



BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT BUGLE

News from our Airport at Biggin Hill - established 2005



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CHRISTMAS GREETINGS 2013



As the Bugle enters its 9th year of publication we wish all our readers a very merry Christmas and a prosperous new year.

Please keep your stories coming in, no matter how small, even some of the characters you have encountered during your aviation career.

All the very best. JB & JW

CAPETOWN TO BIGGIN HILL



Cast your mind back to Xmas 1963 which is 50 years ago Laurie (Harry) Harris set off on the return leg from Capetown to Biggin Hill with Don Parker and his family in the DH Rapide G-ALGC.

Having flown down the east coast of the continent of Africa, they are now flying up the west coast.

THE STORY FROM ISSUE 103

Continues here:

Among the numerous other problems still facing us before our return flight back to England were the maintenance records of the aircraft. Before we departed from Biggin Hill, the Rapide had been used for 'hire and reward' doing joy-riding; a role for which it was most suitable, being a slow-speed eight-passenger aircraft, it had been maintained on what was then called a 'Public Transport Maintenance Schedule'. This meant that it was obligatory for us to have regular checks performed at periodic intervals by a British authorised Engineer with the Rapide on his licence. As this was a private venture we had tried to get a waiver from this requirement prior to our departure but it proved impossible for a variety of reasons. Therefore we should have had the first check done after fifty hours of flying which occurred somewhere in the middle of Africa, which of course was quite out of the question at the time – what to do?

I was consciously aware of the fact that as we had erred by not having these checks performed

when due, it was quite likely that the insurance on the aircraft may well, have been invalidated. With the uncertainty of our venture into the unknown for the return trip, this became somewhat worrisome. I could envisage the problems that faced me on arrival back in the UK without these checks being correctly performed and signed for by a duly authorised engineer, but believing that if I were in fact to make it back to England in one piece anyway, then that would be the least of my worries! The amiable Chief Engineer at Youngsfield, where our Rapide was parked, fully understood the problem but although he commiserated with us, was unwilling to sign our aircraft logbooks without the requisite authorisation from the UK MOA (Ministry of Aviation).

This was impossible to get under the circumstances so we compromised and asked if he would sign a separate sheet of paper to certify that all of the necessary checks had been performed to his satisfaction. This much he graciously agreed to do for us. Don and I then set ourselves the task of stripping the cowlings off the engines and removing, or unzipping (being fabric-covered) all the access panels ready for inspection and rectification where necessary. Our kind Chief Engineer then guided us on what work to carry out under his expert supervision, having explained to him first that I had a fair amount of aircraft engineering experience

behind me, but never got the chance to take my licence exams because I'd concentrated on the flying side instead, which was fairly close to the truth anyway... He took my word for it!

The task took the best part of six days. One big problem that stared us in the face was that both engine cowlings were sooty-black with exhaust fumes – a fact that had been noticed by the Chief Engineer also. This was the typical hallmark of engines that had been constantly running rich in the fuel-air ratio. The reason was all too obvious.

The fuel mixture controls had long since been removed in the UK as being superfluous to requirements. This being due to the low-altitude flights in its joy-riding mode over relatively low-terrain English countryside where there was no requirement for such controls to be fitted. As they were just one more item of equipment that could maybe give problems if inadvertently selected at the wrong time, they had therefore long since been discarded. I had in fact noticed this before leaving Biggin but paid scant attention to it, having many more important issues to concentrate on. In any case, it had been dismissed earlier on as being unnecessary owing to the low altitudes we had planned to fly at. How wrong I was in retrospect not paying more attention to this detail. I was later to learn that at any altitude above 3,000 feet the mixture controls are necessary. Without them it would be akin to running ones car along the road with the choke half-out. Had they been fitted, performance and fuel economy at the heights we were obliged to fly at would have improved dramatically. No wonder our cowlings were so black and sooty!

We considered a number of possibilities in an attempt to remedy the situation but to no

avail. It was impossible to modify the existing system without the necessary spare parts which could only be obtained after an exhaustive search in the UK, which by this time (disregarding the lengthy wait involved before arrival), was in the process of imposing embargoes on exports to South Africa due to the apartheid situation. We were therefore resigned to fly the return trip in the same configuration as the outbound flight.

Putting such considerations to one side, we continued with the check under our Engineer's guidance, until the job was completed. With the cowlings replaced, all panels zipped-up, and after a short test flight around the local area, we commenced making plans for our inevitable, if somewhat reluctant, departure.

Realising of course the problems that would face us if we dared attempt to retrace our steps over the same route we came out on, having passports and aircraft documents liberally endorsed with the Republic of South Africa stamps all over them, our only alternative was to choose another route home. There could only be one other way and that was to follow the west coast of Africa from Cape Town to Tangier. On the face of it this offered the prospect of more positive navigation at relatively low altitudes, albeit a longer way home, but fate decreed otherwise!

Immense problems faced us. First and foremost we had no maps for the route, and with absolutely no information whatsoever from the Royal Aero Club, who naturally assumed that we'd be retracing our outbound steps for the return journey. At this point somebody suggested that we contact the Air Attaché at the American Embassy who may be able to help in this respect. I eventually raised him on the phone and told him about our problem. He said "*leave it with me*

– I'll see what I can do". The next day he rang and told me to meet him at the Embassy at a pre-arranged time.

