

Derek – this is not my official report but I wanted to write it before I forgot the little details. It could easily be tidied up for a newsletter report. Hope you enjoy reading it – if you like we could send a pilot's report and a supplementary retrieve report on the flight to the newsletter/aerostat – I'll let you decide what you'd like to do. I'll write the official report on Saturday and ring you over the weekend.

The Stella Twotoise Long Jump Retrieve

On 18 October I received a telephone call from Derek Maltby, asking if I could help him with a long jump flight (his first ever attempt) the following morning. Unfortunately I couldn't go, but Derek flew and recorded a distance of 156 miles, in ? hours and ? minutes. Apparently, after the flight, he was heard to say that now he realises how much pre-flight organisation is involved he'd never do it again.

5? days later, the telephone rang and I heard Derek say "Hi Julie, you can guess why I'm ringing – I want to try again for the long jump tomorrow!" A few hours later Derek Maltby, Lee Hooper, Scott Ellis and myself were en route from Bristol to Milford Haven where overnight accommodation and a launch site had been arranged. On the way, Derek called Flight Ops at ? to file a flight plan for the following day's flight, anticipating a track towards Norwich. They were friendly but uncertain about how to complete a flight plan for a long distance balloon flight and I think they ended up guessing most of the answers, such as destination ("can you name the field?") although Derek was able at least to confirm the aircraft type and launch location. Flight plan finished, the next task was to work out how the transponder worked. Derek had borrowed it from Andy Elson but the promised instructions were missing.

After a few hours sleep we rigged the balloon for a 08.00 launch. Weather forecasts looked good, with the exception of one report giving 33kn gusts at the west coast. The balloon launched on time after a five minutes to eight phone call from Andy Elson and the retrieve was on its way! After some expert off-road driving from Scott to get the vehicle out of the field we were on the road.

Half an hour after launch Derek confirmed his track as 098° which would take him towards Gatwick. Derek's long jump a few days earlier had recorded a distance of 156 miles/251 km and we knew that he was hoping to improve the distance and achieve his Gold Distance flight of 300km. With a layer of stratus covering most of the sky at about ?ft we had no sight of him as we drove east along the motorway towards Cardiff. We were approaching the Severn Estuary and needed to decide which route to take across the Estuary and more importantly on the other side. Radio and telephone coverage were both poor, but with some timely help from a friend of a friend at Filton ATC at Bristol we were able to get a position on the balloon and a message to Derek that we knew where he was. He was ? miles north of us/5 miles north of Abergavenny on the other side of the Brecon Beacons (no wonder the radio didn't work) and heading for Cheltenham. The track was about 085° which would take him south of Cambridge. We planned a route over the north bridge of the Severn, the M5 north and the A40 towards Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge.

As we passed Cardiff we were able to see a distant balloon at about 4000ft, our first sighting since we'd left the launch site, followed a few minutes later by radio contact from the balloon. As we approached the Severn Estuary a second distant balloon revealed itself, it was on the same track and only a few miles from the first balloon.

Was it another long jumper? It must have launched from somewhere near Swansea. Were we in for a race? We were able to catch sight of a distant balloon as we crossed the Severn. It was already a long distance north of us. It was a great track north of London airspace, but was it our balloon? With our attention stretching on towards Norfolk, we tried to remember what the Record Long Jump distance was. Something in excess of 200 miles, and we thought it had been a north-south flight.

As we passed Brize Norton both balloons were clearly visible but still too far away to identify. With a bit of squinting we thought we could see a whitish spiral on one balloon that had also looked a more rounded shape. A few miles later we were able to clearly see the second balloon – red, black and grey or pale blue spirals, but who was in it? A few minutes later we heard broken radio communications between the two balloons. That was definitely Derek saying “..a pie and a pint at the after-party...”, but who was he talking to? Another few minutes and we were also able to positively identify Derek’s balloon from sight – for the first time since leaving the launch site more than 3 hours earlier. The two balloons were about 5 miles apart and heading the same way.

We phoned the weather line and requested weather info for Stansted? 12 knots surface wind, but increasing to 22 knots by 1800. Almost total cloud cover would produce no solar gain, so fuel consumption was likely to be higher than Derek’s previous week’s long jump (he had 11? tanks on board). The balloons had quickly gained distance from us and were again visible only as distant specks. By 12.00 the surface wind is picking up, and we try to contact Derek for an on-the-hour radio check. After several minutes we manage to establish broken radio contact – he’s north west of Milton Keynes and heading for Cambridge. He has 40 knots, 5 tanks and 3 hours left and Rob Bayly is in the other balloon! A quick glance at the road atlas showed Norwich to be straight ahead.

