

With camping gear and clothes safely stowed, on Wednesday 8 May, Jeremy Liber and I took off from Oaksey Park in Wiltshire on a VFR flight to Rechlin Larz Airfield in the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern region in Northern Germany. I was particularly enthusiastic because I have had a life-long fascination for WWII aircraft and in particular Luftwaffe aircraft, plus I had never flown that far before and I wondered how my ageing frame would cope with long periods of physical inactivity in a cramped cockpit. I need not have worried about the latter for the inclement outbound weather ensured that my concentration was occupied by, at times, intense navigational duties since we did not carry a GPS and relied on good old-fashioned map reading, aided by the occasional VOR beacon.

For Jeremy, this fly-in was an annual pilgrimage and although it is held at different airfields in Germany, he had flown to Rechlin before. Having left Oaksey Park, we set course for Lydd (or London Ashford, as it likes to be called). However, the nearer we got the worse the weather became, with the resultant deterioration in visibility. We decided to fly south until we hit the coast and see if we could fly around the weather front but after stooging up and down the

coast for a while trying to find a way through, we decided to divert to Spilsted Farm near Hastings and wait for things to improve. We received a warm welcome from the owner and over a coffee and biscuits in the Pilot's Lounge (very posh) were given a tour of the hangars and a 'look see' at the owner's toys – the finale being a trio of Flying Fleas!

The weather front having moved east, we left Spilsted and continued our flight to Lydd. Thirty minutes later, formalities dealt with, we were back in the air and crossing the English Channel at 3,000ft. The Channel looked cold and uninviting yet we were in sight of land the whole time and we touched down on French terra firma at Calais Airport at 1435 (we had gained an hour) where, after paying the €10 landing fee, we closed our flight plan, stowed the life-jackets and headed east once more, bound for our overnight stop at the German airfield Traben-Trarbach, or Mount Royal as we preferred to call it.

It soon became apparent that we were catching up with the weather front first encountered in Kent. By late afternoon the skies were ominously grey and were too low for us to fly over Lille at a safe altitude. It



A FORAY INTO GERMANY LIVING THE DREAM

Darrell Parsons and a friend fly to Germany in a Jodel and find warm hospitality, abandoned WWII airfields and an incredible adventure

Darrell, Irena and Jeremy after a night of German and Russian hospitality, typical of the camaraderie and friendship experienced throughout the trip.





My carriage for the trip, Jeremy's Jodel DR1050, a superb and economical tourer in the classic style.

looked clearer to the north so we decided to fly around Lille and pick up our track on the other side. Lower and lower we descended in order to maintain VMC; it was no use, we would have to turn back or land so we dropped into Lille at Marcq-en-Barœul. With no forward vision due to the rain that was battering the windscreen it was a tense affair, certainly for me anyway, but Jeremy got us down safely. This is the life!

FANTASTIC HOSPITALITY

We were both keen to get as far east as possible on this first day but I think we had both given up on the idea of reaching Traben-Trarbach as we taxied to the hold of Runway 17 once the weather improved. Since we were

close to Belgium and did not want to cross an international border, lest they asked us to file a flight plan, we flew a southerly heading this time to bring us back onto our original intended track. Before too long we were again catching up the weather so decided to call it a day and landed at Vitry-en-Artois. The airfield was an established airport built prior to WWII but was seized by the Germans in June 1940 during the Battle of France and was used by the Luftwaffe until recaptured by the Allies in late 1944. Today the 'all-weather' runways laid down by the Luftwaffe in 1941

are unserviceable and only an 837m grass runway remains in use. It is now a microlight field and to have foreign Jodel visitors amongst them was a rare event – we were treated like kings! Vehicles were removed from the hangar so that the Jodel could go in overnight out of the rain; then we were advised there would be no need to pitch our tent because we could use the clubhouse; and when we asked our hosts for a telephone directory so that a taxi could be summoned to take us into nearby Douai, a bunch of car keys was tossed over to us – fantastic hospitality! After a meal to cap off an entirely satisfying day for me, I was snug and warm in my sleeping bag as the rain

FLIGHT TO GERMANY

continued outside. I didn't know where I would be sleeping tomorrow night and I didn't really care. This trip to a fly-in was turning into an adventure.

