

A Jolly Little Caper – by Brian Milton

I was phoned by a blind man at 11 o'clock on a Sunday evening in early March, 2007, still winter, and asked: 'Can you be my sighted pilot on a flexwing microlight flight from London to Sydney, leaving at nine o'clock tomorrow morning?'

I had taken a few glasses of wine by that time.

'I'll think about it' I replied

The caller was Miles Hilton-Barber – MHB - the famous English adventurer whose father had been a crack Rhodesian fighter pilot, but Miles had lost his own sight 25 years earlier.

I had known him briefly a few years back when he had started out on this wheeze, trying to find the money to make a flexwing microlight flight from London to Sydney. His 'sighted' pilot back then had been Storm Smith, a man who looked the archetype of an English hero, tall, slim, fair, good-looking, plausible. Storm had dined at my table, and his pretty epic microlight flight from India to England in 1998 had been overshadowed by my microlight flight around the world in the same year.

Two days before Miles called me, Storm had phoned to say thanks for the book I had written on the world flight – *Global Flyer* – which covered half his route to Australia. I had been expecting the two of them to soar away the following morning from the famous World War Two RAF fighter station at Biggin Hill, to share the flying across Europe, the Middle and Far East to Australia. Storm gave me no indication at the time that he was going to rat on MHB.

Then at just eleven hours notice, 10 o'clock that Sunday evening, Storm told MHB that he wasn't going ahead with the flight!

On paper, Storm was a sponsor's dream. The actuality was something else. He may have cited family reasons, though he had been on holiday with his family until a week before the scheduled take-off.

MHB was shattered.

So, I was to learn, were the two good-looking girls, Joanna Conlon and Sophie Consett from the sponsors, Standard Chartered Bank. They worked for the 'Seeing is Believing' campaign to raise \$1 million for the blind in the Third World, and had invested so much of their careers in getting this epic flight to work.

But MHB was not so shattered as to despair.

He phoned me.

I had recently ended twenty months with no income, using up all my reserves and savings, and some of the projects I had cast upon the waters were beginning to come to life. They demanded daily attention. I told MHB I would think about his request, put down the phone, thought for just two minutes, and phoned former world champion Richard Meredith-Hardy – RMH – first man to fly a microlight over Everest.

His wife Nikki told me later they were both slumped, half asleep, in front of the TV at that hour of the night, that it was she who checked the answering service and found my message. For a moment she looked at the slumbering bearded

vastness of RMH and thought, 'all I have to do is delete this message and we won't be disturbed'.

She didn't do that, RMH phoned, I told him I might still do the whole flight myself, but if I didn't, was he interested? He was.

I phoned MHB back immediately and told him that, one way or another, I could *guarantee* he had a sighted pilot.

The following day RMH took a delayed train to my home in Bethnal Green and we both drove down to Biggin Hill to meet the shattered team. MHB was there, still whispering on the phone as he does, and the two girls from SCB, Joanna Conlon and Sophie Consett. They were in a state of shock, but not hysterics. Storm was also there. He knew as soon as he saw my face that I really hated what was happening. We said hello but didn't shake hands – I hadn't realised I was so transparent – and we looked the aircraft over.

It was a mess of wires and unfinished business.

RMH snorted and began making disgusted grumbling noises at the sight of all the loose wires and bits on the aircraft – a beautiful P&M flexwing Quik 450 GT. RMH, an Old Etonian, is one of the world's greatest microlight pilots, but he seems to specialise in looking particularly scruffy, like Pigpen in the Snoopy cartoons. That morning, having spilled coffee down his T-shirt on the way to Biggin Hill, we had to find him a clean sponsor's shirt when we went to meet the girls, so as not to frighten them. RMH still looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards.

I could hardly have looked better. At the age of 64m, I had 15 years on RMH. Would you buy a used adventure from these men?

There, in the airport lounge, introduced by MHB and his organiser Jon Cook, I went through a song and dance act to convince Joanna in particular that we could rescue the flight and make it happen. She aroused my admiration because of that great Hemingway quality, 'grace under pressure'. There were no hysterics. She had dealt closely with one microlight pilot who had let her down dreadfully; why should she believe others of the same ilk?

It was obvious we had to make a case to keep the project alive. Storm didn't join us, but hung around on the fringes. The girls had mind problems dropping him, wanting to include him still, despite his behaviour.

At one time Joanna wondered whether Storm could fly a stage.

I vetoed that.

'What if he said yes?' I asked.

Who knew what he would do?

Between us, RMH and I set about reassuring the girls, and gradually, boasting as little as we could get away with, we convinced them to consider us.

Joanna finally asked RMH if he would go. I was confident he would say yes.

Then, to my consternation, he said he needed an extra week to help his daughter through her 0-level exams before he left.

I could hear the two girls saying 'Awwwww'.

Joanna turned and asked me to fly the first week, leaving in two days time, to get to Cyprus, while RMH did his fatherly duty!

Against all my convictions – I had flown only 10 minutes experience flying a GT 450, I had never flown their aircraft, I didn't know how to work half the equipment, I had done no route research, I was not the steely-eyed, square-jawed hero I wanted to be – I said yes.

RMH spent the afternoon tidying up the microlight, but no dinghy could be fitted, and there were hundreds of miles of sea to cross. I saw Storm at the edges still, but was not inclined to speak to him. He knew this. He left and some time later I found he had taken the aircraft's radio with him. MHB phoned him and I took the phone and Storm's first words were, 'so you're talking to me now?'

'Why did you take the radio?' I asked.

'It's my radio.'

'What did you think we would use?'

'Haven't you got a radio?'

'Not configured to this aircraft. Mine's the old A-20, which I like and prefer, but it's not set up for this aircraft.'

He felt no guilt at what he had done. I thought it was extraordinary that Storm could not see how dreadful his behaviour was. He had already tried to walk off with his flying suit 'as a souvenir'; what would his replacement have used?

That night the local instructor at my microlight club in St Albans, Jay Madhvani* drove more than 20 miles through the rain from his airfield in St Albans with a toolkit, tie-downs, and one of his spare radios.

'Anything at all you want,' he said, 'let me know'.

(*Jay was killed within the month)

I spent Tuesday renewing batteries, collecting gear, making sure the cameras worked, writing, cancelling dates and brooding fearfully.

The fact was I had only a tiny one-flight experience on this type of aircraft, so it would virtually be a maiden flight on a GT450. I had never flown with Miles, and learned he had had only 4 hours with Storm anyway, for which I blamed Storm. I had no intention of letting Miles touch the controls until the bottom of Italy, after he had demonstrated to me that he could fly, in which case he could do the 100-mile water crossing without hitting anything. Would I have to test a theory that he's better at cloud flying than I am, because he can't see it? Probably.

I hoped I had enough to go with. I resolved to take the wimp's route over the Alps, rather than go into them in the middle of the day, that is, down the Rhone Valley, under the airspace around Cannes, and over the 4,000 feet mountains north of Genoa. I hoped the Italians were reasonably hospitable.

Tuesday, March 6th, 2007 - 8.10pm - In a Croydon hotel after a nightmare journey from Biggin Hill, following Jon Cook by car through soul-less streets. Quite bad tempered. Some Eastern European girl at the reception didn't know about credit cards so I had to advance £61.00 in cash against Jon's credit card, and wait for him to redeem it.

Long tangled day, telling people I was off, cancelling appointments to do with a biography called 'The Last Jobber' I was writing on the City trader, Brian Winterflood. I had not eaten since a smelly kipper this morning at 0900.

Part of me thinks I just have to set off and go each day as far as I can. Not sure yet how much of a drag Miles will be, but suspect he will be a genuine drag. He has done nothing so far on the flight, and it's difficult to see what he can do. People are shocked at Storm Smith's behaviour, including Jim Cunliffe, the man who built his aircraft.

Mr Smith is no longer one of us, of the Ancient Company of Adventurers. I am apprehensive about the adventure, yet it is well within my powers. It's because of the lack of preparation, having to run to catch up. I have plotted my own route across Europe, and will give the co-ordinates in the air to Miles. I may have to do my own co-ordinates on my back-up GPS in the air as well. It's 90 miles to Le Touquet, and that should give me an idea of my general speed. After that I will avoid Paris by heading for Troyes, Macon, and then east of Lyons down the Rhone Valley. Don't fancy going over the Alps at all, never mind it being cold, as RMH says. He would do it in the early morning. I want to get to the mediaeval city of Carpentras by tomorrow night, and then go along the Mediterranean coast and over the Alps north of Genoa, where it's only 5,000 feet, descending into the Milanese plain and then coasting down south as far as I can get.

Wednesday, March 7th - 0457 hrs - Sitting in the Stalag Luft 3 atmosphere of the Travelodge in Croydon, a nightmare vision of the future as planners envisage it. When RMH turned up last night, allegedly 2 minutes walk from the railway station, he had been wandering the shiftless streets for 20 minutes until finally returning to the station and ordering a taxi. He immediately sank 3 beers, as I had on arriving here. I know that's going to be how I will feel in the coming evenings.

I am not in the best state of mind to fly a blind man 2,400 miles to Cyprus. Miles has had four hours experience using experimental technology which will enable him to fly a flexwing microlight. It would not help him fly a 3-axis. He can, and I have to test this theory, only fly because the aircraft itself, though physical to fly, is also benign. But apparently the yaw side of this system doesn't work, which means he doesn't know if his wings are level. I am told it would help to play this down in public, and of course I will, but we are not going into the Alps, which has killed more pilots than the number of porkies told by this Government, surely the most dishonest for 300 years, with Miles in the front seat.

I cannot help but get into a raging fury over Storm Smith, and the dilemma he has left this benign sponsor - though one with illusions, yet good and noble illusions, worthy ones - and Miles himself, a good and driven man.

He has had this dream of flying a microlight to Australia for 4 years. I failed to find him a sponsor, and Storm got him one. But what do you call a man - who wrote me a letter objecting to being cold-shouldered - who brings such a project to within 12 hours of it happening, and then backs out?

One word that occurred was See You Next Tuesday.

RMH thought that was being too generous.

I went to bed and immediately to sleep at 11pm last night, and woke at 2am, my mind full of rage still, and questions about my own competence. I have not prepared for this flight. We got a radio, after Storm walked off with the one on the

microlight - 'It's my radio!' - but I have not put in the first 15 radio frequencies I need. I have arbitrarily chosen a route, avoiding the high Alps, even though that's the quickest - but coldest, and I have no heated waistcoat - way to Italy. I hope to make it as far as the bottom of the Rhone Valley - Carpentras - that Keith Reynolds and I stayed in on our first test flight - but that would leave me a clear run east along the Med coast to get to eastern Italy.

I told Miles last night he had to learn in the air. We are going to get almost twice the flight time today that Storm Smith gave him in all the months of preparation. I said that, if necessarily, I will drag him across Europe, and he can learn *willi nilli*. I will trust him with the controls when he has convinced me that he can, indeed, fly. Storm left me a note which, aside from playing hurt at my attitude, told me not to drag Miles anywhere, and that he knew how to fly. Whatever judgement he once had, it isn't worth anything now. But that attitude of mine comes from an age before Jade Goody and Tony Blair, when people actually took responsibility for their behaviour.

Can I make this happen?

Can I get Miles to Cyprus safely, in 6 days, even if I push it?

What physical weaknesses will come out in me after I push hard for a few days, with no recent training, no preparation, having to ignore half the high-powered modern kit and put on my own more simple 10-year-old GPS's?

Will RMH have a sense of urgency then and greet me, or will I be forced to fly on into Syria and the Saudi Desert?

How will the Syrians react?

And how will I react to being threatened?

I had a text message that woke me at 2 am from Senga Bradie, a pilot who has experience of flying microlights in Zimbabwe, protecting rhinos from local poachers. In her insightful way, she has let her imagination go to where I am actually going, discovered the same fears within herself, and texted me about them. I wish I knew how to turn off the noises the mobile phone makes, so it just shivers or vibrates or whatever it does, silently.

Bring back the 19th century, I say. Bring back runners with cleft sticks.

I have brought with me, as the mandatory book to read on down-time days - which I hope never happen - '*The Lunatic Express*' by Charles Miller, a brilliant account - I am 50 pages in - of the building of the East African railway from Mombasa to Kampala. Miller is, or was, I don't know if he is still alive, a man who thought, as I do, that the British Empire was broadly a force for good, and what is replacing it in Africa - why should the Chinese care? - is barbarism. The Chinese will ruthlessly take all the mineral wealth of Africa and leave just small traders in return, the new Lebanese.

I know that somewhere on this journey there will be nothing to do but retreat into myself and join another world, as I did on my big flights. It may be a function of age.

Just had breakfast delivered. I told Miles not to drink too much, and I have already drunk two coffees and I am now drinking the orange juice. Never mind. We can pee our hearts out in Le Touquet, because then we will be on the road, and there will be no going back for Miles. It's either success, or an accident, and

even then I hope he finds the strength to continue. I just don't want the accident to be on my watch, though it's unlikely on the massively competent RMH's watch. I need to find a way to pack the gear that works, and that means I get on the road without bits trailing along behind me. It's just 90 minutes until the hangar doors open and my fellow reptiles (reporters) turn up as we bustle around trying to go. I wonder if any of them will actually realise what has happened?

Thursday, March 8th - 0530 French time - In a cheap hotel in Macon at the top of the Rhone Valley, about 30 miles north of Lyons, where the first man to fly to Australia from England - Ross Smith - got to on his first day in 1919. I haven't looked out of the window, but I hope the rain has cleared. I am expecting fog anyway.

