

Safely arrived at Le Touquet



Bois et moi

Martyn Love set off on a memorable flight to Bois de la Pierre on 22 May, arriving three eventful days later. The return trip was made in double quick time, leaving on 29 May and getting home the next day. His story starts overleaf.



Manhandling the RAF in the rain at Bois - looks just like Blighty doesn't it!



Dave Beevers fixing the RAF with an audience



Main picture: Martyn with his RAF at Bois
Inset left: Martyn has a fag in Le Dorat



Rescuing the RAF in the pouring rain



Kevin breakfasts at Rouen in the BRA caravan



Finally into Wannafly's place at Le Dorat



Martyn and Kevin in the MT03 at Le Dorat



Bad weather at Bois



Kevin and Sam on finals into Bergerac



Several years ago, when I began my gyro training with Marc Lhermette, two things struck me. The first and most obvious was Marc's beautifully appointed RAF2000, and the second thing was the map, stuck to his hangar wall, plotting a route from his farm right down to the very south of France. When it eventually dawned on me that this was a trip to some god-forsaken field called Bois de la Pierre, and that it was undertaken in the very same gyro, I was slightly amazed, and not to say slightly concerned that it might be incumbent on me to make a similar trek.

However, this voyage to the mecca of European gyro events was placed firmly in the back of my mind and virtually forgotten. Most of my efforts were concentrated on trying to fly the bloody thing. '50 50 50!' was a much repeated phrase from my instructor and all thoughts of such a trip were easily forgotten, among the sweat and profanities that were called 'flight training'.

The subject of BdIP was brought up about a year ago, by Marc, and I had to admit that by then the trip sounded very tempting, especially if he was going as well, to act as mentor, guide and planner...

I then spoke to Kevin Robinson, based at RAF Benson, who also seemed quite keen, and the plan was brought into sharp focus at this year's BRA meeting. Kevin arrived with a couple of maps and I arrived with nothing but a dismal plan. Very little was decided, other than a vague notion of a route.

At that time, safe in the knowledge that we had about six weeks to plan and co-ordinate the trip, it all seemed easily possible. However, time slipped by and nothing got sorted. It later transpired that Marc would be unable to accompany us, so it would be just Kevin, and Sam Palmer as his passenger, with me to organise it all.

Out of nowhere that bloke that wears the hats phoned me, and said that he and 'our lass' would act as our ground crew. (That's Tony and Dina Wilk to the uninitiated). This was brilliant news, as I was beginning to wonder who we could get that was gullible enough to undertake this task!

Planning the flight route was not as onerous as I first thought, but planning the route so that it co-incided with easily accessible motorway routes, for the ground crew to follow, was not so straightforward. In the end it transpired that Kevin and Sam would fly into Marc's strip in Kent, and meet up with me, from where we would then take off for Le Touquet. Next down to Rouen, on to Blois, then to a microlight strip about halfway down, to stop off with Dave and his lovely girlfriend for a day or so. Finally, onto Bergerac and finally BdIP. We allowed four days for the trip down, figuring that, allowing for bad weather, this should be enough.

Any road up, jerry cans were purchased (mogas being preferable to avgas) and couriered to Tony's house. Clothing was shipped down to Marc's, maps were pored over every night, notams plotted, and somewhere in between I swotted up on my French.

In the meantime my son Tim decided that he would like to tag along, giving his mother even more to worry about. So, more clothes, a few Mars bars, and plenty of fags were packed.

Tony and Dinah set off from 'somewhere up north', a place called Hull, on Sunday 21 May, called into Marc's to collect all the clothing and fags, stayed overnight and departed for Le Touquet the next day.

Tim and I had planned to fly down to Kent on the Monday

evening and stay overnight at the exquisite Travelodge near Marc's farm. As luck would have it the weather was not flyable, so we trailed the aircraft down, through the rain and mist, arriving late afternoon. The gyro was hangered overnight and we departed to our accommodation.