The next morning we awoke to a pale blue sky and nil wind. We had checked the Met forecast on our hosts' computer the previous evening and knew this good weather would not last. Having left suitable gifts, we took off and headed east, intending to use the VORs at Cambrai and Nattenheim where we would alter course to 036° to Gedern on our way to Traben-Trarbach. We then intended to fly to Wasserkuppe where we wanted to look around the gliding museum before stopping off for the second overnight stop, at Suhl, where they would be expecting us.

At 0732 we were overhead the beacon at Cambrai and with 093° on the compass we pointed ourselves towards the Ardennes. After an hour we had travelled 100nm, having crossed the border into Luxembourg at 0813. The only excursion from track had been a fly-by along the runway of a reserve military airfield at St Hubert. Jeremy and I share the same interest in historic airfields – just knowing that Messerschmitt Bf109s or Junker 88s were rolling down those runways 60 odd years ago was fascinating. The architecture of the Control Towers differs greatly between that of the British and German WWII airfields – I won't go into detail here but it does – I think I'm turning into a bit of an anorak!

At 0832 I made my last 'waypoint' mark on the map as we had flown into the bad weather that was forecast and I became 'temporarily unsure of our position'. At the time we were at 3,700ft but ahead of us looked grim. Lower and lower we descended while making our

way through the clag. I knew we had crossed the German border simply by the number of wind turbines that were dotted about the landscape. We were forced to turn first north and then south in an effort to keep the ground in sight. At one point we ascended up into a hole in the clouds that appeared so we could look at what was ahead of us. Thankfully the cloud was breaking up to the east so we headed for the Nattenheim VOR above the clouds for a change and the difference was breathtaking. Suddenly we were in a different world and our seemingly vulnerable little craft looked out of proportion to the sun-baked, snow-white, broken layer of cloud beneath us. Climbing up through 6,000ft we now levelled off and could see the ground intermittently across the German border, whereupon a suitably-sized hole appeared and we spiralled down below the clouds once more. That brief excursion into the sunshine was marvellous but we were still unsure of our position until a town came into view. Knowing where the beacon was relative to our position we calculated that the town now in view was Bitburg. And further study of the map showed that Bitburg had an airfield and at 0846 we alighted onto its 3,056m of Runway 24.

ONWARD THROUGH GERMANY

Bitburg Air Base was a front-line NATO base during the Cold War; it was the home of the United States Air Force's 36th Fighter Wing for over 40 years but at the end of the Cold War it was no longer needed and was handed over to the German government on 1 October 1994. When we arrived it was also closed but dead on 0900 people started arriving for work and soon we had paid the landing fee (€12),

refuelled both tanks with avgas (€193.83) and ordered breakfast in the restaurant (€8.80). The Controller was a decent chap and let us explore the Control Tower. Built by the Americans, it was big in every way possible and was built to a very high standard including marble flooring on the staircase which served the eleven floors!

By now the weather had improved a great deal but we finally abandoned the idea of going to Traben-Trarbach and decided to head directly to Wasserkuppe. At 1050 we were off again and for the next 120nm we enjoyed a spell of reasonable weather, tracking 072° passing north of Frankfurt with good views of the Rhine and on into the upper regions of Hesse and Fulda. Mile after mile of typical German landscape passed below. Forest upon forest of mostly evergreen trees were growing in this tumbling terrain. And the further we flew, the more prevalent the wind farms became. The Germans are obsessed with green energy and one could also see large areas of land being taken over by solar farms (photovoltaic panels). As someone who has purchased no less than four such systems back in the UK, I too am as 'green cultured' but it's such a shame that the Germans have turned perfectly good airfields into power stations by installing solar panels over them and rendering them unusable.