The previous day started early. I was down in the hotel reception awaiting RMH on time, 0545, and we found our way along bleak and wet Croydon streets to the Whitgift car park, where we learned the fiction of the hotel claim that car parking came with staying overnight at the Travelodge. It took a precious 5 minutes of 'debate' with a disembodied West Indian before I put my credit card in the right way and was robbed of another £7.00.

Jon Cook was on the phone, waiting for us a mile away in his own car. We drove to Biggin Hill, were greeted by Joanna Conlon and Sophie Consett, and I concealed my uneasiness by trailing along behind them and then walking off to vomit. I had eaten no breakfast, so at first nothing came up, then the previous night's hamburger - bits of it - appeared, and I was able to recover. I think this was nerves. It had not happened at the beginning of previous adventures.

No one saw me.

RMH and I set about the aircraft, RMH being as colourful as ever in his comments on the hotchpotch and untested wiring, and we managed to get bits attached to the microlight. Outside, there was low cloud and spotty rain, altogether unprepossessing. TV cameramen - I couldn't see any newspaper men - turned up, and MHB did his song and dance about 'Seeing is Believing' and said all the right things. My apprehensions about my own fitness for this job went away, I joined in the song and dance, though honest about not having flown the aircraft, and it was obvious that no searching questions were being asked. It was 'soft' news.

By 0845 RMH had got us into the aircraft, dramatised the door opening for the TV crews, pushed us out on to the tarmac, and we were ready to go.

You have to be a pilot to know the significance of no flight plan filed, and no weather forecast. I had neither, partially because I expected it to have been done. It was, after all, only 58 hours since that fatal phone call from MHB, and I had also had to sleep between frenetic preparations.

There was a lot of interviewing, and then everyone took photos, group shots of this or that, PR girls, airport staff and so on. RMH said he would cope with the flight plan. I could see blue sky coming from the west, I warmed the microlight up and we taxied to the threshold. RMH had already started the camera, and MHB was in media mode. With his hand firmly on the instructor bar, he did his piece to

camera as if, sitting in the front, I was only there to monitor his flying, and at 0900, I started the take-off.

The aircraft took a very long time to unstick, and jiggled about in the morning turbulence. It was not difficult to control, just different to anything I had flown. I circled once for the cameras, and we set off for Le Touquet in France. I climbed to 2,000 feet and wondered whether the large box on my knee, holding maps and known as the *lady's handbag*, was really suitable. I couldn't see half the instruments, and had already turned the cameras off in its blundering on my lap. We flew down the side of the previous weather system, black and misty to my left, clear and benign to my right. I tuned the radio into London Control, settled down, the flying was easy, and when we came to the coast, MHB grasped the bar again and did another piece to the right wing camera - I waved at the viewers - as we 'coasted out' (all useless gestures as the wimpy camera system did not work until RMH saw it the Middle East). We avoided the danger area of Dungeness atomic station, skirted out to sea, and with the usual nerves about single-engine flight over water - there had been no room for the dinghy - I headed for Le Touquet, MHB occasionally grasping the controls and sadly confirming that some bits of his steering system weren't working.

He couldn't fly a straight line.

I went through some cloud to get to France, which I don't like, but it was very quick - averaging 90 mph, amazing in a flexwing microlight - I landed in Le Touquet. I was in fast trim and we came down like a pregnant cow, though with no damage. We went through the formalities, someone there recognised me from 20 years ago and my first microlight flight to Australia, had a pee with me asking MHB not to drink - though I had to find him a sandwich - and when we wanted to set off again I found the GPS wasn't working.

There was no fiction in my mind about the GPS. It was not a back-up for me, it was the main navigation system, and I had not had time to programme a second GPS. Indeed, I had only decided the previous evening the route I was taking, which was not Storm Smith's route. I did not know how to work his GPS, and again, had had no time to learn.

I found the cigar plug on my GPS had collapsed through age and use, and after various trips across the tarmac, a lovely Frenchman called Jean-Jacques Dayez, of Opal Aero Services, went off and fixed the whole thing at no charge. I stewed in 3 flying suits and MHB whispered into his telephone. The aircraft looked overcrowded. Having landed at 1000 English time, it was only at 12.50 we were able to get away, with a cursory meteorology report.

The sky looked good, 2,000 foot cloud-base, and we headed down the 1914-18 Western Front, just to the south of Amiens, and taking a route further east from Paris air space than that chosen by Mr Smith. I climbed to 3,000 feet without my normal height fears, MHB was quiet in the back though always instant in response to any questions, and getting colder and colder as the afternoon progressed. We flew through a series of rain fronts. We always avoided the heaviest rain, I had the radio off anyway as I hate talking to ATCs, and hours went by. So far, I thought, so good. We've got away and the game has changed. Now we have to get miles of distance under our belts and see if we can restore

some of the time lost by Mr Smith's instant bout of LMF - Lack of Moral Fibre. The weather started to change.

We had flown past Troyes, 180 miles from Le Touquet, and set off on the 145 miles to Macon, when I noticed darkness to the west, where the weather was coming from. As we entered the top of the Rhone Valley, there were ominous clouds heading our way. I don't usually mind about rain in an open microlight, the actuality of it is much less fearful than the thought of it, but our instruments, especially the radio I had borrowed, were open to the elements, and the prolonged rain did for my radio in the end. It got darker and more misty - I told MHB what was happening, but without alarming him - but he became concerned when I had to find my way over a low-flying danger area.

The first fast jet I saw looked like a grey hawk, quite close, I thought - I don't fly with my glasses on - and it was a few seconds looking at what I thought was a model aircraft before realising it was the real thing. In the next two minutes, three of these fast jet fighters tumbled by, chasing each other. I hoped they had not seen us and pulled the bar in to 'race' out of the zone at 80 mph. There had been no way of avoiding it, but because they flew low, I flew high, 3,500 feet, just under cloud-base. I had no height fears at all. Odd, that.

It started to rain in earnest, and I contemplated alternative landing fields. All those that appeared on my GPS looked tiny, and I feared being on a small deserted field in France as night fell, with no hangar and no one to help and MHB at the mercy of the elements. The rain smeared everything, and penetrated the radio, which crackled and acted up, and then stopped working.

The GPS said the estimated time of arrival - ETA - at Macon was 1712 hrs, and it was into a dark, misty, rainy valley that I first saw our destination. I slowed the wing down for this, my second landing, and to MHB's obvious relief, there was no bump. We taxied around a deserted airfield until arriving at the control tower, where there was a light on. A cheery Frenchman called Pierre Beaulieu, who spoke good English, greeted us - MHB had been clapping me on the back at relief at being alive, I suppose - and after guiding MHB to the toilet and then leaving him in a warm room, Pierre and I moved aircraft around in his small hangar until there was room for our own, and we drove off to find 70 litres of petrol. Pierre was the local flying instructor, and like all French flyers, instinctively kind to flyers from other countries.

He siphoned the fuel into the microlight - I had used the whole of the spare capacity tank, and it seemed to need 40 litres to fill it - and there was some overflow from the main tank. By now it was seriously dark, we were working by the lights of Pierre's car, and MHB was with us but perhaps on the phone. There was nothing he could do. I hoped that my wallet, which I think I left there, was still there when I get back this morning (it was).

Pierre left me the means to get to the aircraft, not locking gates as he usually did, and drove us to a nearby hotel, where my lack of a credit card became evident. MHB paid for rooms, Pierre went off to his impatient wife - she was on the phone, possibly cooking dinner - and, damp and soggy, I steered MHB to his room, agreed to meet in 40 minutes, and dragged my gear into my own simple room and set everything on charge. That's when I discovered one of my video cameras

didn't work, and I suspect the batteries - brand new but how does one go back to complain? - of not holding a charge. I also had a shower and stomped my dirty washing in the shower.

Dinner, my first meal in 24 hours, was simple, a salad, some fish, and an apple pie, accompanied by 3 beers which did much to relieve my tensions. MHB has his own communications, all, of course, in sound - his phone speaks to him, for example, and all his emails are verbal - and we had a pleasant if impatient supper. I went straight to bed at about 10 pm, but woke at midnight with violent cramp in both legs. It was the effect of sitting for hours in cold with the lady's handbag on my knees. In general, however tired I was, I did not sleep well. I know I have major problems. The radio may not work at all this morning. I have a spare, but its format is different, and I am not sure I can adapt it. Without a radio we are in difficulty. I also think the wimpy arrangements to video the flight had been ruined by the treatment I gave it, just fitting the two of us into the microlight. I have to get MHB safely to Cyprus and the ministrations of RMH without too much damage.

MHB told me of the central and courageous role of Joanna Conlon in the way the flight was put together, in which she acted contrary to all my experience of women and lone adventurers. Normally, if there's a woman involved in the process of raising sponsorship, chaps like me lose, they can't take the chance on us. It's a subject that comes up at beery meetings of other chaps like me, the Dutch adventurer Eppo Numan, for example, first man to fly the Atlantic by microlight. Women ask rational questions to which the lone adventurer has no reply. Joanna may be different. It makes my responsibilities even more arduous. My son James phoned on my mobile, surprised I was already in France.

I hope to be able to get away before 0900. It's 0620 now, and I have to find a way of packing my gear and ensuring I have enough dry clothes to stay warm. It was cold yesterday, and I shivered most of the last hour into Macon.

Statistics: I took off at 0900 from Biggin Hill on Wednesday, landed in Le Touquet at 1000. Took off again from Le Touquet at 1250, landed Macon, 1715. Total distance, about 400 statute miles, the same as Keith Reynolds and I did on the first day of my 1998 world flight, but much faster.

Friday, March 9th - 0510 - In a small town called Romans Saint Paul in the Rhone Valley in SE France, having flown 81 miles yesterday in 55 minutes in a weight-shift microlight, touching 117 mph at times.

Glad I am to be alive.

MHB is coming to the same conclusion, though because he's blind that's coming out of discussion of what happened, tangling with the infamous *Mystral*.

For the record, we took off at 1050, landed 1145, in a 40 knot crosswind.

I ran a few minutes late yesterday because of setting the alarm at just 0500, and today I woke at 0445. We had a French breakfast - MHB has three helpings of baguette, he eats like a horse, but drinks orange juice and not coffee - and we get to the airfield at 0800 by taxi, cost 20 euros. I find my lost wallet immediately,

which is a relief, and I discover the radio appears to work, having dried out a bit. I carry it in my pocket while I get into a flying suit and stomp off to find the Meteo. The forecaster sucks his teeth and tells me that 60 miles south, 20 miles past Lyons, the *Mystral* is starting, a cold north wind that allegedly makes more widows than smoking, and even birds don't fly in it.

'Quarante knots,' he says, '40 to 50 knots, and it gets worse during the day.' As ever, I tried to weasel a way through, not quite arguing with him - I remember one Russian forecaster on my world flight was driven to extremes of irritation because I didn't immediately accept her forecast - but I accepted this forecast, and went back to tell Miles we wouldn't fly that day.

Then Pierre Beaulieu turned up.

'All weather forecasters are poofers,' he said, 'it's been so ever since they failed to forecast a killer storm in 1999, and now they throw their hands up at a breeze.' He went to his computer and, 10 pieces of paper later, he had plotted me a route down past Valance, where he thought the winds would start to get dangerous. Then he said I should turn left up a steep valley and go into the high Alps! I knew about winds in mountains, and it was my turn to start sucking my teeth, but Pierre made a plausible case, and I cheered up. MHB, who lives in a world of his own, always on the phone, was up for anything, as ever. He had to place his trust in me, and if I would go, he would go. He doesn't have the sight to see the sky I was looking at.

As it happened, the sky looked benign, and we went through the process of getting into flying suits. I wore long johns, a vest, an electric waistcoat without the electricity, and three flying suits, along with two pairs of socks. These are too warm on the ground but it does get cold up there. I helped MHB into the microlight, plugged in whatever pieces of equipment I could find, pulled him out on the tarmac, and got in myself. I suffer from 'bootitis', in which I have to wiggle my left boot past so much equipment that the slightest change of angle means I cannot move at all. No good if we have to get out in an emergency, so let's make sure we don't have one.

I only have to fly another 1,800 miles to Cyprus, after all. The main job of getting MHB to Australia is RMH's, so long as he gives some time to his daughter to get her project ready for O-levels. I am just a jobbing pilot on this adventure.

I seem to be getting better at take-offs, she doesn't hang around on the ground as she first did, and once in the air, conditions were benign. We climbed to 2,500 feet, and I described the landscape to MHB so he had some idea of what was happening. There were high hills to the right, woods covered just 5% of the ground but the hills were forested, and the mighty Rhone River was on our left.

As Pierre advised, I followed the right side of the valley south, to find a way west around the Lyons control zone, which looked busy and mythical in the distance. Pierre had given me the lat/longs of various small airfields - a lifesaver, as it turned out - and I flew past Villefranche, long tarmac, and Lyons Brindas, a pretty little grass runway, and then flew east across the valley, crossing the river and Vienne Reventin, a tarmac runway next to a factory. It was misty in the distance, but we were flying at a spanking pace, touching 100 mph. That was exhilarating, and 45 minutes went by that way.

I was looking out for our next marker when MHB remarked - his sound system tells him about speed, direction, altitude, and so on, but not whether his wings are straight - that we seemed to have a huge increase in speed. Instead of averaging 90 mph, touching 100, we were averaging 105, touching 117mph. This was less exhilarating than frightening. We rushed into the mist, the blue sky disappearing, and hills coming out of the gloom. I had never seen names whiz by so quickly on my GPS. I went through a period of about five minutes justifying the weather conditions to myself - 'Pierre said it would get fast here but the valley is soon coming up' - but we seemed to go faster and faster, and I suddenly had that classic thought, 'better on the ground wishing I was in the air than in the air wishing I was on the ground.'

I was in the air wishing I was on the ground.