Tuesday morning dawned bright and sunny through our Crimplene curtains, covering a broken window. Kevin and Sam arrived mid morning, in brilliant sunshine, only to find that the pre-spin and the GPS and the radio and the compass weren't working. Apart from that everything was fine. Sam and Marc proceeded to strip the dash panel and fiddle about for two hours attempting to fix the problems. Personally I had enough to worry about, the thought of crossing the Channel loomed large...

To say I was apprehensive would be a gross understatement; trying not to communicate that fear to my son, as I explained the ditching process, was very difficult.

With flight plan faxed to Heathrow, and with my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, we set off for Dover, GPS routes plotted and maps at the ready. The last time I felt this nervous was when I forgot our anniversary: I was down the pub with a few mates getting very pissed, when my wife phoned and proceeded to tell me exactly where I could stick the non-existent anniversary present!

With the wind behind us we made quick work of the first leg. Dover harbour loomed large in the windscreen and the Channel loomed even larger... Now, it's really strange, when the land slips away and is replaced by water with nothing else around, just how small, insignificant and vulnerable you feel in a gyroplane. Squeezing the buttocks in hard seemed to help, and forcing saliva into the mouth, in a dismal and slightly sad attempt to communicate with my son, certainly alleviated a lot of the fears. 'You alright?' 'Yeah I'm cool!' 'Sure you're OK?' 'Yeah I'm fine' was the general father-and-son chit-chat. 'Is that cloud on the horizon, or is it land?' 'No it's land' says Tim, surely the finest words my son has ever spoken to me, even better than the 'Dadda' uttered when he was but a few months old!

The trip over the water was probably only 15 minutes, but it seemed a lot longer. I tried not to look down too much, I'm not a good swimmer, and don't really like gargling with salt water. The life jackets seemed incredibly flimsy, anyway, I wasn't even sure that we would get out of the aircraft in the event of a ditching - undo the harness, remove headsets, fly along the swell, roll right to stop the rotors (doesn't seem fair on my son to drop him in first), in freezing darkness, coughing and gagging on salt water... such were the thoughts that flashed through my head.

Kevin, where the hell was he? I'd forgotten about him, he was behind, at our 7 o'clock. A quick squint over my left shoulder confirmed that he was still with us. Over the French coast at Cap Griz Nez, buttocks unclenched, now we were heading to Le Touquet.

Weather deteriorating now, down to about 1000ft, threat of rain in the air. Made the R/T call inbound 5 miles out, joined downwind, and landed just fine.

Had a fag...

Tony and Dinah arrived in Land Rover and caravan, resplendent with new BRA logos. We refuelled from the jerry cans and chatted for a while. They then disappeared off to Rouen, to sort out our first overnight stop. Forgot to close the flight plan, caused a bit of a stir, but with a gallic shrug from the lady at the desk we assumed that all was fine. Spent about 2 hours loafing around the airport, grabbed a sandwich and a coffee.

Had another fag...

Set off for Rouen that afternoon. We forgot to put on the lifejackets, an error which only became apparent as we flew over about 3 miles of river inlet 10 miles south of Le Touquet, but by now I was blasé about flying over water.

The trip down to Rouen was reasonably uneventful, apart from the fact that with lowering cloud and mist and only 2 miles to go, I still couldn't see the runway. ATC didn't seem to be too concerned either, just kept on asking 'are you visual yet?' I think it was the gimlet-eyed Kevin who spotted it first, and eventually so did I. Landed on the massive runway and taxied to the terminal building. The entire place was

'No charge gentlemen, it's free!' One of the things that strikes you fairly early on about GA flying in France is that no-one really seems to give a damn about procedure, protocol, rules or regulations. The only thing they do seem to care about is lunch, and boy do they know a thing or two about lunch. Don't expect to get anything sorted out during their lunch break. A world war could break out between the hours of noon and 2pm and they would be more concerned about the cheese course with coffee to follow.