On arrival at the duly appointed time he handed me a complete set of US Airforce WAC Route Charts covering the entire flight. An angel in disguise if ever I met one! I just simply couldn't thank him enough... First big problem over!

Don and I studied the charts at length and pondered over the numerous countries we would need to transit en-route, all of which would no doubt require permission and clearance to go through, and of course visas for each of us. Because of apartheid there was not one single country that we proposed going through that were represented in the Republic of South Africa, and therefore no possibility whatsoever of obtaining any clearances. This indeed was the greatest quandary of all. We toyed with all sorts of various schemes and ideas to solve it but in the end we decided that we had no alternative but to heave off '*into the wild blue yonder*' without clearances and just hope that we could flannel our way along. Doom and gloom descended upon me as I visualised the problems ahead. It was unheard of in aviation circles, and folly in itself, to attempt any flight from South Africa through hostile 'black anti-apartheid Africa' without permission or clearances, but what to do indeed?

At least Don had the remarkable foresight (drawn on past experience no doubt) to have stacks of General Declaration forms printed and liberally stamped with our own (Don's actually) cleverly forged stamps of various colours like black, blue, red and green, to confound any inquisitive Customs or Immigration officials en-route. As most of the territories we would be passing through were former British Colonies, lots of stamped

paperwork (for which we British were world-renowned) was a must. We therefore hoped that armed with such, our passage through the unknown would be lubricated a little, hoping that being baffled by so much red tape we would be in and out of their jurisdiction before being discovered.

In the end, being a born optimist combined with Don's 'devil may care' attitude, we decided to put the problems to the back of our minds and tackle each day as it came.

One more obstacle confronted us to blight our otherwise rising spirits as the departure day approached. We were informed by the authorities that due to the strictly enforced regulations imposed upon unauthorised aircraft, all flights up the so-called skeleton coast of South West Africa were forbidden because of the diamond fields there. Namibia as it's now called was still under South African control at that time. Lengthy prison sentences were threatened for anyone caught violating the restrictions. We were therefore obliged to fly quite some distance inland until we had crossed the border into Angolan territory. This necessitated a rapid re-planning and further scrutiny of our charts.

Final preparations for our departure got under way at last with lots of flight planning and enquiries from all and sundry were made about any unknown hazards ahead. I was still rather unsure of our exact routeing though, especially as most of the WAC charts covering Angola had remarks like 'highest elevation unknown' stamped across them. A visiting pilot at Youngsfield whom I got chatting to about the trip claimed he knew Angola well and warned me that the spot heights referred to on Angolan maps were highly suspect. He also warned me that due to the elevation, we would have to fly quite high, certainly in

excess of 5,000 feet, most of the time.

How I wished we'd had those mixture controls fitted back at Biggin Hill. We did however manage to contact the Shell company to arrange supplies to be made available at our intended landings spots which relieved my growing anxiety somewhat.

The day finally arrived for our departure. Our first leg was to be a long one – all the way to a small town called Keetmanshoop in South West Africa (Namibia). The departing formalities were completed without too much trauma, if a little tearful for our four females saying their goodbyes to their newly-found friends. We climbed aboard dear old G-ALGC for the much longer flight back to the UK around the vast bulge of West Africa, with me at least wondering with considerable trepidation, what surprises lay in store for us ahead.

February 2nd 1964... Having said our farewells and most sincere thanks to all of the kind folk who made our five and a half week stay in the Cape so enjoyable, I started the engines and taxied out to the far perimeter fence of Youngsfield; did the pre-take-off checks, turned around and took off, waving goodbye to our friends as we sped past them after lift-off for the first stage of our homeward flight. It was great to be back into the driving seat of our dear old Rapide again – my itchy feet were telling me it was time to move on once more!

We flew in a northerly direction towards our first intended landing at Keetmanshoop in South West Africa (Namibia). Because of the Government restriction forbidding all flights along the skeleton coast to protect the diamond trade, it was necessary to fly a considerable distance inland until crossing the border into Angola. Thereafter our

intention was to gradually converge across to the South Atlantic coastline. From there on we would more or less follow the West African coast all the way to Tangier, which was to be our departure point from Africa, and only a short distance across the narrow neck of the Mediterranean Straits of Gibraltar; thence once again into Europe and home.



After a rather long but uneventful four and three quarter hour flight in clear conditions we landed at Keetmanshoop to refuel. It was a dry and dusty place with not much to recommend it, although to be fair, we only saw the airport and

not the town itself. Having filled our tanks again and grabbed a quick bite to eat we emplaned for our next leg to Windhoek, the capital of South West Africa, where we intended to spend the night.

Kalahari Desert. Three quarters of the journey to our destination we crossed the 23½ degree south latitude marking the Tropic of Capricorn so once again we entered the tropical regions of Africa. The landing at Windhoek was without problems and whilst Don took care of the arrival formalities at the control tower I supervised the refuelling ready for next day's flight. Most of the three hundred mile flight to Windhoek was spent over the featureless and barren Kalahari.

