

Wild West Adventure

by Jim Foster

Excitement levels were running high at the South West Microlight School on the weekend of the 17th and 18th of October. Early weather forecasts were not so good, however the forecast for late Saturday afternoon was pretty good indicating an opportunity for a late afternoon lesson.

I was excited as due to bad weather I had not flown for several weeks. Fellow student pilot, Ian Bawden who has recently taken delivery of his new 912 Tundra SST, the first of the strutted-wings to come to WA, and yet to take its maiden flight, was obviously equally excited.

CFI Brendan Watts was to take the new SST for a test flight, then he and I would take off for some serious circuits and instructor Paul Coffey would go up with Ian. Brendan completed the test flight with no problems, as expected so he and I took off on our circuits.

Ian suggested to Paul that he might like to take the SST for a solo flight first. Of course he would. Ian's wife and daughter then rocked up to see the new trike so, after consulting with Paul, Ian offered them a ride in his pride and

joy, which he still had not flown. Eventually, Ian and Paul joined Brendan and I in the circuit.

During this time fellow pilot Jim Polinelli had gone flying locally in his 912 Tundra.

By about 6:30PM we were all back in the hangar reflecting on the days flying and how well the new SST performed. Perhaps an ale was being had as well.

The weather forecasts for Sunday were pretty good, especially for the morning. So for the benefit of us students, Brendan and Paul suggested that we have a day away from circuits and take a trip up to Murrayfield. WOW, a cross-country trip. Ian and I jumped at that opportunity. Plans were made for us to be in the air by 7:00AM the next morning.

Sunday morning Ian and I were at the airport nice and early and had our planes all pre-flighted and ready for departure by the time Brendan and Paul arrived. Jim P was also ready. We had all studied up overnight on approaches to Murrayfield, radio frequencies enroute and in circuit and special circuit procedures, like right-hand circuits on east-facing runways.

In a pre-flight briefing, we again discussed all of this and Paul produced copies of the flight plan showing our intended path etc.

Weather was perfect so off we go. TWMPFISCHR done, radio call made for entering and back tracking Runway 25. Perfect conditions on takeoff.

Usual departing overhead calls made and we tracked towards the coast before turning inland to follow the power line north levelling out at 1,800 ft.

About half an hour into the flight we started to notice wispy white clouds going past us, a little quickly but nothing to worry about. However, things started to get a little bumpy. Soon the clouds were starting to get a little thicker but still well-broken and we found ourselves having to climb a little to stay in smooth air. What a wonderful sight—the shadow of our aircraft on the top of the white clouds surrounded by what appeared to be a rainbow.

As we got closer to our destination, the lovely white clouds started to turn a little greyish and they seemed to be going past us a lot quicker.

A quick radio call to Paul confirmed that we were now hammering our way into a solid 20 knot headwind. Things started to get more bumpy and we found ourselves varying altitude to avoid cloud and get better air.

Ah, there is Murrayfield. Inbound radio calls made. A fly-over the field confirms what we already knew. The wind was quite strong and about 45 degrees across the strip from our left on Runway 05, so it was to be a right-hand circuit. Downwind and base calls made and we are lining up on final. Am I glad Brendan is in the back seat? Oh yeah. With more than a little input



Rainbow shadow



from Brendan we get the wheels on the ground and taxi over to the hangars.

No-one is game to leave the trikes unattended for long, so in shifts we all head off to the gents noting the rather unusual notice on all inside doors in the Royal Aero Club hangar — obviously snakes are a bigger problem here than they are in Bunbury.

While at Murrayfield, we had the chance to talk to Aussie ace, Matt Hall, who was practising for next year's Red Bull Air Race and training a new hopeful in an Extra 300S (photo next page). Matt was a RAAF ace and squadron leader on F-15s and F-18s before leaving the Air Force to join Red Bull.

Matt is 28 years old (but looks about 17 or 18) and is currently lying third overall in the Red Bull standings in this, his first ever year of competition. He is the first Aussie and the first rookie to ever

achieve a podium finish in a Red Bull Race flying his \$500,000 MXS-R. And, believe it or not, he is an accomplished hang glider and trike pilot who rates Airborne trikes as the best in the world. He was most interested and impressed with Ian's XT-912 SST strutted wing.

Because we had seen the storm front incoming from the north-west, we decided there was no chance of a coffee break here, we needed to be on our way south and back home ASAP. With the quick meeting over and the decision made to get out of here while we can and try to outrun the worst of the incoming weather back to Bunbury.

Brendan and I line up first option for the sealed runway 05. Full power and away we go. As soon as we rotated, the wind picked us up and things got quite bumpy but still we climbed out of there. We climbed to 1000 ft and circled while Ian and Paul and then Jim P had their turn at departure, each enjoying the experience as much as we did.

Once we were all in the air, it was agreed that it would be unlikely that we'd be able to land back in Bunbury in this wind. Decision made, let's keep low, track the 55 nautical miles directly to Bunbury and, if unable to land there,

follow the coast and go on to Busselton another 22 nautical miles further south. It was too bumpy at 1000 ft, so we settled on 700 ft with the yukky grey clouds above making sure we didn't go too high. An interesting time to fly and try to maintain 700 ft. WOW what was that I remember saying to Brendan as he was simultaneously shouting to me, lose the power, lose the power. It was those wonderful thermals pushing me up towards the clouds. I now know that when this happens, quick response on the throttle is required. Straight and level flight — yeah right — I was happy just to be able to control the trike and keep it pointing in the right direction while we scooted along at more than 90 knots over the ground, according to the GPS.