A great deal of time was spent in the planning, trying to avoid military low fly zones and keeping out of the way of various airspaces, however in reality all it took was a quick call on the radio and permission seemed to be granted immediately. The only thing they did seem concerned about was overflying, or rather not overflying, any of their numerous nuclear power stations.

The next leg took us down to Blois, flying in increasingly improving weather, still with a light wind behind us and making about 75-80mph groundspeed. Each leg was averaging 100 miles and we were turning that round in about 75 minutes or so. On most of the legs we would call up for clearance, taxi out and go, making a last R/T call to advise that we were changing to our en-route frequency. This was our pre-arranged signal for us both to dial up 123.45 and use that as a gyro-to-gyro chat frequency, only changing back when 5 miles out from our next landing point.

Arriving at Blois, we found that they were shut for lunch. My R/T calls in French to Blois Traffique certainly satisfied me, whether or not anyone else understood, or even cared, is another matter entirely.

Tony and Dinah were a good hour or so behind us, so we had lunch and chilled out. When they arrived, replete with more mogas, we refuelled and said our farewells. They must have been seriously pissed off by now, driving like a bat out of hell for three hours solid, turning up to see us just wiping the last vestiges of food from our greasy chops, refuelling us, then being told they had better get a move on or they would be late for the next stop.

Still, Tony seemed to be irrepressibly happy. Dinah though, was more realistic...

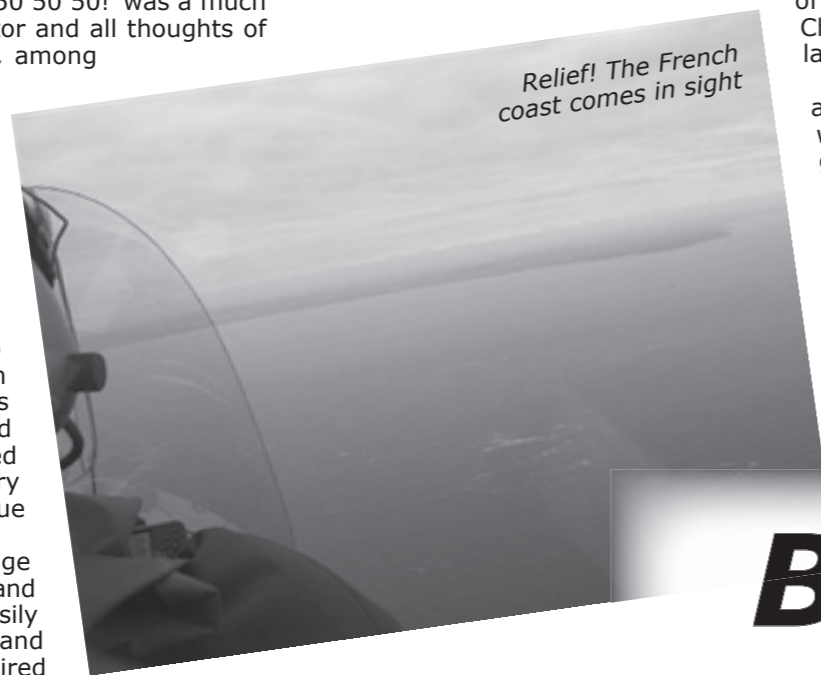
The second leg was down to Wannafly, Dave and Mandy's place. They bought a huge plot of land some 18 months ago, along with various ramshackle

buildings and outhouses, plus barns, and then cut down loads of trees and put in an airstrip. Dave now spends his time teaching students on his flexwings. There are worse ways of making a living.

Sam and Kevin stayed overnight on Wednesday with Dave and Mandy, while the remaining four of us repaired to a local B&B, run by the guy who was one part of Hinge and Bracket. We were never sure which part he played, suffice it to say, he seemed a very nice man, as was his friend. (*He was Hinge - Ed.*)

Spent Thursday at Dave's place, with Kevin taking all and sundry for quick spins in his (borrowed) MT03, around the local countryside, I got to have a go, in the back seat, and I have to say that, compared to the RAF2000, it is a piece of cake to fly. So stable and smooth, with minimal pilot inputs.