Windhoek was a dry and dusty town and didn't appeal to us very much. I often wondered what attracts people to live in such desolate places? The small hotel where we stayed was clean and comfortable though and the mainly German descendants (being a former German colony) were quite friendly. They told us that the average humidity throughout the year, due to the lack of rainfall, was only about five per cent, and that it was not uncommon for pieces of wooden furniture to suddenly collapse in a cloud of dust due to the dryness. The following day's flight though was very much on my mind. We had to find a small unpaved airstrip in Angola called Villa Pereira d'Eca after a long flight, almost to the very limit of our fuel endurance, with few recognisable landmarks en-route. I retired that night full of foreboding for the biggest obstacle yet; how to locate a small airstrip after nearly five hours flying?

February 3rd 1964... At the airport next day I had a lengthy chat with the Controller about the flight and he gave me a lot of very sound advice. He said that a little

under the half way point, and off to the left of track, if the conditions were clear enough, I should see a small township called Outjo which would serve as a en-route checkpoint. Soon after passing Outjo we would come to a very big dry salt lake called the Etosha Pan, the world's largest game reserve. He told me we would see lots of wild game there and possibly even elephants too. After leaving the Etosha Pan we could expect pampas-type bush and grassland with very few landmarks. Eventually we would come across a jeep track running at right angles to our own track. I should then turn right and follow it until we came across the village of Villa Pereira d'Eca. The procedure then would be to fly low over the village a couple of times. This would alert the persons concerned who would then drive out to the strip with cans of fuel specially arranged by the fuel company. After buzzing the town we were directed to follow a track out in a north-easterly direction for a few more miles where we should then see the red laterite landing strip alongside and to the left of the track – It all sounded too simple for words. I felt that I was going to need a pot full of luck to find the place!

We took off and flew on a northerly heading and I settled down for the long flight ahead, but conditions were quite a bit bumpy in the early morning thermals rising from the ground. Then suddenly, and without warning, the Rapide went into a series of violent gyrations and fell like a brick towards the desert below. I was taken completely by surprise and thought for one dreadful moment that we had lost part of the tailplane! Struggling to regain control, and at about 800ft from the ground, we came out of the headlong descent into smoother air. The girls were all screaming in the back and having got the Rapide under control again I quickly reassured them that everything was

now okay. I have no idea what caused it but back in the UK some weeks later, during an interview with a Daily Mail reporter, Don suggested that we flew into a 'whirlwind', but frankly I haven't a clue what it was. My best guess now in the light of more recent experience is that it was probably just a 'dust devil' in the making, which is a common phenomena in desert regions, but I suppose a whirlwind sounded a bit more dramatic.

Whatever it may have been, it was quite frightening and I counted my lucky stars that we survived. It was not a pleasant beginning to our most demanding flight yet!

The small settlement of Outjo came into sight more or less on ETA, from which I surmised that there was hardly any wind and hence very little drift to speak of. Then up came the great Etosha Pan. It stretched as far as the eye could see, ahead and to the left and right of us. We had previously been assured that lots of wild game inhabited the area, so I descended to about one hundred feet so that everybody could get a closer look. Before long herds of wildebeest together with ostrich, zebras, hyenas, giraffes and lots more game filled the scene.

Unfortunately, they heard our engines approaching and began stampeding in clouds of dust. I was told some months later that my actions were highly illegal and that I could have been jailed if the authorities had caught me. I did not of course do it on purpose and as soon as I realised the sheer panic I was causing I quickly climbed away to a higher altitude. There were massive herds of animals everywhere and the children were really excited to see it all.

The Pampus grassland eventually came into view at last and soon after leaving the Etosha Pan behind



I caught sight of a group of elephants near some clumps of small trees. I shouted to the children to keep a look out for them and then did a rather steep 360 degree turn to the left to retrace my track. However by the time I had returned to the point where I first spotted them they had completely disappeared! I marvelled how such a large group of mammoths could suddenly hide in such relatively sparse surroundings.

Having settled down on course again and climbed to a reasonable altitude, not only for passenger comfort but also to give me a better view of what lay ahead, my concentration now focussed on the most difficult part of our entire journey since leaving England – how to find a small village in the middle of nowhere? The large grasslands and scrubby-type bush seemed to stretch on all sides to infinity. I held the compass course as accurately as possible, with no idea of wind direction or strength if any. We plodded on for mile after mile of featureless terrain although there were a few more trees appearing now interspersed among the endless grassland.

After what seemed an eternity, some tracks came into view ahead. The one I was searching for though should be more distinctive – then I saw it!

Right on ETA a well-marked jeep-track appeared crossing at right angles. I banked sharply over to the right to follow it and suddenly found myself passing two more tracks; then there were tracks

everywhere! Which one should I follow now? Making a snap decision I chose the first one that I had just crossed. I couldn't believe my good fortune because a few minutes later a small village came into view. I hoped and prayed it was Villa Pereira d'Eca.

In accordance with previous instructions I flew low over the village a couple of times then set course in a north-easterly direction as advised. Once again there was not just one track but half-a-dozen radiating out from the village. With very little choice I selected the most likely-looking one and began to follow it. A quick glance at the fuel gauges reminded me that I had better find a landing spot very soon or otherwise I would be forced to put her down on the first flat stretch of flat ground available. Then there it was! Parallel to the track and off to the left of it lay the red-coloured laterite dirt airstrip.