The retrieve had already travelled 184 miles and a quick measurement on the atlas gave Derek’s distance so far as 160 miles (257kms). He was well on track for that Gold distance of 300 km. It would be a further 70 miles to fly to Norwich, which would give a total distance of 230 miles (370 kms). I thought it was time to phone Norman Pritchard and check the Records. Norman recalled the Long Jump flight in 1990 by Giles Lantoss and Dave Boxall, recording 254 miles, (and David Bareford’s Gold distance of 320 km.) Allowing for error in our rough and ready road atlas measurements it could be a close thing...And Derek was flying solo.

The balloon was still visible about 40 miles ahead of us. The retrieve was en route to Milton Keynes, Bedford then Cambridge. Our retrieve was going well so far, no traffic jams, 200 miles since Milford Haven and one quick stop since the petrol fill in Milford Haven. The balloon was travelling at 40 knots and we were doing well to keep it in sight at all, if it *is* him, that small dot on the horizon. By 1.00pm we could see both dots on the horizon, about 15 miles apart. The balloons were visible but on the limits of our visual acuity. We pulled in at McD’s in Milton Keynes for fast food then hit the road again, having lost sight of the distant balloons. Half an hour later and was that an airship next to the road ahead – yes, of course, we were passing Cardington Hangars, home of the airships!

We had driven 264 miles by now. A few minutes later Derek radioed to say that he was just north of Ipswich and could see the sea. He would be landing in the next hour and was on his last tank. It was 2.40pm and his position was about 40 miles further south than we thought, but as he was about 40 miles ahead of us we were easily able to correct our course. Some quick calculations gave a flight distance to Ipswich

of 244 miles. Somewhere near Milton Keynes we had decided not to mention any of the distances of other flights to Derek until we saw him on the ground, partly because they were unconfirmed but more importantly because none of us fancied a North Sea retrieve! In fact he never asked us, most of the time we struggled for any radio contact at all. Ten minutes later we received a grid reference from Derek and a message that he would land on this map in the next half hour and that Rob is still airborne and behind Derek at about 4000ft. The retrieve is 25 kms from Ipswich and of course Sheet 156 is one of the few maps that we don't have in the car. We need petrol and a new map. "How bad are we on petrol?" asks Lee. "Terrible" replies Scott. Where had all the petrol stations gone?

At 3.00pm I phone Norman again. The Long Jump record is confirmed as 274 miles (an increase of 30 miles) which was recorded by Andy Elson and ? in 1994. This was 30 miles more than our estimate of Derek's flight and there was only 10 miles of land left in front of Derek. But we still thought Derek had a winning flight and he was flying a 105, which would qualify for the ?? Small Balloons (105s and under) Award. At 3.20pm Derek was on the mobile and landed – and Rob Bayly was coming in towards the same field! Derek's landing site is on the same road that we're already on, but we're about 20 minutes away from him, so resign ourselves to missing Rob's landing. I rang Norman with the grid reference for an unofficial calculation of the flight distance, grid reference to grid reference. Derek rings us again with directions and says that Rob has landed in the same field! Meanwhile Norman is on the other line calculating the distance. Less than half an hour later we finally see both balloons in the same field. Rob and Roman had flown 223 miles? in a 120, having launched just west? of Swansea. Their landings were 9 kms from the coast. (Derek had a max speed of 40 kms? (check – 40knots?)). After photos of the field, balloons and crew Rob and Roman helped us pack the balloon away whilst they waited for their retrieve – Rob and Roman are fellow Western Region members and how nice it was of them to fly all that way to help us pack our kit away!

Having flown distances of 259 miles and 223 miles from Milford Haven and Swansea respectively, both balloons had landed over 7 hours later in the same field, 9 kms from the East coast! Both were very respectable Long Jumps, Derek achieved his Gold Distance and Duration and although Derek was only 15 miles short of the Long Jump Record, we think he may have completed the longest solo Long Jump (Derek – Norman is checking this). Derek was last heard saying that now he's done it he won't be trying it again, but at the time of writing there's still 6 days of October left...

Then it was off to the pub for that pie and pint!

And the retrieve – total distance 333 miles, 700 miles by the time we had returned to Bristol, and of course we were all too busy to help with refuelling the next day!

Well Done Derek!

Derek – if you're writing an Aerostat article think about adding the following emails at the end, they demonstrate such good spirit:

"The Western Region has recently opened an email chatroom. These were the messages posted by the pilots the following day:"

Copy (Jeremy's updates) Rob's tortoise and hare mail and Derek's response.