Flying the RAF for several hours a day, in thermally conditions, is the best weight loss program I have ever encountered. Forget the Atkins, forget the cabbage soup and dock leaf diet, buy an RAF2000 without a horizontal ➔



Bois et moi

deserted, no planes, no people, nothing, just two tiny little gyros against a massive backdrop of buildings and runways.

Tony and Dinah arrived, unhitched the caravan and left it in the car park. They whisked us all off to the hotel, then off for something to eat. Feeling very tired by now.

Had a fag...

Later on we returned to the airport and deposited Kevin and Sam back their luxuriously appointed caravan, no Crimplene curtains here I'm afraid. It was apparently their choice to doss down in the van. We returned to our hotel - well, I call it a hotel, more like a kennel really - to sleep and re-enact the first leg.

On Wednesday we woke early, had breakfast and left for the airport, arrived to find Sam and Kevin up and about, sitting at their plastic table outside the caravan, having breakfast. Those guys know the true meaning of travelling in style!

The gyros had both been hangered overnight, so we attempted to pay for both this and the landing fees, but...



by Martyn Love

→stabiliser, fly it for 4h a day and the pounds will fall off you.

Next morning, Friday, we set off for Bergerac, another leg of 100 miles or so, with only another 100 miles after that until we reached our journey's end. Dave's strip is fairly bumpy, and the runway has quite a slope, with tall trees at the bottom and power lines at the other end.

Tim and I were fully fuelled, on a fairly hot and humid day, on a bumpy grass runway. I had already picked out my abandon takeoff point, 250-300m down the 400m strip. The wind was very light and at right angles to the runway, the pre-spin was poor, and couldn't get more than 150rpm, so when we began our takeoff roll, it seemed to take an eternity to get the rotors up to flying speed. By the time we had 200rpm and released the pre-spin we were halfway down. The aircraft eventually got airborne and I was looking for '50 50 50' knots of airspeed, still keeping the nose down, and by now aiming directly at the base of the trees. Possibly I was the only one at that airfield who knew we would clear the trees; my son didn't think we would, and neither, as I later found out, did any of the other onlookers.

We cleared them with about 30ft to spare. Kevin's take off was a lot better, but then it would be, he's a policeman.

The flight down to Bergerac was fantastic – hot sunny day, wind behind us, making good time. Radio call to Bergerac to join right base, told we were number 2 behind the Dash turboprop on finals, dropped in behind, he landed long and we landed short, we both then taxied towards each other towards the apron. I felt it only right and proper to let him go first, so I flashed the headlights at him and waved him on. I guess when you ponced up in first-officer mode, carting a plane load of holidaymakers around Europe in your smart plane, it can't be the norm to be waved through by a guy in a tiny little gyroplane? The 2 on the flight deck seemed most amused, and waved like mad to us, at least, that's what I think they were doing.

Bergerac was boiling hot, must have been 90°F with not a cloud in the sky, however the weather forecast was for storms and CB later that evening. As it was only 2pm, with only another 90min needed to fly the last leg, we sat outside in the sun and had some lunch. Had I known then what I know now, I would have pushed on for BdIP a lot sooner than we did.

Tony and Dinah didn't call in to Bergerac to refuel us, as it was too much of a detour for them, so we filled up with avgas. Excitement was building as we struck out for BdIP, with visions of onion-strewn Frenchmen, throwing their *bicyclettes* to the wind, in an effort to run up and embrace us on both cheeks for our daring and bodacious voyage.

Forty miles to go and the sky was turning a nasty shade of grey. A few spots of rain on the windshield heralded the arrival of the predicted stormy weather. Thirty miles to go and the sky was turning very dark, the lights on the dashboard were shining brightly, the rain was getting heavier, 25 miles to go and the heavens opened. With 20 miles to go we could barely see through the windshield, rain was pouring in everywhere, and with 19 miles to go I felt the first misfire. Tim looked apprehensively at me but remained silent.

