

TRANS-AUSTRALIAN MICROLIGHTS

by Geoff Barratt

The epic flight of Geoff Barratt and Jim Polinelli from Maitland NSW to Bunbury WA set a world record for the longest ever delivery flight of an Airborne microlight

I love flying microlights. But sometime in January 2008 I started to realise I wasn't enjoying it as much as I had in the past. I've had my license for about 5 years now and when I first started out I bought a "Redback" complete with Wizard Wing. A basic model - you guys know what I'm talking about - that can land slow on a dime. A reliable little plane.

I had outgrown the Redback and my plan was to either upgrade my machine or get out of microlights altogether. With my mind made up, I started on plans to buy the Rolls Royce of microlights: the XT912 Tundra. It was at this point that I also made plans to jump on a jet and pick up my new plane direct from the Redhead factory before flying it

home to Bunbury.

This is where my flying mate of five years entered the equation; one Jim Pollinelli.

We had spoken before about our reluctance to upgrade to better aircraft because we could do most things in our existing units. However, we soon talked ourselves in to the upgrade and, as the short version of the story goes, I told Jim that I was buying a new XT912. I explained that I intended to fly it across Australia without support crew and asked if he was interested. His response may as well have been, "Is the Pope a Catholic?" because after that it was on for young and old. Myself being the "young" and Jim the "old", obviously.

Jim was still looking at gyros at

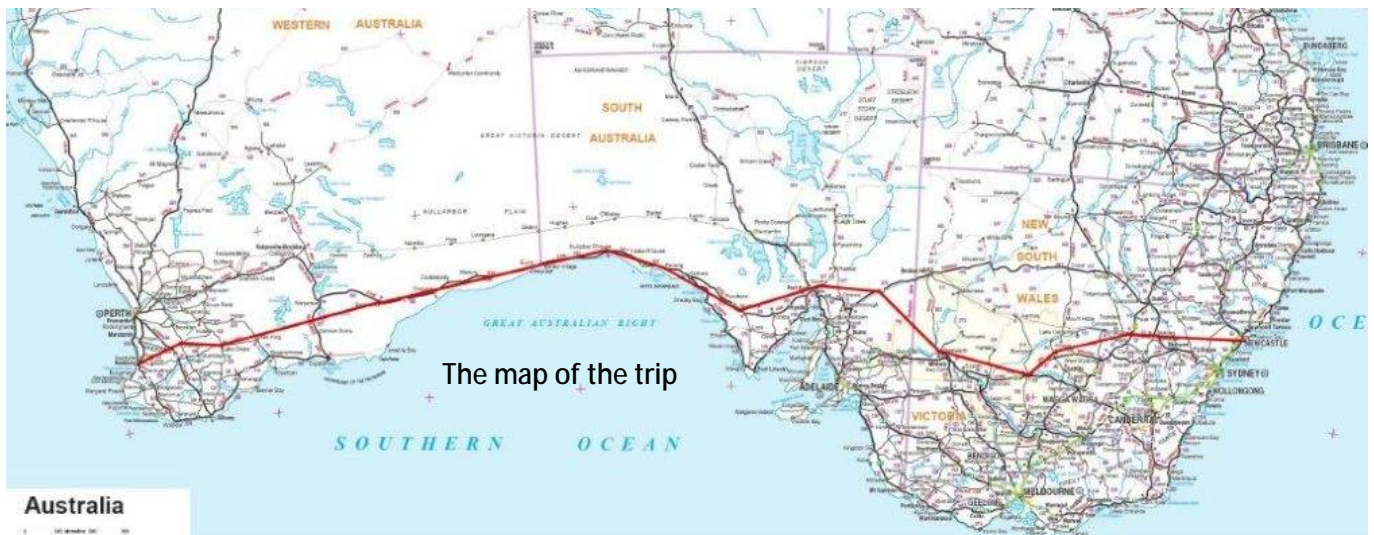
the time, but it wasn't long until we had contacted Southwest Microlights for prices and paid the deposit. It was now June and we were informed that the new planes would be ready for pickup in September or October.

With all the equipment bought, my plan was for us to put it all on a commercial jet and fly over. But when it became clear Jim was intent on taking the kitchen sink along for the ride, it was decided that he would make his way over by road. Knowing I couldn't change his mind, Jim loaded up his car with our equipment and I jumped on the next Virgin flight out of Perth.