A quick fly past at low level to make sure it was okay then a low-level circuit to a final approach, dropping her down just past the indistinct threshold. Doing a 'one-eighty' as the Rapide slowed down I taxied back into the cloud of red dust I had just created to a small parking area I'd noticed as we came into land.

Swinging the plane around to face the landing strip I allowed the engines to idle for a couple of minutes and then shut them down. We climbed out into the fierce shimmering midday heat pondering my good fortune on finding it. Good old lady luck had saved me once again! I could only assume that all of the plusses and minuses throughout the long flight had somehow evened themselves all out; it was nothing short of a miracle to find the place. I stood by the Rapide, pondering our good fortune, and listening with an immense feeling of relief to the creaking sounds coming from the

engines as they gradually cooled off.

The heat was so intense that the children, having been cautioned to watch out for any nasties like scorpions etc, sat under the shade of the lower wing out of the blazing sun, which was just about overhead at that time of the year. It was then that we noticed we were not alone.

Lots of pairs of eyes were looking at us from the shade beneath one of the clumps of trees at the edge of the strip! Alarm spread over the girls as they came scrambling up towards us for protection. I must confess that I wasn't too happy about the situation myself. Who were they and what were their intentions? Then I noticed they were all native women; most of them bare-breasted as well by the look of it!

Thinking back on it I can well imagine their curiosity at seeing such an ancient canvas-covered biplane land at this remote semi-jungle strip, disgorging four white females and two white men! Realising they were friendly we beckoned them to come forward and meet with us but they were too shy and just giggled amongst themselves. Anne suddenly remembered a box of Black Magic chocolates that someone had presented her with as a parting gift.

She rummaged through the luggage and found them, albeit a trifle soggy now with the heat, and then offered it to them from a distance. They just shyly laughed but couldn't pluck up the courage to come forward, so we each pretended to eat a chocolate apiece, displaying make-believe pleasure in doing so, and then Anne went slowly towards them holding out the box in front of her. One of them, who was obviously their leader, coyly came forward, taking it from Anne, and then retreated rapidly to the curious throng of

women behind. They immediately crowded around the lady with the box and within seconds had scooped the lot! Then one of them put the empty box on her head and they all clapped hands to show their approval and pleasure.

Just at that moment a jeep came tearing along the track kicking up a great cloud of red dust behind it, coming to a screeching halt beside the Rapide. The back of the jeep was piled high with our cans of fuel. The Portuguese-speaking man in charge told us in halting English that after the refuelling we'd have to accompany him into the village to clear formalities, by which we assumed to be Customs and Immigration clearance (Angola was still a Portuguese colony).

The refuelling took some time as we were obliged to open each of the sealed cans in turn, pouring the precious fuel through our chamois leather to ensure we filtered out any water or impurities. Finally it was completed and having been positively assured the aircraft would be left in the safe hands of one of the uniformed chaps left to guard it, we jumped into the back of the jeep and sped off into town. The formalities were minimal as we expected, with lots of stamped General Declaration forms handed over which seemed to satisfy them. Then we were treated to some cups of coffee with cool drinks for the three girls. Passports stamped; aircraft documents inspected and stamped; all necessary fees paid, then back into the jeep for our next and final leg of the day to a place called Sa da Bandeira where we intended to night stop.

According to the Aerad radio chart I still had covering that part of Africa, Sa da Bandeira was a prominent enough strip to have its own radio beacon. So soon after take-off I tuned into the frequency given on the chart and began listening for the 3-letter call sign in

morse. Not really expecting to hear anything from that distance away and would probably not come into range for at least another hour or so.

The terrain was now getting a lot greener with more hills and small rivers appearing. There were a couple of largish rivers shown on the map which I was hoping would pinpoint our position. In fact I came across more than three but none of them where I expected them to be, or flowing in the direction the map indicated. Apart from the occasional small native village or two we saw no sign of life except the endless jungle and hills. I noticed also that in order to keep a healthy distance above the ground, I needed to nudge the Rapide higher and higher until I was registering about 8,000 feet on the altimeter. This was only approximate because I had no way of knowing the pressure datum to set the altimeter to anyway.

After a couple of hours I started searching the ADF dial for any radio beacon I could find, as the frequency and call-sign stated on the chart simply gave no indications whatsoever. I was beginning to get a little concerned because there was no sign of life appearing anywhere and we were rapidly approaching our ETA. Supposing, I had drifted off course without realising it?

If I missed Sa da Bandeira I could see no other town or settlement on the map within miles of our track. As I scanned the dial for the elusive call-sign, I noticed a strong signal coming from our one o'clock position emitting the call-sign of 'SB' in morse. It bore no resemblance to the call-sign and frequency on the Aerad chart but surely the 'SB' must stand for the SB in Sa da Bandeira I thought? It was Hobson's choice so I turned towards the needle and lo-and-behold a town very soon appeared with a long concrete runway close

by. I had been calling on various likely frequencies over the radio but no response so I did a circuit and came in to land. It was Sa da Bandeira alright but as it later transpired they had changed both the VHF frequency and the call-sign of the beacon without informing anyone in the outside world!