MHB kept asking what was happening? Nice sane comments, he was even excited at our speed. I became curt in my replies. I felt we were flying into a wall of mist, and once past the next airfield, Romans, I was not certain I could find the turn-point. There had been some doubt about its actual location, and I had thought it would be obvious to see, but conditions were such I now felt I could be sucked into the valley venturi around Montpelier, further south, and spat out, or crunched, by the violent winds.

It became crucial to actually find the airfield called Romans. I chased it down my GPS across wind, my speed not abating, dropping to within 500 feet of the ground, and racing over pretty undulating farmland heading for the flat valley itself. It was only when I was within half a mile of the field that I saw it, long, wide and grassy, better than being wiped off the tarmac like a lump of strawberry jam as some American poet put it. ('The death of the ball-turret gunner.')

It's odd what thoughts occur in such situations.

I told MHB I could see the airfield, told him it was a 40 mph crosswind, fingered the electric trim to slow the aircraft down while breathlessly hanging on to the control bar for a racing fighter turn into the wind - my last sight of my groundspeed on the GPS was still 110 mph - and lined up to land. I was expecting to get thrashed on the way in, the wind curling over the low buildings and trees to my left, but somehow that didn't happen, and we were down, racing over the ground - more 'bootitis', not quite in control of the accelerator in the tight confines of my feet - but then I braked, skidded left, taxied along the deserted buildings and found some shelter behind trees on a soggy part of the field.

When I got out, it looked like a normal day with a flying wind. It was only to the south, about 200 yards away, that I watched two teenagers with a parawing soar it into the sky and start making leaps of 10 to 15 feet into the roaring air. I walked out into the middle of the airfield and felt again that scary wind, and was thankful in that quiet way it happens, to be alive.

Throughout the rest of the day, Miles questioned me to find out the full extent of what had happened. He has said three times that he wishes the duff video was working so he could show other people what he is going through. I replied that he can explore all those experiences with the more technically accomplished RMH. I'd rather we had a peaceful life.

I headed off to what looked like a restaurant at the north end of the field, discovered it was full of lunching Frenchmen, went back to guide MHB there – his nose twitched, he likes his food - and we followed his nose through the door and a respectfully offered table. There MHB tucked into a pizza, and I looked for a safe place for the microlight, always my first concern. I can imagine how RMH would say - Plonker! - if I phoned to say I had dinked it.

The local Romans flying club was a few steps away, with three middle-aged people poring over paperwork, two men, one called Fred, and a woman - Madame President of the club - and they were kindness personified. Fred offered me the club hangar - he's the incoming club president in 10 days time - and a lift to a nearby hotel, and later, a lift back to the airfield in the morning. I drove the aircraft to the hangar, we shifted the four GA aircraft already there, I went back to eat most of a pizza - MHB ate the remainder - and we unpacked our luggage. I left my wet laundry, socks and shreddies and a shirt - to dry on the aircraft rigging, along with our flying suits. It was out of the wind, but surely dry enough to work (it wasn't).

Both MHB and I were weary. It had been a difficult few days, much worse for him, keeping faith with his dream, than for me. He lives in a permanent world of blackness, forever dependent on the rest of us for small things, yet aspiring to adventures that many sighted people would shy away from.

Fred dropped us at a nearby hotel - Hotel Karene - where we were greeted by a pretty woman, six months pregnant, and allocated rooms. MHB wanted to sleep for three hours, and I wanted to get all my navigation points into a separate simple GPS, and have some reserves in case more things went wrong. The single slender lead between my GPS and the aircraft power supply was the only link between us and getting lost. I needed at least 2 such leads. MHB, meanwhile, asked for sweeties, lots of sweeties, while I went out to look for batteries for the big GPS, and I found all we needed in a big supermarket nearby. Then I slept too for 70 minutes, had a bath, delivered the sweeties - MHB now wanted lots of bottles of coke, which I fetched - and then I did all my computer work.

It looks like we have 1,707 miles to go to get to Pafos in western Cyprus, including about 700 miles over water. I can hear the teeth-sucking from GA pilots at this news, but Amy Johnson did it without a GPS. That was back in the heroic days of GA flying; we in microlighting are still living in such days.

MHB is having real problems with his flying equipment, and with other technical bits. I checked the video of our take-off from Biggin Hill, but the camera had failed. I reset his video camera on charge, and checked my own equipment, finding my video camera now works. I must use it today. MHB wants to have all my turn-points in his own system, but his new keyboard isn't in Braille, and he wants me to put them in. I persuaded him that this can all be done in Cyprus, irritated that Storm had not done this before the flight started.

The more I look into what Storm did - or actually, didn't do - the more appalled I am. The markings on the maps he left behind when he legged it home, for example, have the route marked down to Foggia in southern Italy, but I am missing a map with the actual heel of Italy on it, including the two possible

departure towns of either Bari or Brindisi. A hundred miles of map is missing. From then on, I have the right maps, but they are not marked. It is as if he got to the bottom of Italy and, appalled at the prospect of so much flying to come, hundreds of miles of it over water, had just given up.

This was the theme of the dinner we had at the local Tex-Mex, great kind service but indifferent food. I questioned MHB closely about how his adventure had started, and why - and how - Storm Smith was involved. Why was so little training done? There were problems with the equipment. In the two days with me, MHB had done 50% more flying than all the months with Storm leading up to the adventure. I talked to RMH in England by phone - a mobile is a revelation to me, though I hate the way it can dictate one's life - and he, too, was raging at what he had found. The simplest things had not been done. This was not the fault of the sponsor, Standard Chartered, nor the organiser - Jon Wood - and nor of MHB. It came down to the trust they had placed in the judgement and commitment of Storm Smith.

To say that was found wanting is a terrific understatement.

The personal edge to my fury came from the thought that the few of us who go for adventures need people like Standard Chartered, and to realise that one of our number had so betrayed the unwritten covenant between sponsor and adventurer was galling. I wanted to assure Joanna Conlon, the link between us and SCB that almost all of us were not like Storm Smith. Both Paul Loach of GT Global, and Terry Pryce of Dalgety, who had sponsored me in the past, had a secret knowledge that I was going to come back from the adventure they had backed, with my shield, as Paul put it, or on it. Keith Reynolds had at least got halfway around the world on our world flight before blowing it. Storm Smith had not even started!

MHB told me it was the second time this had happened, but after the first time Storm had been so plausible about why he had given up that MHB had believed him.

'Please don't believe him a third time,' I pleaded.

There was a red sky last night. I will, of course, get a better forecast than this, but the old-fashioned forecast was re-assuring.

Charles Miller's 'The Lunatic Express' which I am reading in the down-time days I knew we would have, is perfect. Those wonderful Victorian explorers in Africa, who got by and survived hostile tribes on stoicism and bluff, give me great heart. I know I am just a temporary part of MHB's noble feat, but I delight in returning to the atmosphere that has dominated parts of my life. Today I have to find a way through the high Alps to the Mediterranean coast, to get into Italy with all my paperwork attached, and to race for the Adriatic coast.

Will we make it?

Will events conspire to stop us?

Storm's lunatic timetable has got in the way.

How did he expect to get to Amman in Jordan in 6 days, for example, with a blind man as a co-pilot, when Keith Reynolds and I took 8 days, flying every day, to make the same journey? Keith and I aspired, however temporarily in Keith's case, to the greatest feat in microlighting, the first world flight in a tiny flexwing.

We could swap about, me flying one day, he the next, so I had no responsibility for crossing the Alps (to my relief).

Storm could not do that with MHB, yet that was his judgement.

An embarrassment.

Saturday, Mar 10th, 0630 Late but then we have problems here in Forli in north-east Italy.

In Romans in the Rhone Valley on Friday morning, Fred was there, as expected, to pick MHB and me up at 0730, looking at a lovely blue sky day, but I soon discovered that the *Mystral* still lurked to the south, where I wanted to go. Fred recommended going straight down the valley into the venturi around Montpellier; I am glad I gently ignored his advice.

It takes ages to get ready. MHB wants photos of everything, they are his solid proof of achievement, and though he has never seen a video, he is aware of their power. I interviewed him on my single working camera, and later, when I took some in-air shots in a benign period, he was really happy. He would only have been happier had I chosen to ignore fighting for our lives at other times and used the video then. The wimpy gear he has lies useless under my legs, the first of many victims of the attrition of long-distance microlight flying.

We got away at 0910 into a fresh north breeze, headed south, climbing, and I was astonished to see, once more, 117 mph ground speed. That's a 47 mph following wind, and we were some way yet from the venturi, when I could expect a wind of twice that speed. We headed for Aubenasson, a tiny airfield at the bottom of a valley taking us at right angles left into the high alps, and my mouth was dry with apprehension as I turned left in this gale and felt my way along the right side of the mountains. MHB was chirrupy with delight at just being in the air - he claps me on the back with joy occasionally - but although none of my height fears have returned so far to haunt me, I was fearful of climbing too high to catch the wind above which could trash us into a pulp. So far, so good, I repeated, remembering the optimist falling from a 100 storey building, as he passed the 37th floor.

The first existential decision was to take a chance and climb over a 4,000 foot ridge, and so avoid a huge loop in the valley I was following. I would like to say it was a brave decision to do it - we cleared the ridge by just 100 feet - but the fact that I eliminated the need to spend a further 20 minutes flying the loop was the clincher. The mountains rose around us, only one with snow on its peak, the genuine high Alps being over to our left. Still, it was difficult enough, inside that still place, knowing winds were howling behind and above us, and I was alive to every passing moment. We headed for Aspres, a small village at the junction of three valleys, following the one road through the area. It was only with a dawning realisation at how the road builders had solved their final problem that I saw what I had to do. I followed the road into a blind valley where it wiggled furiously, seeking a way to climb, and I climbed with it on full power, again above 4,000 feet and fearful of the different weather on the other side of the ridge. I knew, instinctively, it would be different, and was close going over the top - no more than 50 feet high - anticipating being whacked on the other side. This happened,

but only for 15 seconds, clinging on as we were banged around, pulling the throttle back, being curt to MHB's queries about what was happening. We flew down into the new valley, now over the watershed; I could see that rivers headed south direct for the Med, rather than west into the Rhone.

Conditions became benign over the next stage to Chateaux Arnoux, which I remembered from a 2-hour flight in cloud - I couldn't see my wingtips then and I had no blind flying instruments - 20 years earlier, practicing for my own microlight flight to Australia. I never saw the ground. But looking at it today, it is lean and Spartan. MHB took the controls for a while as I videoed the scene. He has a tendency, without knowing whether his wings are level, to get into great oscillations, which I calmed with one hand while filming with the other. The sun shone brilliantly, our ground speed dropped to match our airspeed, and we punted south, trying to find a way to avoid an Army testing ground which, when in use, is said to be full of explosions. I opted to fly two sides of a triangle, due south to Vinton, then due east to Fayence, rather than the hypotenuse of that triangle, direct to Fayence, which would have put us in amongst the Army hardware. In this way we arrived on a dry grass airfield full of gliders and demands I speak French on the radio. I kept quiet finding my way into what I felt, and it transpired, was a downwind landing. The wind was in the process of changing at that time.

I stomped off in my moon boots and three flying suits to try and find petrol - 50 litres of LL95 - and met the delightful Giselle, a middle aged lady with pretty eyes like Shirley Maclean. MHB talked to a local teacher called Pierre who flew microlights in his spare time but had never visited Italy, 30 miles away. More photos taken, more wrestling with gear, and I used MHB's phone to file a flight plan to Forli in the east of the Milanese plane, which means another crossing of the Alps, though not the high Alps.

We got away in a skidding take-off over rough ground before 1 o'clock, climbed in bumpy conditions heading east, and flew over the capitalist splendour of Cannes and Monte Carlo. I shouted 'capitalist bastards!' a couple of times - there were so *many* of them - but of course, I'm a capitalist bastard myself, to my fingertips, and any leanings to the Left I had when young were because I was young.

MHB wanted guidance on taking photos, over my right shoulder was the best, at the shimmering sea, the yachts - so many tied up, so few actually out there - and we found our way east into Italy, where working class terraced housing appeared; odd, the contrast between the wealthiest people in the world separated by 20 miles from *hoi polloi*, both looking at the same sea.

The radio worked, at the time, clear communications, and I fantasised about the French ATC voice, thinking she cared about us because we were so small, though she was just doing her job. As we moved along the French coast the radio crackled and made other noises, and the flying conditions deteriorated. The sky still looked the same but the wind behaved differently. I was irritated at being banged around as we headed past Albenga for Genoa. Over the sea, flying conditions should be smooth. Why were we being bumped around so? Irrationally, I blamed Albenga, where a one-armed man had detained Keith

Reynolds and I on a world practice flight 10 years earlier, claiming we had to prove - by official faxes from England - that we were a legal aircraft. Thinking such thoughts about villains like that helps to while away the time.

The ATC at Genoa started to bully me. I was not able to understand why, but it's common with ATC and microlights. I gathered we could not enter Genoa air space, even though we had a transponder to identify us automatically. I can't stand being bullied. I was only heading for Genoa because I wanted to get over the lower mountains behind that city on to the Milan Plain. Instead of explaining, I saw some low mountains north of Savona, possibly as good as the mountains behind Genoa, and turned left into them, first ignoring the irritated queries of Genoa ATC - there was no other traffic, so he had the time - and then turning the radio off. I had a captain's responsibility for my companion and my aircraft, and arguing with irritable Italians wasn't helping.

