and land outs 63 miles 64 miles 89.1 miles (longest leg) and 72.5 miles.

Furthest point from Sywell 127 miles (GPS info not straight line of flight).

Combined flight of 288.6 miles over 7 hours 32 mins flight time.

Average combined ground speed = 35.6 mph. Maximum = 60.96 mph.

I would like to thank the organisers of this event and all those at Sywell Aerodrome who made us very welcome. This is an excellent aviation facility and I would recommend it as a 'must do' place to visit due to the excellent facilities including museum and bar / restaurant.



Left to right. Dan Burton. Russell Hawkins. Richard Whitmarsh.