The altimeter after landing still showed about 6,000 feet on it and I later discovered that the actual airport elevation was in fact 5,778 feet above sea level; our highest airfield of the entire trip so far. By now though, the engine cowlings were sooty-black with the over-rich mixture. How I wished we had paid more attention to this problem before leaving the UK! My concern was for the morrow's flight which would involve much higher altitudes than we had thus far encountered, due to the mountainous terrain between Sa da Bandeira and the Atlantic coast.

The Portuguese Air Traffic Controller in the control tower was friendly enough and we, somehow managed to get through the formalities and refuelling without too much ado, although the language difficulties presented quite a few problems. A taxi was organised and we were soon arriving at a delightful old Colonial-style single-storey hotel run by a charming English-speaking Portuguese lady. She made us very welcome and after a most satisfying meal we went for a stroll in the flowered gardens. As it was still early in the evening Linda suggested we all go for a swim in the hotel's pool. The others declined so I went along to keep her company.

Linda was still only fourteen but well developed and advanced for her age, with a somewhat curvaceously slim figure... a fact that did not go entirely unnoticed by me! She seemed to sense this

and was not reticent in tantalisingly showing off her well-formed shape as we merrily splashed around in the water. I had to sharply remind myself that she was not only well under-aged but also still my responsibility in a manner of speaking.

We stayed in the pool until it grew dusk, thoroughly enjoying the clean and refreshing water, then strolled leisurely back through the sweet-smelling flower garden abundant with scented frangipani, bougainvillea, and other fragrant tropical flowers, to get dressed and join the rest of our party for dinner. Long after Anne and the girls went to bed Don and I stayed chatting for hours to our charming hostess over drinks listening to fascinating tales of her experiences in Colonial Angola. What a far cry from the war-ravaged devastated country it is today!

February 4th 1964... Next morning, after a sumptuous breakfast and probably the last of its type for some time to come, we bade our charming hostess adios and took a taxi to the airport.

Before long we were climbing aboard our trusty Rapide once again and after settling in and closing the rear door I started both the engines. I called-up the Controller on the new frequency they gave me before departure and in halting English was given clearance for taxi and take-off for the next leg of our journey which was Luanda, the capital of Angola. This was good because after reaching Luanda it would be coast-following all the way around the west coast of Africa to Tangier... No more fumbling around in unknown territory!

The poor old girl took longer than normal to get airborne from the lengthy concrete runway and felt rather sluggish after lift-off; probably due to the higher elevation, temperature, and lack of mixture controls. Soon we were

back over hilly jungle interspersed with numerous water courses. I flew at about 8,000 feet and eyed the approaching high ground ahead, separating us from the low coastal plains we were heading for, with more than a little trepidation. If only I could have leaned-out that mixture to give more power and gain more height, to say nothing of the fuel economy it would have afforded.

The American WAC maps showed scanty detail, due to lack of survey information available, and urged extreme caution with the suspect spot heights. The pilot I met back in Cape Town warned me that when he flew in this region previously he had observed mountain peaks way above the heights marked on his map, some even as high as 9,000 feet or more. I too began to notice the high ground appearing around us was well in excess of our cruising altitude, but with no mixture controls fitted it would be impossible to out-climb them. I held the course marked on the map as accurately as possible, trying to keep to my assumed track and avoid the rising high ground at the same time, searching for a lower route through the mountains. Before long I was in among the hills-cum-mountains which must have been at least 9,000 feet if not more.

I had been flying for some time along the valleys in this undulating region, having seen no sign of life for the past hour at least. Nothing in fact, except jungle-covered hills all around.

Then the unthinkable happened! That confounded starboard engine began to miss the odd beat or two occasionally. I knew the warning signs all too well!

Before long, the rough running started and only by easing the throttle back progressively in

stages could I get it to run evenly again. It couldn't have happened at a worse time or in a more inhospitable place.

There was no question of turning back now. I simply wouldn't have made it on one engine. My only option was to continue straight ahead and hope and pray that I would shortly be out of the mountains and able to descend over lower ground. Soon I was forced to retard the engine back to idle to stop the vibrating and misfiring. Now it was giving drag instead of thrust! I had the port engine running flat-out by this time and slowly descending straight into the seemingly solid mass of high ground ahead. If only I could get out of this high ground to the coastal plain ahead!

It flashed through my mind that rivers must eventually run to the sea, so I started following a rather largish river which twisted and turned through a valley in the mountains. Soon it was winding through gorges with rapidly rising ground on either side of me whilst I gradually descended lower and lower. What an awful predicament to be in! By this time I was wreathed in sweat with my left leg getting very tired. It began trembling with spasms in trying to hold the left rudder over to counteract the asymmetric thrust caused by the port engine which was at full throttle under the max available power, but the aircraft was still losing height gradually.