We weaselled our way through the air, constantly straightening the wings, but it was quite benign thermal activity rather than deadly winds, heading NNW for a while - back home to England again - just to get to level ground. I was off one map, not yet on another, flying by instinct, watching the compass - which is rare when flying with a GPS which tells one all that information - intent on finding the quickest way out of high ground. I described the changing conditions to MHB - I give him a running commentary of the ground we fly over, so he can build it in his imagination. Occasionally I hand him the controls so I can fiddle with something, but he continues to oscillate. He apologises, but I am sympathetic anyhow. It is the sheer breadth of his ambition, a man blind for more than 20 years attempting to fly a microlight to Australia, that impresses me. What sighted person would opt to be with me in such conditions? Many would volunteer after a night's drinking, but reality would be another thing. My commentary on the passing conditions must help him.

We were headed for Parma, and the sun was behind my right shoulder when I spotted it, a large city with a tiny airfield. I wanted to tramp east to Forli because I had fond memories on my own England - Australia microlight flight, of a welcome there, adequate fuel, a good hotel and a superb pizza place. When you spend more than 6 hours in the air in a microlight, such things matter. We flew ESE, following the great road that goes from Milan down the east coast of Italy, past Modena and Bologna. I became concerned that the fuel transfer from spare tank to main tank wasn't working, and though we had adequate fuel to get to Forli, there was not a huge reserve. The sun was going down anyway when Forli came into view, and there I learned we were not welcome.

In the ensuing conversation - ATC asked, absurdly, if we knew the local area - I asked where he thought I should land? Anywhere, was the reply, in effect, as long as it was not there. I mentioned fuel, that triggered a response - regulations covered low fuel - so we were allowed in, but we circled for 10 minutes while the twice-daily Ryanair flight landed. We followed it in and taxied to a holding area, looking at two juicy empty hangars and hoping we could be in there quickly, and away for a beer and pizza. That was at 1730, after 4h40m of some occasionally difficult flying. It was not to be until 2100 that we partly achieved our ambition.

I do not want to bore you with the absurdities of Italian bureaucracy. Even New Labour bureaucrats are anarchists by comparison. The Italians we met were a handsome people with a clinging love of regulation, and we had contravened so many I lost count. I left MHB at the microlight for an hour while I listened to how criminal I was. There was utter astonishment when I said I had filed a flight plan for Forli, much blowing of lips and shrugs and claims they had not received it. Somewhere there's a piece of lost paper with my innocence on it. We were not allowed to use the hangars - insurance, allegedly - we couldn't go on to the grass to park - they didn't own the grass - everyone had gone home - where were our passports? A large handsome policeman turned up, but his mind appeared small. He compared everything I wrote with my official papers, having trouble matching the spelling of Hitchen - in Herts, I was born there - with the way I had written Hitchen on the form he gave me. Later, showing him the aircraft, I had to demonstrate that the fuel was low, and find the official markings showing that the main tank carried 47 litres. I decided not to tell him about the spare tank, also empty (I think) because it would confuse him. They collected papers. When I showed him a website devoted to some of my adventures - www.brian-milton.com - they ran off copies of the front page.

I was at last allowed to taxi the aircraft to what they regarded as a safe place and rope it to the ground. I passed the empty hangars with scarcely a glance. I took what gear we needed last night. Elizabeth, chief bureaucrat, told me I may not be allowed to fly out of the airfield, but we could be forced to strip the microlight and tow it away.

Where? I asked.

She shrugged.

My whole case had to be sent to Bologna for discussion. They will decide. But it is Saturday, and there is no fuel available. Actually, there is fuel, but a NOTAM has gone out saying fuel would not be available for two days. I said we could use ordinary Mogas. Elizabeth looked a bit disappointed, though where I could get it I don't know. If we were allowed to fly out, they had to close and seal the whole airport, virtually make it sterile. That meant we couldn't leave until the two Saturday Ryanair flights went through, the second at 1030am.

I managed not to be rude, while MHB was like oil on water. He had been absurdly brave. While guarding the trike, he had heard the Ryanair Jet start up and begin to taxi. He had only the noise to guide him, but he was on his own and the microlight was at risk. He stood there, enveloped in darkness, alone and fearless, waving his long white stick, as the pilots of the Ryanair jet taxied by. What they must have thought, I don't know. It was one of the few occurrences last night that made me laugh.

We finally got a taxi to a hotel, no faffing around with showers, just in, pee, put out the damp washing to dry, and then down to the pizza place and three flagons of good beer and the best pizzas I have had for a long time.

It struck me last night that MHB doesn't swear. I have not heard him say a rude word, not even about Storm Smith, around whose absent head many rude words are buzzing. MHB's expression of amazement is not the disgusting 'awesome' of our American friends, but 'my goodness'. Tell him an amazing tale, and be

greeted by 'my goodness'. We are gradually swapping stories, but his life is still a mystery to me. I do approve of him though, greatly.

Standard Chartered want an estimate of when we will get to Cyprus. MHB is due at an important event in Jordan early next week, and SCB will stop the microlight flight, get MHB on an airliner to Amman, do the event, and fly him back afterwards. But I have to let them know how. The key is today. If we can get away from these tendrils, find some fuel, and beat it to the south of Italy, we're back in with a decent chance to give minimal disruption to their timetable. But RMH had to find me Italian microlight fields to land in. Microlights and GA flyers in Italy are quite separate. I know whose side I am on, that of a free people able to make decisions without constant scrutiny of the books.

Reminders to RMH

Find a key to open the Lynx intercom box

Seal on the main tank lid is duff

Number one oil pressure appearing on Flydat - remind RMH

Wing has developed a natural left turn, quickly.

Spare tank reading is awful.

Need a reminder when transferring fuel; forgetting could be fatal.

Bring spare magnetos

I have twice pressed the starter button and nothing has happened. Each time I turned the prop over and then the engine started. I don't know why.

Early engine runs like old man. Is this Avgas effect?

We use 73 litres for 5 hrs flying, that is 14.6 litres an hour

You need stickers as presents to locals.

Hand throttle doesn't stick, needs tightening.

Statistics: T/O Romans Saint Paul in France, 0910, 26 m to Aubenasson, 37m to Aspres, 34m Chateau Arnoux, 47m to Fayence on the other side of the Alps where we landed at 1110. T/O 1250 via the northern ATC zone around Nice - 42 miles - then 155m over the Italian Alps to Parma, then Forli 98m.

Those are the bald distances, but we had to fly a lot further to cope with the idiot Italian aviation authorities, who now have us in their grasp.

Total distance, 144m to Fayence, 297m more to Forli, grand total 441m in 6h30m, for an average speed of 68mph, very fast for a microlight. Compare this with the average 57mph which I achieved daily on the world flight.

Sunday, March 11th – 0520 - late out of bed because I turned off the main power source by accident.

I was apprehensive about the bureaucracy at breakfast in Forli with the constantly upbeat and hopeful MHB, who offered to mediate between a quick-tempered me and the authorities. But when we got a taxi to the airport, and - absurdly, considering all the electrical equipment we were carrying could be bombs - went through security - we were conveyed to Elizabeth's office to be told we could continue our flight. But she said, only after Ryanair had taken off at 1115, and then the whole airport had to be shut down.

Fuel was also available!

I taxied off to fill up with 70 litres, then taxied back to begin the long slow process of preparing to fly. MHB was driven up and left with me, and an excitable bloke called Max told me a dozen times, no less, that a *Notam* was to be issued to the whole world of Italian aviation to close the airport, and I must go away within the allotted 15 minute slot. I said I would go within a minute of the slot opening, after which he wouldn't see me for dust and small feathers. I took some photos of MHB waving his white stick at the Ryanair flight as it left, to illustrate his wonderful defiance the previous day, we struggled into our gear - MHB's flying computer was working, to his great joy - and true to my word, I took off at 1131, with the official warnings against landing at airports in Italy in a microlight whinging in my ears.

The weather started beautiful and thermic, so we bumped our way SE - course 120 degrees - heading down a long narrow V, us on one arm, the coastline with the Adriatic on the other, converging near Ancona. Our speed was disappointing, a headwind of 5/10 mph, and I was slightly worried about the fuel. The back tank has no way of being measured, which is absurd, and all endurance calculations were guesses. I thought we were on the limit trying for Brindisi, 408 miles away, but I was conscious of having to get MHB to Cyprus within 6 days and handing him over safely to RMH.

The scenery was quite pretty, foothills to mountains on our right, the coastal strip with rolling waves to our left, and I was pleased to see the wind start to change, to establish itself eventually as a slight tailwind. MHB was happy as Larry in the back, constantly checking air-speed, track, height, against what his sound system was telling him, and if my reading didn't match his, making arrangements in his navigation. He has no way of discovering if his wings are level, so he can get established in a turn before his system tells him about it. This causes him to oscillate over an increasing range until I set him straight again. He is very patient, and if I am less patient, it isn't personal, and I am learning.

We came to Ancona in about an hour, and I was shocked at the huge size of the airfield. I did not want to establish radio comms with them, because my experience is, Italian ATC bullies microlights. I set off into the foothills, anxiously peering left to get as far away from the airfield as possible, and relieved to find that the aircraft lined up to take off went the other way to us. That meant peering right to see if anyone was coming in to land. No one was, and we fled safely into the hills.

There was a line of clouds across the sky, separating it from the clear north to the murky south, and when we got under those clouds, we started to motor, seeing 90-95 mph ground speed, and passing over lovely hilltop villages, much like the French *bastides*, houses clustered together, able to defend themselves in street fighting. When I mentioned these to MHB, he wanted to be directed to take photos. He frets that he cannot get pictures home because I am not adept enough at digital cameras, or at least, his sophisticated machine, to edit the pictures on the screen, but he takes pictures constantly when I do point the camera for him. I take pictures of him, and one or two of me, with my camera. I

do look a bit weather-beaten, but that may be the effects of age as much as the weather.

By two hours into the flight I was trying to calculate - daft, as it turned out - that if we got a quick turnaround at Brindisi at the boot of Italy, we might thrash off for Corfu, but then the sky started to change again. I noticed rain clouds, and we were soon immersed, with me hiding Jay Madhvani's little radio under the windscreen, and flying with a hand over the two GPS's. The second GPS, a tiny Garmin 12, is dear to me because it was so simple, and I had set it on the day's destination - Brindisi - and the bigger Skyforce 3 on each dogleg. But I was conscious that my equipment, with which I was familiar, was at least 10 years old, in the tearing hurry we had been in to make the flight possible.

The lovely Garmin 496 looked at me from the top of the dashboard like Danielle Lloyd - the Celebrity beauty queen Big Brother contestant who thought that Winston Churchill was the first black president of the United States - it was pretty but utterly useless.

I didn't mind the rain, so long as the trade-off with speed continued, and our speed was now constantly above 80mph, but as we flew south, so the rain and cloud grew worse, surrounding us. We came abeam Pescara, which had an airfield, and I started to try and programme my radio to at least talk to Pescara ATC - a sign of alarm - when I became conscious that we should not be in the air at all in such conditions. I said this to MHB, then asked him to take control, and we were in a diving turn towards the ground by the time I had the radio on and working. MHB said later that the feedback from the radio had drowned his verbal instructions. I would not have let him control the aircraft if there was a chance of hitting anything, so I wasn't alarmed at the turn, but by now had decided we had to bolt for the coast.

As happens - I don't know why - when I get nervous, the inside of my visor mists up, and I had constantly to open and wipe it with a soppy glove, the better to see. We dropped from 3,500 feet to below 1,000, flew over trashy conditions to the coast, and headed south again, me trying to find Pescara airfield. No one replied to my radio calls. If they had, I would have landed there. As the information from the GPS, including airfield frequencies, was also 10 years old, it is possible the frequency had changed. I looked right once through rain and cloud and thought I saw the runway, but we were really flying, over 90 mph, and it was gone in a flash.

MHB never panicked in the back. I have had people shrieking at me to land at 500 feet just a minute after take-off in perfect conditions, just at being there - I am not that bad a pilot - but there we were in turbulence, lashing rain, poor visibility, no radio contact with anyone, and he was cool as a cucumber. I kept heading south, there was no option, and came to the conclusion that conditions were improving ever so slightly. I decided not to try again for Pescara - I saw by my GPS it was already 13 miles behind us - because I had no faith in Italian aviation services, and flew low level about 900 feet over the beaches, following the coastline.

It was, as it turned out, the right thing to do, in that we stayed alive and made progress. Rain continued to bucket down, and I had real fears that it would

penetrate either GPS or radio. But we were committed. Get to Brindisi, I thought, and my pledge to Joanna Conlon still had some validity, that I would deliver Miles to Cyprus within 6 days. Weather is always weather, and I was glad she couldn't see the risks I was taking to get MHB through. I could dismiss them later, airily, boys being boys, and you know how girls love to hear that; they claim to be much more sensible.

We continued down the coast with another dilemma facing us. The 'spur' of Italy has a huge lump on it, 3,500 feet high, which affects the winds. When Keith Reynolds and I flew past it in 1998 on the world flight, I was in the driving seat, and slung all over the sky for 15 minutes. MHB and I debated the choice of going around the spur, that is, following the coast, adding 60 miles to our journey, or punting across in poor visibility. I thought I could see the lump early enough to avoid it, we were both worried about having enough fuel to get to Brindisi, so we went for the direct route. By now we had made two transfers of fuel from the spare tank, playing it cautiously, only 10 minutes each time, adding - we hoped - all the fuel and not pumping it out into free air which I think we did the previous day.

I steered inland under low cloud and rain, which got worse, and we rushed over flat farmland. I noted places to land in an emergency, and turned around once to see how the wind affected me, the speed dropping from 90 to below 60, so it was a real wind. We had passed over a number of those dreadful wind farm machines, whose arms were not moving. The lump was discernable, as I had hoped, looking like a Scottish mountain in the gloom. I headed right towards what turned out to be a giant Italian fighter base, and we jinked right and left in the mist until I had us back on track and the base behind us. Soon, cloud lifted to 2,000 feet, we climbed and found the southern junction of the 'spur' and a clear run through to Bari and Brindisi.