The engine missed again, rpm was now down to 3500. It started coughing and spluttering, rpm down to 1500 or so, starting to panic now, especially as we were down to about 500ft with not many decent fields to choose from. I called Kevin and said we were going down, turned back through 180° and had a choice of two fields, one a brown lumpy-looking one and the other green. We elected for the green one.

The RAF is fairly tricky to land in an engine-out, as you have to make massive rudder inputs, but in this instance, with the engine on tickover it wasn't too bad. I managed to get my airspeed up to about 60kt, and pointed it straight down the middle of the field. As we got closer I could see that the crop was over a metre high, so I flared early and cushioned it onto the top of the crop. It was a perfect landing. I had often wondered whether or not I would be up for a real engine-out, and whether or not I could cope with the high workload. Now I know.

Down on the ground in four feet of corn, with Kevin and Sam circling overhead, I left the engine running to see if it might dry out. However-



Bent aircraft at Bois – but it could have been far worse

er, in the worsening rain it wouldn't pick up above tickover.

Tim and I were fine, and the gyro seemed to be none the worse for its forced landing, all three wheels still intact. Kevin and Sam continued on their way, as there was little they could do to offer assistance, despite my pathetic pleas for help. Kevin's timely advice was 'There's a nice big house with a pool at the top of the hill over to your 11 o'clock', this transpired to be an invaluable piece of information.

Some way off at our 11 o'clock there was indeed a nice house, with the occupants moving out onto the verandah to see just what was going on. It's probably not an everyday event to have an aircraft land in your corn field.

We made our way through the soaking corn, in the pouring rain, just wearing T-shirts and jeans. By the time we had negotiated our way to the house, via a cabbage field, and up the hill, we were drenched. My lovely red shoes were ruined and were now about three inches taller than before.

The lady of the house ushered us in and plied us with food and drink, offering us brandy to calm the nerves. I really can't state firmly enough how kind these people were; they asked us if we wanted to stay for dinner, and even stay the night. Would that happen in the UK?

I called Tony on the mobile and let him know what had happened, but by this time Kevin and Sam had landed and told their version of events anyway. Apparently, after much arm waving and shouting, a posse was raised, a trailer appropriated, a translator organized, and four vehicles set off in convoy.

As they didn't actually know where they were going, a minor miracle was needed if they were to find us, so

after many phone calls I decided to hand the phone over to *madame* who gave instructions in the native tongue. By now the farmer and his lovely daughter had arrived in the field at the foot of the hill to investigate. When I say lovely I am of course being sarcastic, try imagining a gallic version of Les Dawson in a dress, with a slight hint of five o'clock shadow, and you get the picture. The farmer was of indeterminate age, toothless, and had an air of the drunken old Irish geezer that habitually props up the bar in the corner of the pub. A lot of laughter and complete incoherence was the order of the day.

He didn't seem too disturbed about the outlanding, I think he was more interested in getting his daughter hitched up with my son, or that's what I told Tim.

By now it seemed that half the village knew of the 'petit helicoptère rouge' and were calling round to the house to offer assistance, all of it useless but much welcomed as a diversion. We eventually organized pulling the gyro out of the field, and by then the troops had arrived. How we actually got the RAF onto a trailer that was designed for no more than a window cleaner's ladder and bucket I will never know, but get it on they did!

There is one image that will stay with me for a long time, and that is of Tony Wilk, in a black felt fedora, wearing his long, Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven* coat, standing on the top of a tall pair of steps, in the lashing rain, wielding spanners to remove the rotors, when the largest flash of forked lightning, accompanied almost immediately by a clap of thunder, occurred right overhead. The look on his face was priceless!

After saying our goodbyes to the farmer, his wife and more lovely daughters, we set off for BdIP, taking about an hour to get there. We were soaked, freezing cold and hungry. But our reception at the gyroclub was fantastic, they all came outside and clapped and cheered us. They had even delayed the evening meal until we arrived, some three hours late.