Awful thoughts raced through my head! Supposing the river took a right-angled bend, as rivers sometimes have a habit of doing? There was no way I could have banked the Rapide round it in time to avoid smashing headlong into the sheer side of the steep gorge. I made up my mind that at the next sandbank I saw on one of the inside bends of the river, I would try and put her down, hoping we would survive the inevitable crash

landing. Even if we did manage to survive, I wondered how we could possibly get back to civilisation in such a remote and inhospitable terrain? They'd previously told me that this part of Angola was real lion country!

How could we survive without weapons to defend ourselves and what about the females on board – always assuming that we all survived the forced landing?



I would be forced to leave them with the aircraft and somehow make my way alone to civilisation to get help. Even if I survived unscathed it could take weeks for me to reach assistance. All these dreadful thoughts went racing through my head as I banked sharply round each river bend with the gorge getting steeper and narrower all the time. It was then, for the first time ever in my flying career, that I began praying to the Almighty to get me out of this hopeless mess I had inadvertently landed myself in.

The river had now become a raging torrent as the sides of the gorge closed in on me. A wall of rock faced me round the next bend and I thought *'Oh my God! This is it; what a bloody stupid way to go!'* I banked sharply round to the right trying to out-turn the bend in the river, expecting any second to go crashing into the sheer sides of the

ravine in a gigantic fireball. The aircraft started juddering and began approaching the point of stall as I heaved back on the control column in an attempt to pull her round the bend. I only just made it only to be faced immediately with yet another sharp bend to the left this time. 'How much longer before it's all over' I thought. Then as I scraped around the bend; miracle of miracles; right in front of me was a steep 'V' of sky; suddenly we were out of the high ground with the terrain shelving steeply away beneath us. What an enormous relief! Now I had height to spare as the mountains rapidly receded behind and gave way to the lower ground leading to the coastal plain. Thank you God!

I headed due west towards the Atlantic coast with the avowed intention of landing on the nearest beach. Still no signs of habitation anywhere but I wasn't caring too much at that stage. My prayers had been answered and we were now out of those dreadful mountains with about 2,000 feet of height to spare. Dimly through the heat haze ahead I saw a line of purple where the horizon should be and I realised at last we were approaching the South Atlantic Ocean. Then off to my right a little, in my one o'clock position, I caught sight of something glittering in the sunlight. Some more flashes of light followed and then it dawned on me that it was the sun reflecting off glass – that meant habitation!

As we drew closer, through the heat haze a rather large town came into sight and I thought how lucky I was to be able to do a forced landing near human beings, as a forced landing it would certainly have to be as by now my altitude was getting very low indeed. Then I saw it!

I could hardly believe my eyes; there right in front of me was a long concrete runway approaching at right-angles to my track! I had

just about enough height to join a left base leg and a quick turn onto finals. Then flaring as I crossed the threshold of the runway, I chopped the power immediately and landed on the main wheels seconds afterwards. As the airspeed decayed and the tail began to drop I could not help but notice lots of earth-moving vehicles around the place and wondered how such a long airstrip had no buildings around it? Slowing down and turning off into a concrete parking area at one side of the runway I braked gently, fetching the aircraft to a halt, and shutting the engines down I sank back into my seat in a pool of sweat, thanking whoever it was up there for saving all our skins...

As we climbed out of the aircraft, lots of ramshackle cars and old trucks drove up to us with the occupants spilling out of them as they came to a stop, jabbering twenty-to-the-dozen in Portuguese. Not understanding one single word they were saying we tried communicating in English but to no avail. Then a battered jeep came screeching to a halt alongside us and out jumped a man whom I presumed to be in charge. In a very officious broken-English accent he demanded to know who we were and why we had landed there? We somehow made him understand our predicament whereupon his face lit-up and with a big toothy smile came and shook us all vigorously by the hand saying something to the effect of *"Welcome to our new airport of Benguela – we only finished the runway yesterday and you are the first plane to land on it"*. How lucky could we be? What incredible good fortune had ensured our safe arrival after such an ordeal. Benguela is now apparently a thriving airport taking jets I hear – and we were the first ones to land there and inaugurate it! Thank you once again up there!

Don quickly had the starboard engine cowling off and soon

discovered the problem with the same troublesome magnetos. Apparently the cam shafts had ridged with wear and this in turn had worn out the ebonite part of the contact breakers causing the spark gaps to close. From now on we vowed to readjust them at every landing. That was the third engine failure since leaving England, which almost led to disaster. We certainly didn't relish having any more.

Don was very mechanically-minded and with the aid of a piece of matchbox to gauge the correct gap, soon had the problem solved. A quick engine run to confirm it then we all piled on board, said our goodbyes to the crowd of workers still milling around the aircraft jabbering away excitedly in rapid quick-firing Portuguese, and made tracks for our original destination Luanda. Benguela to Luanda was just over another two hours flying time. The straight line track would have taken us out over the Atlantic Ocean most of the way; still following the general direction of the coast but well out over the water. I decided to play safe and follow the coastline instead, which would only have involved a few minutes extra flying but we'd had just about enough excitement for one day!