I had had experience of both airfields. I landed at Brindisi on my flight to Australia in 1987, and had found it the most miserable of all the towns I visited on that flight. It had once been glamorous as the Imperial Airways base for land flight. In the 1930s the Hannibals, giant biplane airliners that never had an accident and used to break out the union jack above the pilot's cockpit after he landed, ended the Europe part of the flights to India there, and passengers transferred to flying boats to begin the journey to Alexandria in Egypt. None of that was apparent in 1987 on my first visit, and, when we got there, in the 2007 visit either. Bari had been indifferent to me and Keith on our world flight, and high winds had nearly wrecked the aircraft while we argued with bored and cretinous Italian officials about a hangar for the night.

Bumbling speedily down the coast, conditions were mellow, and Bari was kind to us (we were not landing there). MHB took over for the longest spell I let him have - 15 minutes of meticulous flying - listening to his whizzy machines steer him blindly through the sky. I videoed this process, emphasising that I was hands off, and, I hope - I haven't seen the pictures - his determined face.

We started to talk to Brindisi, 70miles from Bari, but then the rain cascaded down, serious stuff, and Brindisi - when they heard we wanted to land - didn't want to talk to us. The closer I got, the more ATC's voice rose, telling me I had

no right to land. I insisted I had, that permissions had been given two months earlier (and what did the oaf propose anyway, that I circle until I ran out of fuel and then crash?). With very bad grace, permission was given for me to land on an enormous airfield with four whole aircraft on it, and as it transpired, dozens of people with nothing else to do but shout at us.

I landed with a bump, warnings still echoing in my ears - I didn't transmit the curses I threw back, almost all ending in '-off' - and turned left as instructed. A vehicular ballet was conducted near the long row of buildings, I think deciding who had precedence to shout first, and then cars whizzed all over the place, surrounding us. I took off my helmet and tried to work out who was in charge; it was not immediately apparent. They didn't know what to do first, clap us in irons or even think about our delicate aircraft in the rain.

The bureaucracy reached Indian proportions in the next four hours - it takes a microlight pilot five hours in Calcutta between entering the airport and lining up to take off - as crowds of people whirled around arguing. I was absolutely insistent that we had permission to land - Jon Cook had even given me an approvals number in England - and when they finally found that this was true, a lot of the heat went out of the debate. It was, in any case, absurd, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. We were obviously two Englishmen, one of whom happened to be blind, doing what Englishmen do, and most foreigners don't do and wish they did, and that was have an adventure.

Why didn't they just let us peaceably get on with it?

Eventually, of course, they did.

But every piece of paper I had was examined and photo-copied, and a man's status was determined by how many of these documents he could claim. The girls there, three of them, spoke the best English, and did translations, and were eventually our saviours. One, called Serena, actually helped! That is, she left the office with me - we needed police permission for that - while we toured the airfield looking for shelter for the Flyer, which we found in some old sheds. Then I was taken to the aircraft and left there on the open tarmac for 30 minutes, after which steam came out of my ears and I radioed ATC to ask sharply what was happening. Right then a peasant shambled out of the night and said 'fuel?' and when I nodded, shambled off again. I asked ATC if I could follow him, was given permission, taxied with him to the pumps and we put in 73 litres, which cost a massive 220 herberts – euros - allegedly because it was given 'out of hours'. When I had been 'in hours' they wouldn't give me fuel. An old dodge that, which I have come across all over the world.

Then I taxied off to find the shelter, manoeuvred the Flyer in within 10 minutes, and went back to fetch MHB, who had fallen asleep sitting in his chair. Serena got us a hotel - 'very reasonable' she said - and the hotel sent us a car.

More Italian absurdity, because on the 5 kilometre trip to its base, with us inside, crabby and exhausted, it ran out of fuel. The driver borrowed MHB's mobile phone to call for help, 10 minutes later a lady drove out of the night in a 4x4, and we were taken to what looked like a palace - electric gates opened at the end of the driveway - but it was an empty palace.

Aside from the staff, a large family, no one else was there, and when we sat down I feared they had no food. The opening menu was spaghetti with everything. I asked for a large steak and chips - I had eaten only one bread roll for breakfast, and nothing since - just to get something substantial inside us. I need not have worried. The steaks were excellent, as were the chips, but half a dozen huge ord'oevres were also served, and three litre bottles of beer. MHB also asked for Coke. He has the barbarous habit of mixing his Coke with his beer. One of the waiters thought this was because MHB was blind, but I explained that we were Englishmen; I am getting grumpy in my old age, and deliberately didn't mind what foreigners, especially Italians, thought of us. MHB raised an interesting question at dinner.

He wondered how far he would have got with Storm Smith as his pilot?

He thought Storm would never have reached Macon on Day one, and would not have flown in the Rhone Valley while the *Mystral* was blowing. I thought he would have done the flight through the Alps, but we only learned that route by meeting Pierre at Macon, and had we landed five minutes later, Pierre would not have been there and our whole flight would have been different. I was absolutely certain that Storm would have ended that day's flying, as would any sensible pilot, before the raging weather at Pescara.

My artist friend Anna Dickerson, fluent in Italian and with all the confidence that blond girls have being brought up in Italy, has involved herself in the battle to get the flight to continue. This is especially moving to me, as she earns so very little money, and phone calls abroad to mobiles are expensive. The police chief at the airport wanted to continue his 'relationship' with Anna after we were gone - Anna said, smugly - I tease her unmercifully if occasionally her charms don't work on men - but I must find some place to take her to dinner when I return to England. The problem is, of course, that she doesn't eat meat. How can such people survive? But they do.

The plan today is to get to Corfu, 127miles away, as quickly as possible, refuel, and punt on to somewhere near Athens. On the world flight we went to Marathon, but it had no fuel. I'd like to find fuel without a hassle. That would come to 379 miles, with not enough light left to reach Rhodes. But if the Greeks are as laid-back as I remember, we could fly to Rhodes and then on to Cyprus tomorrow. Who knows?

Yesterday's flying statistics: T/0 1130 local from Forli, landing Brindisi 1630 local in rain, after one of the half dozen most difficult flights of my life.

Stats - Forli to Ancona, 127m, Ancona to Pescara, 92m, Pescara to Bari, 160, Bari to Brindisi, 70m, total 408 miles.

Monday, March 12th – 0426am local - In the Hotel Bretagne in Corfu after a frustrating day yesterday, but at last we have got out of the grasp of the Italians. We had a lovely breakfast in the Massimo Hotel, and did not run out of fuel going back to the airport. Now there was no question of us being there illegally, but just because of the usual paper hassles, a lot of the passion to stop us has gone, though not all. A new woman was in the control centre, and at first she seemed to think there would be no problems. But when I went to file a flight plan, all the

old Italian gifts for bloody-minded interfering came up, and I was told I could not leave that day, and I should return the following day to see what happened.

I threw a wobbly.

I am afraid I am known to occasionally throw wobblies, though as wobblies go, this was quite a mild one. I said King Abdullah of Jordan - in fact it's his wife - was waiting for us in Amman on Tuesday, and I looked forward to telling him it was because of Italy that we wouldn't be there. This must have had some potency. I heard later that day that my friend Jay Madhvani, the instructor at the St Albans airfield from which I normally fly, had landed at Brindisi on his own race to Cyprus, and had been detained *five days*. I can imagine how they played with him. I stomped around the ATC office looking thunderous, and after a while I heard that - unheard of on a Sunday morning - the Director of the Airport was considering our case.

What case? I thought.

Here's this huge airport with only four other aircraft on it and hundreds of staff all standing around with hours of time to crack jokes and spray each other with perfume, and their only job appeared to be to hold up two honest travellers on spurious grounds.

In the end, I wrote out a flight plan - I am really rusty at that - and leaving the time of departure to God and the Airport Director, went back to tell MHB the bad news. He falls into a state of trance at such moments, often murmuring to someone on the phone. I pulled out 'The Lunatic Express' and sat down to read. Precious time went by, but did they give a toss?

I asked the new girl whether I could get my aircraft out of the storehouse where we had struggled to put it the previous evening - heaving on the nose with a full fuel load is exhausting - but she said I couldn't.

'It's not as if we will run away,' I said.

'You are not allowed,' she replied..

Miles wanted a pee. I escorted him along to the lavatory, hung around, escorted him back, and the new girl - I never asked her name - said quietly that we could go. We hustled out as quickly as we could and were driven to the hangar, where I soon had the aircraft out on the windy tarmac and began the process - it takes an average of an hour - to get us into it. A small crowd hung around, laughing and joking - what do they do for a living? - but they were full of friendliness. I wanted to get to Kerkira - the local name for Corfu - re-fuel and fly on, so I was glad to be able to taxi out at 1030. Our radio was working perfectly at the time, then it suddenly stopped doing so. When I asked for permission to take off, there was just a loud buzz back. In despair, I taxied off the runway, waved at the van full of spectators, told them the problem, and taxied back to where we had been. I couldn't set off across 128 miles of sea to another country with a duff radio.

Something similar had happened to Keith Reynolds and I on the world flight but we had discovered it 30 miles out to sea, and by then wild horses would not have driven us back to Italy to repair it. This time I had responsibility for MHB.

I got out, helped MHB out - he could do nothing to help, so went back to his phone trance - and I started to tear the aircraft apart, dumping our luggage and trying not to be bad tempered. Had Storm not taken his radio, this would not have

been happening. For the dozenth time on this flight, I said a few harsh words to the ether about him.

Engineers were summoned. We checked the link between the radio and the aerial. It worked. I checked all the radio connections. They also worked. I tried calling Brindisi Tower. They replied! But I had lost confidence in the radio. I had a spare, an Icom A-20 with which I had flown around the world. The occasionally working radio was a later model, an A-22 - which I had never liked - but to change them over, I also had to change the configuration of the Lynx link between the radio and our earphones. When I tried to open the Lynx box in the torn-open remains of the aircraft, it was like trying to enter a tiny Fort Knox. No known Allen key fitted it. I chomped with frustration.

Eventually, yet another engineer was found, and he discovered the right key to open to box, which I did, surrounded by excited Italians offering advice and posing for photos with MHB, who is diligent in getting photographic evidence of his deeds. I looked dubiously at the 8 changes I had to make to tiny switches, made those changes, tested them with the box opened, and they worked! This was a miracle. Engineering and I have a distant relationship.

It was another laborious process putting everything back together, checking that nothing was hanging off, and all the time fearing that yet another Italian bureaucrat will discover some obscure regulation from Brussels to further delay us. I was not in the best of tempers when I finally installed MHB in the back, climbed in, was pushed back by our spectators, got the engine running, and was finally mollified by the way the radio worked perfectly. MHB was, as ever, upbeat. We got away to the usual long run over the tarmac - for a microlight - climbed and set off over 128 miles of sea. We had no dinghies - it is only the energy of RMH back in England that has secured a way of mounting a dinghy on the aircraft, but only after he takes it over - so it was our risk to live with the botched job done by Mr Smith, and RMH will make his own much better arrangements when he takes the aircraft over. MHB asked mildly if one of the emergency locator beacons - ELBs - could be attached to him, which I did, trusting my own life to the out of date ELB from the world flight.

I looked over the Adriatic Sea, ships at anchor, ships plying between the world and Albania to our left. There could hardly have been more favourable weather, as a following wind developed - it may have just been no head wind - and we motored along at 80 mph. MHB took the controls again and made a reasonable job of steering in a straight line, while I videoed him. He sits lower in the back of the trike than I do, for some reason, and I had to adjust camera angles to get - I hope - his determined face, alive with concentration.

MHB takes the controls whenever asked, and often asking himself, and he flew, to begin with, a straight line. I understand he has buttons to ask 20 different questions - speed, height, direction, air speed, ground speed, and lots more in a cacophony of sound - but he doesn't have one that tells him if his wings are level. This means that when he wanders off course, the delay in reading the compass causes him to over-correct, and he goes into a series of oscillations that increase in range and tempo. I can hear him consciously compensating for this, and he does improve, but like pilots permanently in cloud with no specialised

instruments, he is in constant danger of losing equilibrium. MHB is a classical stoic - in the air - and never loses his determination. He has not had nearly enough practice - I have flown nearly four times as many hours with him in six days as Mr Smith in six months - but he is getting better. He dreams, out loud, of what he will do when he can level his wings, like a thirsty man dreaming of water. The radio was a joy, able to pick up Brindisi when we were 60 miles away, and also when we joined Kerkira Control. Albania loomed out of the mist to the left, still mysterious, with enormous cliffs and mountains, and then two small islands - each inhabited, perhaps by rich men - before we found Corfu itself. It looked quite different from Italy, despite being separated by just 120 miles. The colour of the land was yellow, and the architecture was more anarchic. The southern Italy we had left had lots of straight lines dividing one property from another. We flew over the thermally centre of the island at 3,500 feet followed by a steep descent to a left hand circuit on runway 12, facing 120 degrees.

The welcome could not have been more different than the way we had been greeted in Italy. People were friendly, no one warned us of anything, all requests were considered and then granted. Paris Nikoloulis, the young ATC officer who helped us through the formalities, had all sorts of concerns about the fragility of our aircraft that was balm to my injured soul. The fact that he cared was enough. We were able to get the Flyer out of the wind and into what may have been the same fire engine shed slot KR and I had used 9 years earlier. No police stalked us.

But I was still weary. There is no genuine concern in countries like Italy with the safety of pilots. It is just a mad concern for regulations, and if they kill us, then perhaps a regulation can be amended, when it is the way such regulations are administered that does the killing. Greece was lovely.