At 1220 Wasserkuppe gave us joining instructions and we entered the circuit from the overhead. The more rarified air of this 3,000ft high airfield and its comparatively short 670m very steep uphill runway did much to concentrate our minds. A short taxi to the parking area at the top, unbuckle and open hatches – first stop, the loo; second stop,



Segelflug Museum where we were to find some of the earliest gliders that gained the budding Luftwaffe pilots their wings during the inter-war years when Germany was forbidden to build powered aircraft by the Treaty of Versailles.

Our itinerary maintained we had one more leg to complete this day – a 25-mile hop to Suhl, another gliding airfield where they would be expecting us. Nearly 2,000ft high with a single 570m long grass runway, Suhl was going to be challenging for it lay in a valley surrounded on three sides by mountains. From the overhead we could see from the windsock that to land into wind would mean approaching the runway from the S.E. To get to that position our downwind leg would take us deep into the valley towards the 'closed' end. Sure enough, looking sideways (again) at the steep terrain towering above concentrates the mind as we turn onto base leg and then again onto final. Gradient is difficult to see from the air but the lower one gets, the more gradient becomes apparent – and yep, it was a downhill runway... with a steep ravine just off the end.

We were met by Jeremy's contact, Jörg, who showed us the club amenities for our use – bar, toilets, shower room, etc and said we could pitch our tent next to the Jodel. But before we had time to take out the camping gear Jörg came running over saying "Nein, nein." He had just received a telephone call from his Russian wife Irena who had told him to bring the Brits home as she had made us a typical Russian meal, after which we were welcome to sleep overnight at their house. On the way to Jörg's house we stopped off at a garage and bought Irena some chocolates and flowers, plus some wine and beer – ahhh yes, we Brits know how to treat a lady.

Totally refreshed after a good night's sleep, shower and breakfast, we were taken back to the field by Jörg and Irena. At 1120 the Jodel's wheels left the lush green turf and we flew low over the ravine gaining speed. With 036° showing on the compass we were heading for our penultimate outbound destination of Dessau, once the home of the famous German aircraft manufacturer Junkers. Although the factory is no longer in existence, there was a museum adjacent to the airfield that had Ju 52 aircraft on display and is the main reason for us wanting to go there. But first we had 150nm to cover.

Our route took us NW abeam Weimar and into the lowland of Thuringen. 25 minutes into the flight Jeremy brought my attention to a large symmetrical shape on the ground, not far from some old buildings and disused railway track. The surrounding landscape seemed barren and foreboding in comparison to the pretty little German villages we had become accustomed to. There was nothing on the chart to give us a clue as to what we were circling but it was clearly of interest to the hundreds of people milling around below us. It slowly dawned on us that we could have been looking at the site of an old concentration camp. I made a mark on the chart as an aide-memoire for further investigation when I returned home. Meanwhile we resumed 036° and continued in silence. It was very sobering. The site in question turned out to have once been the infamous German concentration camp of Buchenwald. Together with its many satellite camps, Buchenwald was one of the largest concentration camps established within the old German borders of 1937.

At 1320 Dessau Radio gave us airfield information and we entered the circuit from

the overhead. I was looking forward to steeping myself in the history this airfield represented. My thirst for knowledge of German aircraft began in my schoolboy days, no doubt helped by the piece of wood-mounted shrapnel my father gave to me. He told me it was from the first German bomb ever to be dropped on Gloucester. Can you imagine what great stories a 10-year-old lad can conjure up by just holding a relic such as this? I wondered what dropped it in the first place – it could have been a Ju 88 built at the factory site I was now overflying!

The little boy came out in me as the wheels kissed Runway 27 Dessau. A two-kilometre walk later to the museum and I was staring at a Ju 52. This tri-motor aeroplane, nicknamed 'Iron Annie' by the allies, was of the type Adolf Hitler used for his internal flights and is renowned for its corrugated fuselage and wings. Sadly this was the only complete aircraft on display.