Finally we landed at the Luanda International Airport and were very soon embroiled in officialdom. The Portuguese can be rather tiresome when they want to be. There were lots of paperwork to attend to before our arrival formalities were concluded, but with a few 'palm-greasing' Escudos to help lubricate the process, it eased the situation somewhat. I left Don to take care of most of this whilst I attended to the refuelling as usual. Anne and the three girls had their task to perform as well, as indeed they had done throughout the entire trip from the UK, and not a very enviable one either! That was to

remove the Elsan toilet bucket and deposit its contents at the most convenient point, mostly when they thought nobody was looking! Then they would flush it out and recharge the toilet bucket with fresh water and disinfectant before reinstalling it back into its rightful place at the rear of the aircraft.

As we'd had enough epics for the day it was decided to call a halt and night stop. I was not impressed with Luanda and couldn't wait to get away from it. In fact I can't recall anything of that night there at all, just vague memories of wandering around the dingy place that evening.

February 5th 1964... More paraphernalia and officialdom preceded our departure and we were well shot of the place by the time we took-off. Our next port of call was a place called Cabinda; a small enclave of Angola but separated by the former Belgian Congo, and just a few miles north of where the mighty Congo River spilled into the sea. From now on it would mean coast-crawling for the whole of the way around Africa which will make navigation a whole lot simpler at least.

The flight was uneventful for the first part. We crossed the wide mouth of the swirling muddy waters of the Congo as it swept for miles out into the South Atlantic, and then we flew directly on, following the coastline to Cabinda. The weather was excellent and the airstrip, which was parallel to the coastline, looked as if it would be a relatively simple one to land on.

By this time, feeling rather sorry for poor Don not being able to do any of the flying, and in a moment of weakness, I suggested to Anne that maybe it wouldn't do any harm to allow him to do just the one landing with them on board. She was a bit reluctant but trusting my judgement finally

agreed as I had already convinced her that the next landing would be very easy. It was going to be a straight-in approach in light-wind conditions, which under normal circumstances should not have presented any problems. Unfortunately he flared a bit too high and then bounced the aircraft all the way down the runway, corkscrewing from side to side in an effort to keep straight, finally screeching to a halt. I was powerless to assist him as the Rapide has only one pilot's seat up front. I decided to take over at that point and taxi back myself, thinking that maybe we'd better leave the practice landings until we'd all arrived safely back in England!

We cleared the usual formalities at Cabinda, including Customs and Immigration as we were now about to depart from Portuguese territory, and soon we were airborne again enroute to Libreville. So far so good; our unexpected arrivals without prior clearances hadn't seemed to bother anyone. Possibly because of Don's excellent stock of generously endorsed 'Gen Decs' it seemed to do the trick and satisfy them!

Still following along the coastline, we passed places like Port Gentil on the way. Just before Libreville we passed over the equator. I could see from the map on my knee the exact point on the coastline where we crossed it and relayed the information back to the girls, but they didn't appear to be very impressed – or probably didn't understand the significance of it. Had we been at sea it would probably have entailed participating in the ancient ceremony of 'crossing-the-line' but not much chance in our tiny cramped aircraft! A hundred miles or so off to our left, out over the Atlantic Ocean, lay the zero-zero mark where the Greenwich Meridian and the Equator intersect.

We were once again entering into the Northern Hemisphere.

We were refused permission to land at the main airport of Libreville due to it being under the control of the United States Airforce at the time, and were directed to a smaller field quite near to the coast. This didn't bother me unduly because the further we stayed away from officialdom the better I liked it! We were made most welcome on arrival by everyone and formalities were kept to a minimum. It seemed that our policy of flannelling our way in and out of these various countries seemed to be working. We adopted a cheerful attitude with the officials in order to divert attention away from any awkward questions, making sure that Anne and the girls were conspicuous all the time as decoys to keep their interests alive. So far everything was working according to plan. I wondered secretly just how much longer our luck would hold out?

With adequate free time to spare, as we'd previously decided to night-stop there, we accepted a kind invitation by some German pilots we met, who were taking a curious interest in our ancient 'string bomber' biplane, the likes of which they had never seen before, to have a drink at the outside bar on the airfield before proceeding to the hotel. Don wasn't too keen on their company and made it quite apparent that he didn't care very much for German pilots, having no doubt met a few in combat during the war whilst serving in the RAF. Most of them had been in the German Luftwaffe as fighter pilots it seemed. Now they were flying Piper Tripacers on crop-spraying operations, but having finished for the day they decided on a beer or two before going home. I was all too ready to join with them to quench my thirst, and was delighted to see British beer available on draught to which I most readily partook of a couple

of pints at their insistence. Don stayed silent whilst I drank their health and listened to their shop talk. Being ex-Luftwaffe pilots from the recent war, one that I was unfortunately too young to participate in at the time (albeit on the receiving end of their attacks on London, but no hard feelings now) I was very interested to hear their version of those past events. Then one of them in particular told me a most fascinating tale.

First of all he asked me where in England we had flown from, and when I told him he said '*Jah! Jah! I know zee Biggin Hill – I vos shot down near there and spent zee rest of zee var as a prisoner*'... I was all ears! He then gave me a most astonishing account of what happened.