I am not sure where to go today. Because of the Italian delays, I cannot get through to Cyprus in enough time to keep MHB on schedule, and the changeover of pilots is due. The weather forecast for the Athens area is daunting, winds from the NE, directly across our course, at Force 7, up to 40 mph, with 'moderate turbulence', not brilliant news for a little microlight. I plan to follow the coast to the mouth of the Corinth Canal, and then head directly east, staying out at sea most of the time to avoid being thrashed by thermals. I have the procedural way to get into Athens International; let's hope I can interpret it without harassing ATC there. MHB and I dined on pizza last night. Astonishingly, given his appetite, he only ate half the pizza, but that's because he is fighting to keep the integrity of this flight. His silly schedule, devised by Mr Smith, means any delays throw everything out of kilter, and his sponsors are considering flying him by airliner to events, while RMH flies the microlight every day to make up time. I am sympathetic to MHB, but aware that my central role for a short while in this adventure is disappearing, and it is an argument for others to make.

I just want to ensure RMH takes the Flyer - and MHB - in reasonable condition, and then find my own way home. Meanwhile, postcards call, to my son James, to Anna Dickerson and Stephen Lewis, to Julian Parr and Moira Thomson - I would be dead-headed by those two if I failed to record my adventures by postie - and to Helen Dudley, who has had such cards for the past 10 years.

I wonder if she still keeps them?

Statistics: T/O Brindisi, 1200Z, landing Corfu 1400Z, after a flight of 128 miles, but there was a time change so another hour was lost. As a result, we could not fly on to Athens, and the whole nature of the event has changed. It looks like the end of the adventure for me.

Tuesday, March 13th – 0440hrs - Alone in the Sofitel Hotel at Athens International Airport, surrounded by luxury, and now with the responsibility of getting the Flyer to Rhodes and Cyprus to link up with RMH.

Flying on the sixth day of our adventure, which I believe can be called epic, began benignly and ended with us fighting not to end up as raspberry jam either on, or near, the Greek capital.

After a 4am wake-up in Corfu, never a hangover, though why I should have one after just 3 beers I am not sure, into the familiar routine. Shave, clean teeth, shower, hope to have the capacity for a 'Morning George', half dress, write for up to 2 hours, rush around stuffing things into containers, then check with MHB and down to breakfast at 0630. It was solid omelette and old bacon, and coffee, and I wished I had not eaten it about 10 minutes later, but it stayed down. A taxi took us 200 yards to the airfield and charged E7.00 for it, and wanted to keep the change as a tip. I wasn't having that.

It was a joy dealing with the Greek aviation authorities after the dreadful Italians and I had permission given to land at Athens International, the equivalent of landing at Heathrow, with no fuss at all. The weather looked beautiful where we were, but I knew there were abnormally high winds reported in Athens - said to be between 30 and 40 mph from 030, N by NE - though I later discovered this underplayed the situation. Part of me felt relief that this was the last leg, we had survived, and MHB speculated how far Mr Smith would have flown with him in such conditions. We thought perhaps he would still be in Italy.

I planned, with all the delays that happen on these flights, to leave at 0930, and by 0900 I thought I was on time, with MHB getting into the aircraft, surrounded by kindly Greek firemen who gave us a bottle of water by way of introduction.

I know how much the Americans came to appreciate their firemen after 9/11, but I have felt the same way for years. On the world flight they were always terrific, turning out a fire engine to give my aircraft shelter, and the same had applied here. They are selfless, friendly, and obviously tough, ready at any moment to wade into fires and risking their lives. There is a symbiotic link between them and the qualities MHB and I aspire to.

So they were honestly concerned when, having geared up to go, I pressed the starter button and nothing happened!

There wasn't any straining. No power being held back. Just deadness. I lumbered out and checked all the fuses. None of them had gone. I called the firemen and showed them how to hold the microlight while I swung the propeller - I didn't want the brakes to fail and MHB to shoot across the runway and into the nearby water, however amusing they found the prospect - and I tried to swing the engine into life. I had learned how to do this only since the world flight, and was confident it would work. It didn't. I got irritable, but kept it to myself. MHB was in

his usual trance off left. A tiny fireman said I should try the starter button again, so I did, and it worked.

I have no idea why the Flyer does this, but it only had 23 hours on it when we left London, it was brand new, and the testing that Keith and I had done before our world flight, - which produced a hundred small changes - had not been deemed necessary by Mr Smith. It was his responsibility, rather than Miles, because he was Pilot One, so all the little niggles in any new aircraft can be removed.

We were ready to go again, all packed in, when I noticed I was getting no power to the GPS. An inspired guess told me that, having removed the fuses to check them, they had not all gone back into their correct slots. Rather than phone home and waste time, I found a set of fuses in the lady's handbag, and asked Costos, the lead fireman, to insert them into any empty slot. The first one he did so restored power. I know the fuses are now wrong, but RMH can sort it out. For me, at the moment, the aircraft worked, and I could get MHB to Athens and end my task.

As a result of all this fiddling around, it wasn't until 1020 that we were ready to go. In Italy, and lots of other places in the world, this might have meant another flight plan submission, but Corfu cheerfully saw us off, and we rose into the cold morning air and smooth flight.

Whatever was ahead of us, we were now committed to.

We flew down the coast in beautiful misty conditions and a slight head-wind, the bane of microlighting, linked up by radio with Previsa, and glad once more of a working radio. Miles took the controls from time to time, and I was aware of how much he was improving. One more instrument, and I could let him fly in smooth conditions, before letting him have the bar when the winds made us rock and roll. There were occasional bouts of turbulence, the rotor effect of the wind off the mountains, but it was quite benign, and 90 minutes went by before everything changed. We flew past Astakos - I wish I knew more about classical Greek history - and we were talking to Araxos military base when a new voice, speaking good English, broke in, and directed me to another frequency.

I changed and talked to a perfect stranger, for an odd little encounter at 2,500 feet near the new bridge - it hadn't been there when Keith and I flew by in 1998 - at Patrai, a western link between north and south Greece. He seemed to be a working Cessna pilot, and he wanted to photograph us in the air. His chase after us - and eventual discovery - was a diversion from the rotten conditions we started to experience. He twice warned us of severe turbulence, and if that was so for a Cessna, you can imagine what it was like for us. The advantage of the Quik GT450, though, with just 13.5 square metres of sail area, compared to the 17 square metres of sail on the world-flying Quantum, is that it requires a lot less strength to put straight. Microlight pilots on long flights end up with shoulder strength, and I went into serious exercise mode that continued for the next two and a half hours.

We were nearly at the bridge, fighting a 40 mph headwind that roared through the venturi of two mountains, one of 4,800 feet to the north, the other of 6,300 feet to the south, when the stranger found us. He made two passes and I hope he got the photos and sent them home, though I fear he may not have framed us

against the bridge (he did). I think it was as unpleasant for him in the air as it was for us, but he could go home and land, while we set out for Athens.

There was a period about 40 miles later when conditions eased, and we flew up the middle of the Corinth Canal, a large inland sea, with little turbulence and us the sole aircraft under the control of a very bored ATC girl at Athens Information. We wondered why we were the only aircraft she was speaking to, and she was to get a lot more bored the closer we got to Athens. She made a number of attempts to get rid of us, but we kept coming back.

The serious turbulence, much worse than we had gone through - which I thought had been bad enough - began when we flew into the Athens area near Megara. There were upsets that made me out of breath with effort, and which showed up in my voice as I listened to ATCs passing me one to the other. I requested a direct approach - not using the word 'fuel' which alarms ATC - because I wanted to keep it in reserve. In a way, such an approach was granted, but by then we were close to the city of Athens itself, and being slung all over the sky. In the back, Miles was silent - he told me when we got down he was cracking for a pee and was afraid of peeing down my back at each leap and shudder in the sky - while I was passed from one ATC controller to another. I could see over the huge city that there was a big airfield to the right, and then noticed, to my horror, that both GPS's had stopped working!

This must have been a GPS blind spot, but you can imagine how I felt. I was heading for a new runway, not marked on my map, but which I had calculated from its lat/longs was 12 miles from the original Athens International. The airport I could see had to be the old pre-Olympics airport, and I knew the new one was up near Marathon. But I had no real idea where I was, and did not want to declare a PAN, which was half an emergency appeal.

We struggled all across Athens - MHB asked if it was the ancient part, but to be truthful, I didn't notice - heading to the left of a high ridge of mountain, my GPS's both clearly failing to work. A sharp ATC lady was calculating where I was when we reached the end of the ridge and in the distance, I saw a gigantic airfield. At the same time, to my intense relief, my GPS's came out of the blind spot and I discovered I was five miles from my destination.

There was no harassing of us as we headed to the southern end of 03 Left - a runway heading 210/030 degrees - and turned on finals. I was still being thrashed around, and knew I was caught in high winds, so I was extra careful on landing, which went OK. It was then I appreciated what a howling gale was blowing. I taxied off to the right, clearing both active runways, and then found I could not turn left and my wing was pinned to the ground. I stopped taxiing and just stayed there, being sharp but not panicky with Athens ground control, asking for two strong men to be in the 'Follow Me' car. One lady turned up instead, waved, and stayed where she was. I waited for men to turn up. She got out of the car and asked what she could do. I was actively conscious of MHB's dire need of a pee - indeed, he was volunteering to leap out of the back and help, after first peeing, but the idea of him wandering into the propeller made me veto that - so I asked the girl to help raise the wing. She put her hands everywhere except on the left rigging - what would she know of microlights? - and the second 'Follow

Me' car had arrived by the time I had turned the Flyer back into wind on a temporary lull. Then we waiting in desperate conditions while the two 'Follow Me' cars talked to each other, and I raged silently in the front seat. Eventually, she decided that gossiping took second place to getting us to safety - we had a hangar booked through Olympic Airways - and we set off for a 3-mile journey to find the hangar. All the way, I described what was happening to Miles, strained and silent in the back, from one end of the long runway to the other, then a long right leg, a similar left leg, and, with me actively wishing for her to stop - my finger off the transmit button - we finally turned towards a huge hangar with closed doors, and I taxied to a halt and turned the engine off. I managed to get out of the way as Miles struggled out of the craft, and to stop him pointing his willy at the microlight, his only point of reference. I steered him to the middle of the tarmac, and waved at the 'Follow Me' lady to wait for a short while before taking the photograph.

Miles pee'd for Africa.

He said later that the pain actually got worse before he got better, but he had controlled himself. What it is to live with heroes.

There is something heroic about his character. He never looks at the bad side of things, always the good. Where I rage and curse and throw wobbles, Miles patiently sees things through, always looking for the best behaviour. To go for two hours with the strain of wanting a pee, and not tell me until we were on the ground, was terrific. He had had a second orange juice that morning, and he blamed that instead of me - you know how irrational one can get when cracking to leak - and I guess he'll be a lot more careful with RMH.

Struggling on the tarmac, waiting for the huge hangar doors to open, I was aware of feeling I had come through a difficult ordeal, and would soon hand over an intact project to RMH. I felt good, but highly relieved.

For me, ze war vas over.

It was now RMH's job. I could go out on the town and tear off a few slats and return to normal life. We had agreed Richard would join me in the Sofitel, and it was but a walk across the road, buy an air ticket home, and return, not to a hero's welcome obviously, except for my friend Anna Dickerson who had some knowledge as my flying companion of what was happening, but with a story worth a few beers, and what else can a man aspire to in these anti-heroic times? But as we removed our gear, the Flyer surrounded by admiring mechanics and, temporarily, safe again, I was aware things were changing once more.

All communication with me and London is through Miles and his constantly charged phone. RMH was coming out but would I fly on with him to Rhodes and even Cyprus? I had never flown with RMH, and the prospect, despite that day's dreadful experiences, seemed pleasant. But then RMH balked at appearing in Athens at 0100 hours and me booting him awake a few hours later, and irritably asked to join at Rhodes. Part of me thinks that when I get there, solo, he'll be at Cyprus, and then I might be asked to go on to Amman, and then it's 'only' the 1,100 miles of Saudi Desert....

I decided I could cope with the next two flights, 261 miles to Rhodes, and then 276 miles to Pafos in western Cyprus. I have jobs to do at home, writing a

biography which is my main source of much-needed income right now, but a couple more days could be spared.

I hope I don't regret it.

We booked into the luxury Sofitel - standing out like two cockroaches on a wedding cake in our travel-stained clothes - and Miles shared my room for a couple of hours, whistling and singing cheerfully in a long shower. I used his phone to talk to Anna Dickerson - the beautiful girl artist who earns perhaps £12,000/year and who spent precious money staying in touch with me by phone - and it was Anna who suggested I could get £20 more credit in my own phone through her. I don't understand the technology of this, but that is what happened. She used the conversation to chastise me about the difficulty she has using the Yale lock in my house - where she is occasionally staying - and informing me of the number of items broken since I am not there to look after them. This was, she told me, a healthy attempt at keeping me in touch with normality in the world I was temporarily occupying.

I made a mistake talking on Miles's phone to Joanna Conlon, from 'Seeing is Believing', in saying that the problems we were having with the Flyer were caused by inadequate preparation. She was shocked at this, and raised the matter with Jon Cook, MHB's organiser. But there is a huge contrast between what's actually happening, and the way it is being reported. I did not mean to cause an upset, but we have taken a number of - necessary - risks to get here and restore the life to this adventure, and if these risks are being played down in public, that is someone else's responsibility. Yet someone needs to know what is actually happening.