Jim and I met up at Newcastle and drove down to the Airborne factory to introduce ourselves to the boys, who were both accommodating



Geoff (red) and Jim (blue) prepare for an early start



and professional. It wasn't long before we were towing our trikes down to Maitland to put the wings on for a test flight. My trike had always been dealt with first up to this point, so to avoid tempting fate, my craft was the first to be loaded onto the trailer for the trip down. A few minutes into the journey we noticed a strange sound coming from behind us and I suggested Jim pull over. We got out to find the trailer had unhooked itself and was digging up road threatening to jettison my 912 Tundra. A lesson in towing was learned and we got both trikes down to Maitland without any more problems.

The next few days were spent ironing out the bugs in the new craft and soon enough we were ready to leave. We opted to load up the trikes without a send-off audience just in

case we were over-loaded, but Jim was still disappointed that we couldn't find room on the trikes for a mattress.

I myself was already resigned to the reality of our circumstance. I had spent the last few nights laid out on a ground sheet to toughen myself up for the sleepless nights we were sure to have on the trip back.

Leaving Maitland on October 1st 2008, we flew in 18 knot nor'westerly winds, before landing in Parkes on a nice big runway. After stretching and doing all our checks, we continued on to our overnight rest stop. It was a place called Goolgowi and it was an all red dirt strip and large "triple gees". With an accumulated flight time of six hours, we unloaded the trikes and dropped the wings, at which point Jim decided to pass out

from lack of food or water before we put up the tents.

This was the routine for the next few days. We 'shanks-pony'd into town to pick up our fuel, carrying the jerry cans three kilometres either way - a nice bit of exercise for us both. We had tea in town where the owner of the garage tried to sell me a perpetual motion machine he had developed. He only wanted 250 thousand for it, so I referred him straight to Jim. You can ask Jim how it went after that.

We left Goolgowi as early as we could, what with the wind blowing a steady 20 knots from the west (which is about where it stayed for the remainder of the trip). We made our way over the dry wind-blown Hay plains and into Wentworth for our second night stop after about four and a half hours flight time.

We were soon met by Eric, Mick, and Ron, and what gentlemen they were. They went about offering us the use of their brand new clubrooms complete with toilets and a fully stocked fridge. We accepted their hospitality and proceeded to use the showers, but kept to sleeping outside in tents to keep an eye on the trikes in the ever-increasing winds.

The next morning began with my checking the weather and our progress on my laptop (I should point out that where possible we chose cross-strips for all our stopovers) and we were off once again. With winds over 20 knots, we headed for our next stop - a place called Yunta.

It was during this section of our

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The trikes at the start point, Maitland airstrip



Geoff is doing a weather check at Yunta, SA (*I think the wind-sock tells the story*)



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cross-country flight, about four hours in to a long stint over endless tiger country, that I advised Jim I would be climbing to achieve safe flight over the approaching Flinders Ranges. As I ascended I noticed a large squall line across 180 degrees of our flight path. From our vantage it looked to be about 500 feet above the ranges themselves, which didn't leave us much room to play with.

Jim made his way up to my altitude and, catching sight of the squall, proceeded to teach me a few words I had only previously read in toilet cubicles. Not happy, Jim.

Discussing our options, we decided to push on to try and find a landing area. We had already checked all possibles during our pre-flight routine, but it made us feel better to think our options extended beyond deep shit and deeper shit.

As we reached the ranges we were approximately 500 feet above ground level - the same height as the

base of the squall line. In winds in excess of 60 knots variable, we began dodging the rain showers. Now, according to its specifications, the Tundra 912 has a VNE (velocity not to exceed) of 85 knots (Streak 3 wing) and will *not* invert - not that the squall didn't make every effort. The 912 will, however, vertical stall and vertical descend, as often as every few minutes, in serious squall winds. Or at least this was our experience on that particular day for a good hour and a half. We were glad to be wearing seatbelts at the time.

It got to a point where our radio calls consisted of two clicks back and forth to acknowledge we were both still airborne. To say we were exhausted when we hit the ground would be to understate the situation. This flight had lasted five and a half hours.

Safely in Yunta, we came to the problem of getting out of our trikes in 20 knot winds. It required that the wing be held secure while enough

equipment was removed to fully lower it. I wasn't going to sit there all evening, so I made a move. Fair to say, I nearly lost my new trike.

I called to a passing caravaner and he gladly offered his assistance, helping me to secure my trike in spite of the winds. Oh, for a ground crew. Damage was done to the nose channel when a gust of wind nearly toppled the trike as I lowered the wing. We later repaired the damage.

Jim's hands wouldn't leave his control bar, so we prised them loose and got him stowed away - all on the side of a strip in 20 knot winds. We were knackered, but I got straight on to the laptop to recheck the weather and - surprise, surprise - the forecasters had gotten it wrong. On the plus side, it meant we had to be better pilots.