A WARM WELCOME

Airborne once more we tuned onto the VOR beacon of Nauen situated five miles from the NW suburbs of Berlin. Overhead the beacon, we headed 350° for the last leg of our outbound journey. Rechlin-Larz, or to give it its modern name, Müritz Airpark, is situated on the southern shoreline of the largest lake in Germany, Lake Müritz. In 1935, the Rechlin airfield became the official testing ground of the newly-formed Luftwaffe with Hitler, Speer, Goring and Udet being regular visitors. Construction work on the airfield and the accompanying barracks was partly carried out by forced labour from the then nearby concentration camp of Ravenbruck. >



(Far left) Instrument panel sans GPS. We used map, compass and stopwatch – plus a VOR

(Left) An example of a German WWII period Control Tower photographed at Sperenburg airfield. Somewhat more grand than a typical UK Tower of the period.

(Below) An evocative shot of 'Iron Annie', a Junkers 52, the German's counterpart to our Douglas Dakota general transport aircraft during WWII.



FLIGHT TO GERMANY

"Rechlin-Larz, this is Golf Alpha Yankey Golf Delta inbound."

"Jerameeeeee owareyou? It is gooooood to hear you sankyuforkomiiiiing – see you ven you land!"

That was how Hubert, the event organiser, welcomed us over the radio! On landing, the vision that was Hubert was in no part less than that of the 'velkum' he gave over the r/t. Dressed all in red-and-yellow his garb matched the man within. In no time we were ushered to one of the many 'bench tables' within the reception hangar, chatting to new friends and feasting on the best food a carnivore could wish for. Several beers later, I was fast asleep under our own canvas. It had been a long day.

The next morning, Saturday, Jeremy confirmed that I had not dreamt we had won two full tanks of free fuel for flying the furthest to get here – what a wonderful way to start the day. To celebrate, I had a hot shower and breakfast, over which we discussed where we would be going today. The plan was to circumnavigate Berlin whilst looking for some more interesting airfields including, I was told, Schonhagen where believe it or not, Jeremy had arranged to interview a potential new company employee! What's that about mixing work and pleasure?

It was just before noon when we touched down at Schonhagen and after the customary introductions and lunch, I left Jeremy and his potential employee to it and did a bit of exploring. Try as I might, I never did find anything much more exotic than a Cessna and so retired to the foyer where I bought my grandchildren some little gifts.

Post-interview, we were deciding where to go next and noticed a disused airfield symbol on the chart very close to where we were. It was in the middle of an intensely wooded area and intriguingly had no name next to it. To investigate further was an easy choice to make. The airfield in question turned out to be Sperenburg which, at the start of WWII was developed as a military testing and development facility. It was the first site where Werner von Braun tested his rockets, before the research centre was established in Peenemunde. The site was overrun by the Red Army in May 1945, after which it was abandoned. However, during the Cold War it was used for occasional training by both the Soviet Army and the East German Army and became the focal point of attention in 1989 when Erich Honecker, former Head of State of the DDR (from 1971 until 1989), fled to Moscow, and from there to Chile after a warrant had been issued for his arrest.

Using similar abandoned airfields as waypoints, we zigzagged our way back to Rechlin-Larz, this time flying east abeam Berlin. Upon arrival we were surprised to find that over 95% of visiting aircraft

"We won two full tanks of free fuel for flying the furthest to get here – what a wonderful way to start the day!"