In any other world, we would not have flown today. The ATC controllers at Corfu suggested we delay, but also understood when I said we had to catch up on lost time. It was my responsibility to keep Miles safe and I did so, but we still should not have been in the air, and for the last hour of the flight I wanted to be on the ground in any spare moment I had to devote myself to anything other than staying alive. Adventures are adventures, they would not be adventures unless they were risky, risky means things can go wrong, the actual adventure starts when things go wrong because of the qualities one has to find to make things go right again. I can guess at the underplaying of our risks - I suppose until it is all over - but they are happening day to day, and Mr Smith, at least, should have prepared Joanna for them. I have picked up the job of coping with the inadequate preparations, and RMH had up to a week to make his own. I hope to reassure Joanna when I get to see her at the end of my stage, but not by telling untruths. I saw Miles to the airport, where he had a Business Class ticket, and was shocked to see the ticket clerk direct him to a place where - as Miles put it - the 'Saddos' are left to vegetate until guides can be found for them. He, the marathon runner, the great middle-aged athlete, was offered a wheelchair to sit in so that he could be controlled. Miles was aware of how much I had to do still to continue the flight - he had to take this break because of commitments to talk about adventure in two charity events in Jordan, which was why he got the sponsorship in the first place - and to stay on Mr Smith's schedule, that was why

I was moving the microlight to Cyprus. Although MHB fought against leaving the microlight, he is also a realist.

I accompanied Miles to and from the Saddo's area to a harassed check-out girl - 'he's not stupid,' I told her, 'he's only blind' - but she did nothing, grabbing the phone only to pretend she was doing something. Miles told me he was accustomed to such situations, asked to be led to the queue, and when we were at the front, said he would see me on Wednesday in Cyprus and I should go back to the hotel. I did so.

I spent the evening having a quiet meal - rare lamb that must have been bleating five minutes before turning up on my plate - reading 'The Lunatic Express', and getting an early night, falling straight asleep just after 9pm and going without interruptions to 4am. Rare, that.

Despite my personal doubts, it should be all right today. I am in the pilot's circuit now, and can be bussed by our handling agents- Olympic Airways - to get the Met forecast and plan my flight. I will get minute instructions on the formalities of flying away from here, and hope to be unmolested by other ATCs on the over-sea flight through the Greek islands to Rhodes. I pass by holiday islands with airports like Naxos, Paros, Santorini, Astypalaia to get there, and I have no GPS information on my destination. I also fear that, in flying on to Cyprus, I drop off one of my GPS chips, and don't have the next one to hand, so I will just follow a compass route with no supporting information. But microlighting is like that, a more primitive form of aviation, without the epaulettes of modern GA flying, and I rather like it for that reason. It's nice to be called 'Captain', but we are really freelance flyers.

It will be interesting flying with the legendary RMH.

Statistics: T/O 1020 from Corfu, dog-leg to Aroxos at the mouth of the Corinth Canal, 129 miles. From Araxos to the new International Airport - and therefore not in my 10-year old GPS- 138 miles. Landing, 1530 (local). Total distance 268 miles.

Wednesday, March 14th – 0431hrs - In the Capsis Sofitel in Rodus, Rhodes, after a landing at the second desperate attempt in high Force Seven cross-winds that could have put an end to the whole venture, and perhaps me. I can still hear the wind howling outside.

There is something detached about big international hotels, and finding my way around in Athens was like that. I had a small breakfast, watching dubiously as an American airline pilot with hair like Val Kilmer in 'Top Gun' sauntered through his morning routine, surrounded by deferential woman coping with passports and transport, and felt I belonged in another era. When I walked to the airport itself, trying to find Olympic Airways office, without exception, everyone asked for my ticket. I explained I was a pilot. Incomprehension. In my moon boots, jeans and pullover, I did not look the part.

Thus the hotel concierge, who took one look at my weather-stained clothing and discovered something interesting under his finger nails. Three telephone numbers were produced for Olympic Airways, and he contemptuously phoned them, in that snappy - 'why-am-I-bothering' - way that set my teeth on edge. But

then a pretty girl on Reception called Panagiota Grannopoulou quietly stepped in and found me Dimitrian Tafillou, the over-worked hangar supervisor who had brought me to the hotel the previous day, and I was back in the swim. She also gave me 'crew rates' for my stay, which halved the bill.

I had a weather forecast, not really bad for Athens, but Force 7 winds in Rhodes, where I planned to reach at 2pm, re-fuel, and punt on to Cyprus. As Dimitrian drove me around the various tasks - the airport was full of nervous security people because the President of Greece was flying out to the Ukraine - I could see the wind was strong, and I feared for my skills, especially if I was condemned to a 3-mile taxi to get to the actual runway.

In flight planning, a woman called Nikki, in her forties with an absolute perfect figure and a terrific smile, hunted down all the lat/longs of the waypoints I needed to touch on leaving the airport, so I didn't frighten ATC. I had some bills waived because of the nature of the flight, not just to Australia by microlight, but also for the blind, a feature which I think RMH and MHB will meet more often in the Middle East. Then I started the laborious process of getting into the aircraft, for a brief period without Miles. He was that day, I told people, dining with King Abdullah of Jordan, though it was the king's wife who was the actual sponsor of the 'Seeing is Believing' event.

All the engineers at Olympic Airways hangar were turning up with cameras and photographing themselves with the Flyer as backdrop, while I packed things away. I was in a slightly detached state, wondering at the wisdom of setting off for an airfield which I knew was difficult anyway - it had been for Keith Reynolds and I when we had gone through on the world flight - but which, in addition, was living with Force Seven winds across the runway. But I felt there was no alternative.

The flight plan stated I would leave at 1030, and I fitted myself in close to that time, had the giant hangar doors opened, saw the 'follow Me' car waiting for me, was pushed out and found no one replied to me on the radio. I was pushed back in again and tried fiddling with this and that. Dimitrian, constantly attentive despite his work load, suggested that the hangar itself was interfering with the signals, so I was pushed out again and found the radio working. I am not convinced that was the only problem.

Then, when I pressed the starter button, nothing happened. I turned everything off, asked Dimitrian - without explanation - to turn the propeller by hand, and after he did so, the starter worked and the engine started coughing like an old man before settling down to a healthy roar. I don't think she likes the first run of the day with Avgas, but I am not sure why.

All this time the wind was blowing and I was struggling with the wing. Every minute on the ground was dangerous, and after warming up, I set off after the 'Follow Me' car, anxious to get away. It was the same gossipy lady as I had met yesterday, as keen to stop as keep going, and in an instant rage I quickly asked ATC on the radio for an early departure from where I was, a long way short of the threshold. The Greeks, unlike the Italians, trust the pilots they deal with - we are in the best position to know about threats to the aircraft safety - and permission was immediately given. I turned, struggling with the wing, on to 03-Right, and

took off. Almost immediately I went into a GPS dead-spot and both my navigation instruments went dead. I bluffed my way to the first turn-point, and the GPS's came back to life again, and then I was really away.

Cloud-base was at 1,800 feet, it was misty over both land and sea, and though I could not see far, I was always in sight of the sea which soon appeared. I settled back for a solo flight, for the first time with a faint hint of the height fears that have haunted me for 19 years, but also willing to stuff them deep into my mind. I had a long journey to make over the sea, and it was daft to think about how easy it was to lean right and get back in contact with earth again, violently, yet that was what my mind pondered.

Soon, I reverted to song, 'Summertime' once more, first straight, then in a scat style, much like a mantra, and the height fears receded. I also chanted 'Jabberwocky', another mantra. Islands loomed out of the mist, still marked on my GPS; after two hours flying they no longer appeared on my little screen and I realised I was moving from one GPS computer chip to the next, and I didn't have the next with me. I would have thought a natural break-point was Lebanon and Israel, but the Skyforce team felt different.

There is a fantasy life to long-distance microlight flying over the sea. Maybe it's the same for all the single-engine pioneers? One drifts in and out of reality. I stayed with Athens Information on the radio, and they often broke the reverie, but it was easy to go back into it again. My map showed the islands, but as I headed east - missing Miles and his cheerful optimism and trust, I admit - I could not take the risk of scrabbling around under the Perspex of the Lady's handbag to turn the map over, so I just followed the compass course. I drifted to the right of the large island of Naxos, always interested in looking for habitation on any island, large or small, and it took a little time for the realisation to occur that I was in a GPS void. I could see the objective, but there was no ground information on the screen. The one island I could identify, because it had an airfield that appeared on the GPS, was Kos, but by then I had blundered into the edge of its control area. In May or June this could have been a disaster. Still in the low season, I got out without seeing anything after apologising to the islands ATC.

Every time I passed to the south of an island, I was thrown around, which also disturbed the reverie. Sometimes my 'sea-speed' - over the earth - reached the top 90's. Other times I flew at 60 mph, much like my world flight Quantum. But the first fuel transfer went to order, and it was only forgetting the second fuel transfer - leaving the pump on too long - that made me think I should have something irritating fluttering in front of me every time the pump was on, and note it as a suggestion for RMH. I had pumped fuel into the air for minutes while crossing the USA on the world flight in 1998, by forgetting I was transferring fuel, at the risk that some of it could have been ignited by the hot exhaust, and I would be burnt to death. Not the best way to die.

A fluttering plastic card on a piece of bungee attached to the control bar constantly remind me from then on.

I was in easy touch with ATC just after 2pm, and still intent on re-fuelling, picking up Richard - who had taken an airliner to Athens that morning - and flying on to Cyprus, when I joined downwind right hand for runway 27, the wind - allegedly -

at 290 degrees and 20 knots. But when I turned finals there was a horrific drift to the left, and I found myself crabbing down at 45 degrees to the runway. As I descended I was thrown around, shuddering, pushed up and down, and at times it felt like falling and my whole line of approach disappeared. At 20 feet up I was heading for the right side of the runway and rough vegetation, and the serious risk of destroying the aircraft. It was instinctive to boot the accelerator and wrestle my way back up in the air.

There was a long silence from the ATC tower, which must have watched this whole performance. Still, better to be in the air and whole than on the ground and mashed up and I kept at 400 feet as I swung around for another go. No pilot likes go-arounds, they are a criticism of his skill, but the only really good landing is one you walk away from, with the aircraft still capable of flight.

My approach the second time was similar to the first, but I had been warned and was more concentrated, and the first contact with the earth was just a glancing blow. I thought I could make it stick next time, but it was one of the worst landings I have had. Yet I was safely down, a feeling that lasted just a few seconds before the wind started wrestling with me on the tarmac. The 'Follow me' car had appeared, and while I radioed for help - 'two strong men to hold the wings' - it stayed ahead of me as I struggled along behind, always aware I could be flipped over by a second's inattention. Leaving the runway, the 'Follow Me' car went one way, and I went the other, straight left, crabbing over to the shelter of the airport buildings where there was slightly less aerial violence, and I could head for the private aircraft parking.

It was absolutely dreadful when I got there, my engine still running, me hanging over the right rigging being trashed. One of the spectators realised I was in trouble and walked over, I gasped that I needed shelter, and I was directed behind three big old once-working buses, where it felt, for the first time, safe on the ground.

I stopped the engine, breathing heavily, asked for fuel, and managed to get out of the aircraft. I could not believe the strength of the wind. Was I really serious about flying on? Yet the tunnel vision I had adopted back in London was still working, and as kind and interested Greek airport workers came over to look and talk, I realised I had taken quite enough risks, thank you, and was lucky to be whole and alive and with the aircraft in the same condition.

A kind looking man with three badges of rank said he remembered me from nine years ago! This was on the world flight, and I didn't remember him. He was now the chief of the airport firemen, and as firemen do, his kindness gave me peace of mind later, when looking for a place to store the Flyer. As people came and talked, I phoned Jon Cook in London and told him the safest course I could think of, which was to wait until the calm of the following morning, and then try for Cyprus (I can hear the rushing gale outside as I write this, now at 0535, but we'll cope with that later today). Jon accepted my judgement with suspicious speed. I wonder whether they really know what's been happening, despite the bland comments on the journey web site?

The man who arranged everything at Veranos was the Airport Operations Officer, George Psaros, who wrote of the Flyer in my travelling book, 'I am going to

confiscate this and take it home with me'. George joined two other locals, Vayios Savvion - the fuel boss - and one of his men, Vasilis Volonakis, in helping me man-handle the Flyer into a bay vacated by a fire engine - it took 10 minutes of physical struggle - and out of the killing wind.

I did not know whether I would take an airliner home from Rhodes, or fly on with RMH to Cyprus. It all depended on the weather. I was still attracted to what Richard's brother John, a lawyer on the phone from England, called a 'Jolly Little Caper' - these public school types, in John's case it was Harrow, have a language of their own. But I wanted a beer more than ever.

Vayios collected all my luggage and drove me to the Capsis Sofitel, a huge, opulent and empty luxury tourist hotel six kilometres from the airport and on the coast, where the trees were being lashed by the wind in the same way they were lashed 9 years ago. There was a really warm welcome, but I contented myself with a Coke, a shower, and a short sleep before hearing that RMH had arrived and I could open the first beer. He was with me before it was finished.

It was terrific to see him - 'Dr Meredith-Hardy, I presume?' - and he does have the only honorary doctorate in our form of aviation. He was one of the few involved with this flight who genuinely understood what I had taken MHB through, and the risks I had felt necessary to get there. Talking with him was a relief. We drank beer and turned the whole journey over while eating steak and French fries and salad, and I felt the heavy yoke of responsibility lifting. I felt good that I had made it through, and that all my fears of failing to live up to my own expectations had not carried the day.

The beautiful Helen Dudley phoned while we were eating. We arranged a dinner date back in another life in London.

There comes a time in one's life when one must admit to being past it.

Not yet, though.

Statistics: Take-off, Athens International, 1100 hours, flight of 253 miles to Diagorus Airport in Rhodes, 1430 hours. Needed 43 litres of Avgas 100LL to top up.