The weather was closing in, so we stayed in Yunta for the next day, waiting for our next opportunity to fly. It came the following morning when, whilst not perfect, the weather

had improved enough to make a go of it. Besides, if we didn't leave now, it was likely a whole week would pass before our next chance arose.

In sou'easterly winds of 15 knots, we made our way out of Yunta into a rough section of flying through a cloud base with showers at 1000 feet, and landed in Wudinna four hours later in winds closer to 30 knots. A local in a hotted-up ute offered us a lift into town for fuel. Three blokes in a ute - just like the good old days. The same guy (Dustin) dropped our fuel back out at the strip while we ate dinner in town.

During our stay, a local family by the name of Byrne unveiled a plaque to their father/grandfather, who was a pilot and had donated part of their farm to the local community for the Wudinna airstrip.

We left the great people of Wudinna at 1300 hours. We had been waiting for the wind to drop, but when it didn't happen our pre-flight meeting brought us to the decision to continue on regardless. At this point I had already made a phone call to the strip manager at Penong, who explained with excitement that there would be a few people ready to meet us as we landed.

(On a side note, Penong was indeed a cross-strip. I can only speak for myself, but there are better landing strips in the paddocks around Bunbury. Still, we had 360 degrees if we needed it.)



Jim waves for the camera at Goolgowi, NSW

Something you notice when you fly with a mate on a regular basis is that there are always multiple options for any landing. This time I chose to land into the wind, whereas Jim decided to land on the 1.2 metre-wide gravel strip. Both were good landings. Jim and I make a habit of discussing all our landing options whenever we are in remote areas.

We refuelled whilst we chewed the fat with the locals before we were ready to make our way to the Nullabor Roadhouse. Again, the flight was full of excitement as the rain squalls and winds took their toll on both pilot and machine. Flight time was five and a half hours.

The following day we were up nice and early to pack up the trike and take off once again. We were forty minutes into a flight to the west when a total line of squall rose up in front of us, forcing us to turn around. This rain front had not shown up on the weather report the night before, which just shows how unpredictable weather can be.

I decided to fly out over the ocean off the Great Australian Bight and, heading back towards the shore at about 200 feet above sea level, I lined myself up for a direct path at the rocky cliff face. As I neared the cliff, the rotor shot me up over the land and I was another 400 feet up within a few seconds - magic.

A short time later it was back to the Nullabor Station to wait for that rain squall to pass. A funny thing we noticed about the Nullabor Station is that if a local sees you more than once in a 24 hour period, they assume you are a worker and treat you accordingly - great stuff.

The following day we left the station heading in to rain areas and squalls and a 20 knot variable breeze. While it could be considered embarrassing to mention this, I include it only to give you an idea of the conditions in which we were travelling. But we made our way above the Nullabor parallel to the Eyre Highway, we saw a lot of road vehicles - and some of them passed us. I think the

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Wudinna (SA) international terminal

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word is "head-wind".

We landed in Eucla to refuel, then in Mundrabilla where we refuelled from a petrol bowser, much to the amusement of the locals. Then it was on to Madura, Balladonia and then a sturdy old salt lake strip four kilometres out of Norseman for a group flight time total of nine hours.

There we met a gentleman by the name of Peter Brady who, when he learned of our trip, lent us his vehicle to drive back and forth between the fuel garage and the airstrip. I offered him some money for his trouble and he just told me to pay it forward, which I have tried to make good on several times since.

We left Norseman in the early

morning and flew to Harrismith (some of you may remember the trip there when some of the lesser mortals opted to stay in the hotel - you know who you are). On approach to the landing strip at about 500 feet, I got some unexpected lift off the rubbish tip and almost missed the strip altogether.

Refuelling once again, we moved along through the final leg of the trip to land in Bunbury in winds of around 20 knots sou'westerly. After an east-to-west coast flight time of forty-one hours, it was good to be home. Paul Coffey arrived a short time later to welcome us back. He politely informed us that we had just broken a world record.

The trip had been both emotion-

ally and physically exhausting, with a lot of trials and tribulations. Obviously, my flying mate Jim Polinelli was a good friend and sturdy companion, but I think he'll agree when I say that it all would've been so much harder without the help of the people we met along the way. Their kindness and hospitality helped us through a number of difficult situations, and I found it to be a strong reminder of the integrity of the Australian people.

I love the challenges of flying, and this trip offered them up in bucket loads. I still love flying. Probably more so now that I know how big the buckets can get. ■