As we approached the estuaries, it was nothing but white caps from one side to the other. I have never seen an estuary so angry before. Lovely to look at, but maybe not today.

As we approach Lake Preston, and quick chat and we decide it might be prudent to try to land at Blair Howe's private strip which was facing almost into wind. We had already passed the strip by a couple of miles so we did an about

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Matt Hall's Extra 300S practice aeroplane at Murrayfield

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turn and headed back into what was now at least a 30 knot headwind. I am so thankful that I bought the heavier and more powerful 912.

We line up Blair's strip from the southern end and start our descent, not that we were that high to start with. Blair's strip is not flat and level and has a few humps in it. Brendan is saying to me line up for touch down past the first hump. Yeah, no worries mate, as we struggle to keep on line. 200 ft AGL and we near the trees at the end of the strip. WOW things are bumpy now and the plane has a mind of its own – we are experiencing serious rotor in the lee of the sandhills and the trees on approach. My eyes are wide open and my sphincter has me firmly planted in the seat as the call

for full power comes from behind. No time to think about this, down goes my foot and we are out of there. No chance of landing there, so back to the coast we go. Visibility was poor at best with a combination of low clouds and smoke from burn-offs. Ocean was like a boiling kettle. Follow the sand. If something goes wrong, you can always land on the sand, may not be pretty but nothing to get in your way. So down the coast we go, not necessarily maintaining 500 ft AGL. Ah, we can see Bunbury.

Let's go and check out the strip. OK, up we go, maybe not all the way to 1000 ft. Our fly-over shows the windsock standing out in all its glory at 90 degrees straight across the runway. No chance of landing here. Off we go again back to the

coast and south to Busselton. As we head further south, the weather starts to clear up, now this ain't so bad. The white caps on the ocean disappear and visibility is much improved.

Brendan gives me the nod and says take a left, that's Busso airfield over there. Inbound calls are made and soon we are calling final at Busselton. A perfect landing despite my pounding heart, shaking legs and heavy breathing. Hard to believe but on the ground there was almost nil wind, 5 knots at most — what a different scenario — almost like a different planet.

We taxi up to the Aero Club building and are greeted by several of the Busselton Aero Club members. We all secure our planes and head inside. Coffee and biscuits are on offer and readily accepted. Wonderful hospitable people and quite surprised to learn that we could not land in Bunbury and of the experience we had had. A quick phone call to Bunbury Flying School confirms that weather is still not so pretty back there, so we settle in for a while.

After about two hours sitting there, we start thinking about taking off, checking out Bunbury for ourselves and, if necessary, we could always return to Busselton. We all had sufficient fuel on board for the trip up to Bunbury and



Busselton Aero Club stalwart, Ian Stevenson (Left) with Paul, Ian B, Jim F and Jim P at Busselton



Paul and Ian celebrating a safe arrival back at Bunbury

probably even back to Busso, but what if the unexpected happened? So we all topped up with a good 30 litres or so of Avgas, said our farewells to our new friends, made the calls and taxied out. Wonderful strip, no problems with this takeoff.

Back to our friendly coastline and up to Bunbury we head. Time to climb as we approach Dallyelup and make inbound call. Still pretty windy up here and a fly-over of the strip and look at the wind sock confirms this. We decide to have a go at landing. No-one is in circuit so we nominate runway 07 and join downwind. Base and final, here we come. Thank god Brendan is here.

We are getting buffeted around all over the place. Suddenly we fall from the sky, thud and we are back up there again. Back down we come a little more gently but not much and up we go again. Brendan is now shouting out Yee-hah and at the same time demanding full

power, full power. So off we go again. I'm glad one of us was enjoying that.

My head is saying that's it, we are off back to Busselton. Not Brendan though. He says, come on, let's try 25 instead. You're the boss mate, so around we go and join mid-downwind for 25. We are no sooner crossing the road on downwind and Brendan calls, lose the power and turn base now. He takes control and to my surprise, we do a glide approach and landing on 25. Not the smoothest of landings but here we are with all three wheels on the ground. I could feel my legs twitching as we taxied back to our hangar.

Ian and Paul had similar difficulties getting down but a relatively smooth landing in the end. Jim P, on the other hand, made it look so easy and took the honours with a greaser of a landing to the envy of all. Ground handling was a little

difficult but all three aircraft were soon neatly in the hangar.

Now it was time to compare stories and debrief. Certainly had we known about the change in the weather, we would not have undertaken such a flight. We had taken every precaution and checked all weather forecasts but been caught in rapidly deteriorating and most unexpected conditions.

Over a thirst quenching refreshment, Paul and Brendan confirmed what we as students already knew, that we had flown in some of the roughest conditions that a microlight could tackle.

To Brendan and Paul, I say thanks. It was an invaluable experience and one that no doubt Ian and myself will never forget, but at the same time, not be in a hurry to repeat.

Jim Foster, Student Pilot – South West Microlight School