had departed due to the impending severe weather forecast for the following day. Jeremy was due to return to work on Monday so we decided to make an early start on Sunday morning and head west for home, with luck we could stay one foot in front of the weather. The farewell dinner in nearby Mirow that evening had already started and a car had been sent to collect us. I was tired and aching and was in need of a little 'me' time. I made my excuses and after waving Jeremy off sat down between the tent and Jodel and put the kettle on the camp fire. The last four days had been an incredible adventure; one minute I'm living an organised life in suburbia and the next I'm in this nomadic existence where no rules apply, never knowing where I am going to sleep next. I smiled at the thought. Then smiled some more when I realised I had taken to it like a duck to water. It was getting dark. I was comforted by the sound of the occasional ticking as the Jodel engine temperature returned to ambient and in this melancholy mood sent soppy text messages to all of my loved ones back home. The thought of our long flight back to England the next day filled me with the same feelings I've had ever since I first obtained my pilots licence when I was 18-years-old. Those feelings have never dulled or been taken for granted. It is as exciting now as it was then and that excitement has been the reason for many a sleepless night.

As it turned out, I slept like a log and awoke to a beautiful blue sky and zero wind. Over breakfast all talk was about when the weather would come; some pilots had even decided to skip breakfast and were already queuing at the fuel pumps. In turn, we too were at the pumps to claim our 'furthest flight' award and both tanks were filled to the gunnels. Auf wiedersehens over, we were airborne at 1017 and making a beeline for the VOR at Schnackenburg 50nm away. Our intended route would take us through Lower Saxony and on into Belgium although as always, we would be at the mercy of the weather, which up until the beacon held out very well.

At Schnackenburg we turned onto 251° over a vast wooded and fairly flat, sparsely

populated terrain and as the weather worsened we were forced north from our intended track and had to descend to remain VFR. North of Hanover, the visibility improved and we were able to rejoin our intended route and fly at a more respectable height. Before crossing the Dutch border we landed at Stadlohn for a refuel and good stretch. We were making excellent progress.

Having filed a flight plan for the UK we were airborne once more at 1401. We still had a long way to go so I gave Jeremy a rest and made him honorary navigator for this next leg. The weather was OK but we had a headwind to contend with. Flying north of Antwerp we headed down the coast passing the Zeebrugge ferry terminal, over the beaches at Dunkirk and out across the Channel from Cap Gris Nez. The Channel weather deteriorated very quickly with low cloud and freshening wind; we asked Lydd Approach if our flight plan could be closed in the air to save us landing. This was refused and we were told to report to Customs. After landing and paying their extortionate £19.80 landing fee we duly cleared Customs and were on our way once more – only this time we took off into a 25kt headwind and lower cloud.

The further west we flew, cloudbase lowered. Farnborough Approach vectored us to Dunsfold just outside the Gatwick CTR and where the BBC and Jeremy Clarkson & co film the popular Top Gear series. Try as we might to get home that evening it looked like we were destined to once more erect the tent for a sleepover. In the event the friendly locals steered us to the warm and comfortable ladies changing room and we slept like logs after a long day.

By 0700, we were heading west in better weather but still with that headwind; we decided to drop into Lasham, the home of British Gliding, and enjoyed a good breakfast while we waited for the pumps to open. With fuel in our tanks, the sun shining, the gliders flying, and even the headwind abating somewhat, we were soon on the last leg back home at Oaksey Park. As we touched down onto familiar grass less than an hour later a touch of sadness came over me. Yes, I was glad to be back home and longed to be with my family but I had just spent the last six days doing what I had dreamt about doing for the last 45 years.

This really was the realisation of a dream and now it was all over. I liked not knowing where I would be sleeping at night. I liked meeting like-minded people who went on and on about aeroplanes and I liked the experience of being faced with a tsunami of hospitality wherever we landed. Tomorrow I shall be cutting lawns and paying bills – wondering what I can dream about now for the next 45 years! Thank you Jeremy for a wonderful adventure. ■

The DFS Habicht is typical of the giant strides the Germans made in gliding in the inter-war years. Designed in 1936, this aerobatic machine enthralled spectators over the stadium at that year's Olympics. A shorter-span version was used to train pilots for the Messerschmitt Me 163 rocket-powered fighter.