He'd been an Me 109 fighter pilot escorting the German Bombers during their attacks against the main fighter airfield of Biggin Hill (our home base), which was the leading fighter base employed for the defence of London. On arrival over the target, whilst the German bombers were unloading their destructive cargo on the unfortunates below, they were pounced upon by a flight of Spitfires and were instantly involved in a fierce dogfight. He then went on to explain that coming all the way from their home base in Abbeville in Northern France, their limited fuel endurance gave them barely fifteen minutes of combat time before they were forced to break-off the engagement and head back home to avoid running out of fuel. This was mistakenly (or intentionally to boost our civilian morale) interpreted as cowardice by the British media at the time, but today I can well believe their predicament with the severely limited fuel load they had.

I have met numerous ex-Luftwaffe pilots during the course of my flying career and never once

have I ever doubted their great courage in the face of overwhelming odds and, patriotism aside, would rank them at par with the finest of fighter pilots on our side of the Channel.

During the fierce engagement with the Spitfires he soon ran out of ammunition, and getting low on fuel, he broke off the engagement and dived for safety and home... or so he had hoped!

Suddenly two Spitfires were on his tail firing madly and chewing bits and pieces of his plane away from under him. The instrument panel exploded in front of his face and the canopy disintegrated above him as he dived for the ground with the throttle hard against the stop, crouching low in his seat. Pieces of his wings started disappearing as their bullets relentlessly tore into his doomed fighter. By now he was far too low to try and bale out so he attempted to crash-land his battered and crippled fighter into a corn field instead. But he was going far too fast and as he hit the ground he bounced off again skimming over a line of trees bordering the field. His stricken fighter, which by this time was just a heap of bent metal completely out of control, miraculously went careering between two larger trees as it struck the ground again, ripping both wings off in the process! His aircraft, or what was left of it by now being merely a bullet-ridden fuselage with a stationary bent prop and tailplane, continued hurtling along the ground, ploughing a furrow through the cornfield, until it finally came to a smoking stop in the middle of the following field. Fearing being roasted alive in case it caught fire, he unbuckled himself rapidly and leapt out, fortunately for him completely unscathed, and began walking across towards a farmhouse some distance away. Half-way there he was met by a group of angry pitchfork-wielding farm workers who, having witnessed the whole event, came

rushing towards him, goading him with his hands upon his head, in the direction of the farmhouse, relieving him of his pistol in the process. In the meantime, the two Spitfires were performing ‘victory rolls’ overhead the scene. He held me totally enthralled and wide-eyed relating this story to me but then said in an excited high-pitched voice, “do you know what they did when they got me to the farmhouse”? As an immediate reaction, without dwelling too much on what came out, I retorted “made you a cup of tea”? “Jah! Jah! - deh actually made me a cup of tea”! he said incredulously. He couldn’t fathom out even then as he recounted the tale to me some twenty five years after the event, the intricacies of the British mind!

Shoreham Aircraft Museum. Whilst I was having a quiet drink at the bar awaiting my evening meal to arrive, I recounted this tale to the friendly barman.

An old chap sitting on a barstool a few feet away overheard my conversation and chipped in to say that he remembered the incident well. He claimed to be one of the farm workers at the scene who’d ‘pitch-forked’ the German pilot into the farmhouse. He then confirmed everything I said to be absolutely true... What a truly small world this is!

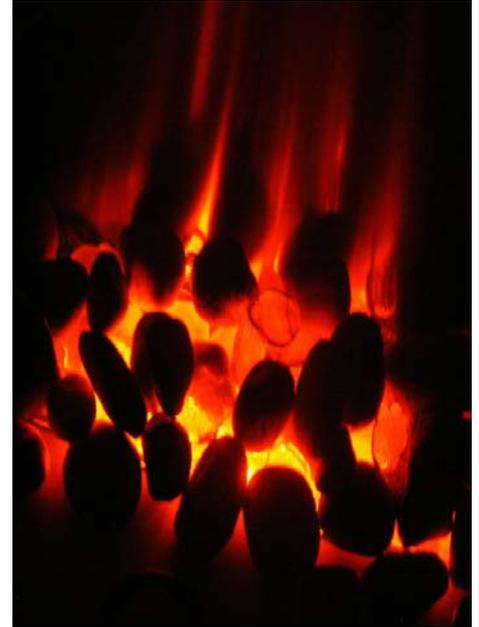


The final episode of this wonderful African journey will continue in the Bugle issue 107 of January 2014

THE EDITOR, meanwhile has been gathering lumps of coal from the electric railway tracks around the locality during the hours of darkness.

It is safer during this time, as there are too many trains in the hours of daylight, think safety.

He now has ample coal stocks for a raging fire throughout the Xmas period.



This amazing event took place near the quaint old village of Brasted, not too far from Churchill’s home at Chartwell in Kent. One day, about twenty years on from meeting this German pilot, I happened to be staying at the White Heart hotel at Brasted.

H.LILLEY & CO BIGGIN HILL



Suppliers of Plumbing and Electrical equipment to the local builders. They always produce a good window display each Xmas.

With the ever continuing miserable damp weather we have all suffered of late he says he will be quite comfortable sitting by a roasting fire toasting his feet and the odd crumpet on a long fork and a few cans of festive beer at arms length.



This very pub featured prominently during the ‘Battle of Britain’ and many a famous ace left his signature on a blackboard there, a copy of which has been preserved and still adorned the wall then. I believe the original is now in