Thursday, March 16th - 0457 hrs - At the Flamingo Beach Hotel, Larnaca, SE Cyprus - I can hear the sea rolling on to the shore as I write. I am demob happy, facing the prospect of a Club Class flight home to London, and already detached from the two adventurers, Miles Hilton-Barber, and Richard Meredith-Hardy, who retired exhausted to bed early last night with the rest of the epic journey to Australia ahead of them.

When I looked out of the hotel window in Rhodes as dawn broke, the trees were being thrashed around with almost the same violence as the previous evening. So much for the forecast calm. Part of me was already detached, in that I knew RMH was at the bar, and I was no longer directly responsible for the state of the adventure. I heard from John Cook that MHB had been helped by so many people in Jordan, where he had fulfilled an important scheduled speaking engagement, that he was never able to carry his own bag. As a result, the bag he ended up with was not his own, whether by design or not we can't know. Jon asked if I would give some description of the missing bag - I had been with MHB

when he had bought it on Athens Airport - and I tried, though I had seen it only two minutes, and of course, MHB was not able to describe it more than vaguely. I discovered that the loud TV I had heard in the middle of the night, which half woke me and kept me awake, was in fact RMH next door! He often falls asleep, he told me, in front of the TV. If we were to continue the journey together, I would have resolved never to book a room anywhere near him at night, because loud TV is one of my banes.

We had a hurried breakfast, and were picked up by the beautifully-mannered Vayios Savvion, who drove us to the airport and got us inside the bureaucracy, always a help. We found the Flyer buried safely in the fire-truck garage, and I did the paperwork while RMH tried to stuff the clothing and equipment for three of us - MHB had left his gear behind - into space that was insufficient for two people. The wind had moderated, but it was still fresh to strong and right across the two-five runway, and I was glad it was RMH who had to make the decision to fly. We filled in Gen Decs - General Declarations - a sort of passport for pilots, as opposed to passengers, who had to have tickets - and gathered together the information to achieve flight, and then set about getting the heavily loaded aircraft out. This involves lifting her by the nose and crabbing her sideways, but took time, so we tried lifting and hauling her sideways. In the process I tumbled over the right spat, which bent and then straightened.

'A piece of white tape will fix that,' said RMH, the great bodger, and I wondered how much visible attrition would be done to the beautiful craft before she arrived in Australia.

We managed to fit into the machine only because I wore MHB's flying suit, so I looked like Michelin Man, so fat I couldn't tie my lap strap. I left it undone. I could only fall out if RMH fell out, and he seemed unlikely to pick that as a life option. He grumbled about his own bulk, saying he had to lose three stones anyway. The take-off was superb, none of the 'when in doubt, charge!' feeling I sometimes revert to, and we climbed into the cold morning air, turning right to find a way around Rhodes without getting into the turbulent lee of the island. It soon became apparent that it was far colder in the back seat than the cosy front. MHB had always worn a balaclava, which I had scorned, and which I now wished I had. Also, my world flight moon boots had their soles separating from their bodies - wear and tear - and the cold air froze my feet. I could wiggle my toes to get some relief, and RMH made some effort to cover them, but I resigned myself to just suffering. MHB must have felt the same way, and never said a word. It was a brilliant Spring day, little cloud, the sea to the horizon, the mysterious and mountainous bulk of Turkey to the left. RMH remembered visiting a Turkish holiday resort in one of the distant bays as we flew by. My detachment grew. I tried to sleep but it felt uncomfortable. It is odd how responsibility so concentrates the mind, and when it is lifted, one's relationship to events changes radically. Every little piece of turbulence, which just the previous day I would have taken personally, seemed like just a passing bump. There was no sign at all of the height fears and the Djinn that had so haunted previous flights.

There is an Old Etonian casualness - RMH gets exasperated at me mentioning his famous school - to the way RMH operates the radio, an authoritative matiness of which he seems quite unconscious. The language of ATC has its own strict rules which I attempt to keep to, but which RMH interprets in his own way. We were flying at a gratifying 90 mph - imagine how we would have felt with a headwind on a journey of nearly 300 miles, all over the sea? - and I listened to RMH deal with the gabby ATC, especially Nicosia, who never stopped talking, and lingered over thoughts that, 24 hours later, if all went to plan, I would be in London tumbling all my clothes into a washing machine, and looking forward to a bottle of wine in the evening, instead of the beer which is a mark of the dehydration of open cockpit - even none-cockpit - flying.

We wanted to fly direct to Larnaca, where MHB was waiting for us, and where I would find an airliner, but ATC reported that aircraft were being diverted by 'weather' over the airport, and recommended we divert to Pafos, 66 miles away. This was inconvenient, and RMH took a course halfway between complying, and being in a position to approach Larnaca from the (Turkish) north if the 'weather' went away. We could not determine what this 'weather' was - as it happens, a terrific rainstorm with Cu-nims sending airliners, even, to Pafos - and my instinct was to go to Larnaca. But then we saw that there was an ominous shimmering cloud formation to our left. RMH was quite democratic in how the decision was made, and I felt I had to stop being confrontational to make miles, so we did indeed divert to Pafos, to the relief of my frozen toes. I had not wanted my toes to be part of the decision.

Pafos is on the coast, and as it hove into view, with clear sky to the west on our right, and threatening cloud almost down to the ground on our left, we were asked to orbit while two big airliners landed. It was then I learned the difference between an amateur - like me - and a real pro like RMH. As he set up to land in a strong crosswind, I recognised instantly that we were descending into the conditions that had so made me nervous the previous day, when I had performed like a pregnant fairy. RHM tore straight out of the sky, despite the crabbing attitude, and just *stuck* it on the ground and braked immediately. It was almost like a helicopter. It was this landing that, I feel, justifies my decision that MHB will have a better chance of success with RMH as his sighted co-pilot than with me. I am, as it were, game, but RMH is more competent.

He grunted and made groaning noises at the effort of keeping the wings straight as we were diverted to the private aircraft park, and from there we taxied to hide from the strong winds behind a hut. There we were introduced to two ex-pat English microlight flyers, Steve Monkcom and Allan Carter.

Steve was living with a hole in his throat after an operation for cancer, and spoke in a strained whisper, but he was competent and very kind, seeing us authoritatively through formalities. Allen had been part of an audience in Nottingham to whom I had spoken after the world flight. RMH and I stomped about in our bulky gear - my toes returned to grateful life - and Allan bound up the disintegrating boots with gaffer tape. I don't think I'll be using them again, but if a museum ever gets interested in the first microlight flight around the world -

the Smithsonian, in Washington, has Colin Bodill's aircraft, the *second* microlight to fly around the world - it might want the boots as well, so I will get them home. It rained lightly, and we watched the storm go by us out to sea, and started to make arrangement to complete my last flight on this 'Jolly Little Caper'. There was a persistent demand for paperwork - had Steve Monkcom not been with us, we might still have been there - especially from a fat flight planner who kept warning us to get away within 2 hours or pay a parking fee - which events conspired against - and who, when we were ready to go, demanded that we leave the aircraft and go and pay him such a fee. As getting into and out of the aircraft took 1h 15m from scratch, and 30m in the state we were in, this was a real irritation. But Steve Monkcom rushed off to pay the £15.00, and absolutely refused to take payment from us, yet another example of the kindness of people who like adventures. It is, I also admit, in the fat flight planner, another example of how games can be played with us.

RMH took us up to 4,000 feet on the flight across the island, flying with terrific competence, while I day-dreamed in the back about the first beer of the day. There were obvious signs of the storm Larnaca had passed through when we lined up the land, the only time I was able to video this event, and a team called Hermes saw us into another fire-truck garage, where, thankfully, as RMH was on the phone for much of the time I struggled to get the Flyer inside, this morning it will be his responsibility to get out.

We found MHB at the airport, accompanied by a pretty woman called Helen English, who lived on the north side of this divided island, and whose husband, another ex-pat called Russell English, had covered all the insurance for MHB's epic flight.

This necessarily had an effect on any stories I told about the flight.

Helen drove us to the Flamingo Beach Hotel where we had a beer about 10 seconds after arrival - RMH can be extremely forceful in these matters, setting off to go behind the bar himself to get the beers, followed by an alarmed barman - before scattering to our bedrooms to divvy up the kit. MHB still had not found his bag, but I returned his bum-bag to him, so he is not entirely without possessions. I returned his flying suit, and I offered to lend him one of the flying suits I used on the world flight to keep him warm, but he declined this. RMH and I had rooms next to each other - he reluctantly agreed not to go to sleep with the TV on - and I am now left with the detritus of dirty clothing and a dozen bits and pieces - videos, cameras, GPS's, mobile phones - that have been such a huge part of my life in the last 9 days, and which I can now bring home and leave to another day. RMH, MHB and I dined with Helen and Russell English, telling stories and stuffing our faces with good Cyprus cuisine. I felt full of energy, but it was obvious that RMH and MHB were exhausted. RMH has been tearing around to adjust to leaving his young family - his wife, Nikki, wants a good gossip when I get back - and MHB has been drained by the effort to find his bag and have more than the clothes he is standing up in. I drove them off to bed early.

Helen and Russell told me of the joys of leaving jobs in insurance and law in the City of London, and setting up a new life in northern Cyprus. We talked about MHB's flight, of course, but also of other things, such as the Lloyds insurance

markets, and the girlification of the younger generation, which is a real delight on adventures like mine. I remember on the world flight, going through the Yukon Territory full of Jack London heroes, I came across a 2-month old copy of the *Economist*, and fell with relief and delight on complex articles about European Monetary Union, happy not to talk constantly about the adventure I was then on. Helen English has a theory that the birth control pill has some responsibility for the girly attitudes of the young nowadays, in that girls upstream from London use the contraceptive pill, the residue gets into the water supply - water we drink in London is said to have gone through six previous people - and it is this that is robbing our young men of the capacity for adventure. Indeed, more than that, it is making them actively hostile and dismissive of the sort of lone adventure MHB and RMH and I aspire to. We thought this was a sad state of affairs, and also dangerous to the nation's health.

It is difficult to realise that, only 11 days ago, I was fast asleep on a peaceful Sunday morning, ahead of me the prospects of a good breakfast, a lie-in without my half-mile daily swim, and a leisurely read of the *Sunday Telegraph*. Just 24 hours later I was precipitated into this caper, had an effect on it for a while, and I am now leaving. There is a lot I want to say about it, to help it succeed and realise a dream that MHB has had ever since he was a boy and wanted to be a pilot - and then watched his eyes begin to fade and die - and which he must, if there is any natural justice in the world, win through.

For me, though, John Meredith-Hardy got it right.

It has been a jolly little caper.

Stats: T/O, Rhodes, RMH at the bar, 1045 local, Idng on a diversion because of a storm at Pafos, SW Cyprus, after a 275 mile flight of 3h 30m at 2.15pm.

T/O Pafos 4 pm, landing Larnaca Airport at 4.55 after a 66 mile flight across the island.

I went out to find some early shops and bought a bag to carry all my personal flying equipment back to England, and saw RMH and MHB to the Flyer. There was strong sunshine and not much wind when we pulled it out of the fire truck hut, and the business of a busy airport went on around us. I was, by now, completely de-mob happy, detached from the tasks of the day, just wanting to get home. RMH was away getting a flight plan filed, and I said goodbye by phone to him. He and MHB faced a flight across the sea to cross Lebanon at 10,000 feet, in temperatures of 20 degrees below to get to Amman in Jordan, and I heard later in the day they completed it successfully, one of the most dangerous parts of the flight.

At 1045 I flew back over the route I had struggled to help carry Miles Hilton-Barber to Cyprus, looking down from a great height in a Club Class seat, able to order alcoholic drinks but sticking to water. Standard Chartered Bank sent a chauffeur car to pick me up at Heathrow, and I was de-briefed by Joanna Conlon and Sophie Consett, who were plainly relieved to see me alive.

I had had no time to negotiate a contract for the job I did, and perhaps one can be arranged now, but having done the work, I am in no position to make any real argument about it. In the event, it all worked out.

It was a terrific little adventure, but I must pick up the pieces of my normal life.

I am quite rude about Storm in the diaries, but not as rude as I actually was on the flight itself. I have dropped the suggestion that his future is a quiet room, a bottle of whisky and a revolver.

But I do feel that if he is to be re-admitted to the company of microlight flyers, he has to find an honourable way – with Joanna Conlon of SCB, with Miles himself, with Richard, and I believe with me – to return four feathers we should have given him.

BM

Timetable – the flight of G-SEEE to Cyprus, first leg of the London-Sydney flight

Brian Milton and Miles Hilton-Barber – pilots

Date	Details	Distance	Time
March 7	Biggin to le Touquet (France)	90	1.00
March 7	Le Touquet – Macon	326	4.25
March 8	Macon – Romans St Paul	86	0.55
March 9	Romans – Alps – Fayence	144	2.00
March 9	Fayence – Forli (Italy)	296	4.10
March 10	Forli – Brindisi	398	5.00
March 11	Brindisi – Corfu (Greece)	127	2.00
March 12	Corfu – Araxos – Athens	267	4.50
March 13	Athens – Rhodes	253	3.30
March 14	Rhodes –Larnaca (Cyprus)	340	5.40

Total: 2,330 miles

Total time: 33 hours, 30 mins, more than 8 times - in 8 days - the total hours Storm Smith flew with MHB in 4 months.

Average speed: 70 mph.

Compare with GT Global average speed on world flight of 57mph on 912 Quantum, and Dalgety Flyer average of 56mph.

Average daily time in air: 4 hours, 31 mins. That means we flew – on average – more hours *each day* than the whole of the training schedule devised by Storm Smith for MHB over a period of six months.

25,269 words – a novelette – need a summary of RMH and MHB’s flying