The weather the next day was not good, it just kept raining, very windy and cold. There was little activity from any of the gyro pilots, despite there being a reasonably good sized crowd. One guy managed to demonstrate his homebuilt single-seat helicopter, hovering 6ft over the crowds – you're not likely to see this kind of display in the UK.

The next day, Sunday, was better, and a couple of guys did some circuits and some 360 spiral turns, but the accolade of the day has to go to the pilot who attempted to land his kit-built light aircraft. He approached at some 30° off the runway, but into wind, at the last moment, heading directly at the crowd line, he straightened up his approach for a landing. But he was by now too low and too slow, he stalled the plane at about 10ft, applied full power and cartwheeled into the crowd. He managed to break both legs and one arm of one of the marshals. It could have been so much worse.

The airfield was closed down temporarily, with the gendarmerie now in control, and some sort of ad hoc investigation seemingly underway. Within three or four hours we were told we could carry on flying, but no-one really fancied it somehow!

So instead that day was spent getting my gyro fixed, and a huge vote of thanks must go to David Beevers for his help, without whom I would have been walking back home.

Eventually we got the gyro sorted out and I asked David if he would sit in with me for a test flight. I must admit

to feeling very nervous as we taxied down to the end of the runway – not sure why, maybe it was the thought of the bill I would be getting from David!

The engine sounded as sweet as the proverbial nut, and didn't miss a beat, and the rotors were flying a lot better since we had adjusted them, with virtually no stick shake at all. The disappointing thing was that the event was a complete washout, such a shame considering the obvious amount of work that Xavier and his team had put into it.

We eventually began planning the trip home, leaving BdIP on Tuesday and flying all day, with three stops until we reached Rouen at about 9pm. We parked up and met up with Tony and Dinah, who must have driven like crazy to keep up. Tim travelled back with them in the Land Rover, obviously not wishing to repeat his foray into a corn field, or suffer a reconciliation with the farmer's daughter.

As the weather for Wednesday was looking grim in the UK from mid morning onward, we decided to leave Rouen early, about 06.30 local time. The weather was fine, I was not. I felt knackered after 10h flying the day before. Life jackets on, sphincter muscles tightening in preparation of the trip back over the water...

All was going well until we were 2 miles off Cap Gris Nez, when it started to rain. Talk about indecision – should we continue in the rain and risk another engine out? Jesus H Christ, what a bloody time to rain.

But no sooner had it started than the rain stopped. We had planned to fly direct to Lydd, which I know is only another 5 miles more across the water than going to Dover, but the second we altered course for Lydd the groundspeed went from 90mph down to 60mph. I was having none of it, I altered course direct to Dover, Sam and Kevin went on to Lydd.

Our diversion brought us to a closed Lydd 10 minutes after Kevin and Sam, who had called me up and said 'There's no-one here, so you might as well land into wind wherever you like'.

With a stiff breeze blowing at right angles to the runway, I did just that.

Hanging around outside Lydd at 7am in a biting wind wasn't a lot of fun. Eventually we were let in by some of the fire crew, and then were made tea and coffee by one of the lovely cleaning ladies.

Officialdom reared its ugly head in the shape of the head safety director of the airfield, who proceeded to bollock us for landing outside hours, and threatened to charge us £300 each for our illegal landings. Talk about welcome home.

Anyway, I said that it was Kevin's fault, he's the policeman. I was just following orders.

We were made to wait till 09.30 until they would let us take off. Tim and I returned to Mark's farm to eventually trailer the gyro home, while Kevin and Sam, who tried to get back to Benson but were beaten by the weather, eventually landed at Shoreham, unable to take off till much later that day.

All in all the trip was well worth the effort. It certainly taught me a lot and boosted my confidence no end.

Many thanks must surely go to Tony and Dinah, who were superb in their unflinching efforts, thanks also to David Beevers for his help at Bois and Marc Lhermette for putting up with my incessant questions and whining on route planning.

A bientôt 2008.



Making an early start back to the UK: (l-r) Tim, Martyn, Sam and Kevin