

African Adventure – 1st IWAC Mossel Bay 2014

It seemed like a really good idea at the time. It was mid-winter and we were all stuck in the doldrums that follow another completed season. That post-Christmas lull when you imagine what the better weather will bring but know full well that it is too far away to contemplate with any real hope. Another AGM, another round of glad handing and pats on the back. Somewhere in the mix a pilot whispered that he might, just might be going to South Africa with a couple of others for the inaugural Intermediate Worlds. Would I like to come as team manager?

Many months passed with little progress. It appeared that the organisers couldn't find aeroplanes to rent, wouldn't confirm a definite go ahead and were working on Africa time anyway. Africa time meaning basically nothing happens until just after it needs to, coupled to a level of secrecy the Kremlin would have been proud of. Thoughts of aerobatics mixed with the Big Five faded and appeared to have become another pipe dream.

And then it happened. All of a sudden there was a competition. Eight pilots put themselves forward for the trip – in the end seven completed. Entries forms were hastily prepared and despatched. Game on. Two training camps later we were ready.

Arrival

Cape Town in the early morning offers stunning vistas with cloud tumbling off the mountains and an azure blue sea. You've heard that the light in Africa has magical qualities – it does and more. As we navigated our way past the shanties and poverty into the rich veldt (Near) Essex Boy Massetti and I reflected on the random nature of fortune which brought us to this beautiful country where many would barely get to cross the street in there short and challenging lifetimes.

Waltham Couple The Colletts and Leicester Lad Sills had already travelled ahead, so we arrived at rural Swellendam airfield to find training in full swing. Well, almost. Having chosen the indigenous Slick 360 as the mount of choice there were some long faces as the challenge of getting to grips with new aircraft, new environment and the potential for embarrassment on the world stage dawned into harsh reality. Fortunately the oil painting African sunsets and hospitality beyond description helped soften the edges and soon bobbles and accelerated stalls gave way to sharp lines and stops.



Transit to Mossel Bay

Having established that we had four pilots on track, I quickly headed up to the competition venue at Mossel Bay, a sort of Compton-by-Sea. Despite a near miss with one of the lethal African taxis and a double satnav failure leading to an unplanned 'outthere' manoeuvre from the local township, the airfield was located and Tooth Doctor Scott and That Other Hotelier Hipwell found in fine spirits. These lifted further when Slick 3 arrived from Durban and training here could also begin in full.

Making friends in a foreign land can be counted as one of life's blessings. When people are as helpful as they were at Mossel Bay Flying Club this becomes a positive joy. Of necessity we started with the engineers, Hennie & Chris, who got to work on a rather exciting left brake on the Slick. Meanwhile box slots were booked and traded, the Special Events Team from air traffic briefed on the mysteries of competition flying and Annie Boon sorted everything else out. Thanks Annie!

Word reached me that the Accountant had met up with the South African team at Oudtshoorn and was busy learning the ropes on Leigh De Gonidec's bright orange Sbach. Kindly the hosts allowed Paul to benefit from some quality coaching from MX2 guru Mark Hensman – a gesture which epitomised the spirit of our welcome and would ultimately lead to a medal winning flight in the Free Programme. Delayed only briefly by some low cloud and rain (now do you see the Compton comparison?) the team finally came together and made its final preparations for ShowTime. Somehow and magically the two Slicks from Swellendam transited themselves to the competition venue via a close inspection of the Indian Ocean surf and we were ready.

The feel good factor at any competition could be considerably improved with a 5.30am view of the sun rising over the Indian Ocean and seals frolicking on their island, oblivious to the two tonne killing machines circling just yards away. A couple of the crew did bring themselves to cage dive with the monster great whites, a gesture to humanity of truly Darwinian proportions. Regrettably, the apex predators did not consider them nutritious enough to bother dismantling the rather flimsy feeding cages in which the human chum was housed. Pity.



The Competition

At the opening ceremony we were treated to some great local singing and dancing festivities, highlighted by the gum boot dancers, black African boys in white wellies, slapping themselves sufficiently vigorously to compete with the finest Bavarian lederhosen troupe. Formalities, speeches, anthems and the lady mayor reminding us that we have all emerged from the mud of Mossel Bay to populate the continents brought home the sense that this was truly an international competition and not just another rainy day in the Shires. In time honoured tradition the beer cans were pulled for flight order, with mixed success. The Waltham Couple both pulled single digits, but the rest of the team were spread through the flying order.



Programme 1 - Known

I cannot comment on the mixture of emotions which must accompany a pilot's first foray into the international box, others will reflect on that experience. I **can** comment on the satisfaction in seeing all seven pilots complete their Known without major error in challenging wind conditions. Having looked into their eyes before and after, I can also report that the mental challenge is as tough as the physical one and all passed with flying colours. International virgins no longer.

The competition was a combined Yak 52 & Intermediate event, which attracted some very gifted pilots from around the world, flying some high performance machines. The Slick 540 in particular was likened to an Apollo rocket in the vertical & Slick MD Justus Venter (who also flew warm up) was on hand to explain the design & marketing philosophy. With a 330LX, Giles 202 and Sbach all in the field, it was a great credit to local talent Michel Leusch that he lead the competition after Round 1, flying a mere Zlin 50LS. Leicester Lad was the UK star, at one point leading the world and achieving a very creditable top 10 placing once the programme was complete. Sher-tinggg was the call, I believe. Yak 52 World Champion, Vladimir Kotelnikov was also a delight to watch, driving the old Russian tractor like it was a roller coaster on rails. With former World Champions Victor Smolin and Elena Klimovitch on hand to advise, the Russian team clearly meant business. Their tactical approach did not always meet with the approval of their main rivals Lithuania, who also fielded a strong and experienced team and were considerably more sociable. As ever Yak serviceability was the main issue and downtime did chew into the available flying slots perhaps a little more than would have been desirable.

Of note was also that the UK readopted Hong Kong as a principality, with star Kenny Chiang joining in the fun and winning an Individual Bronze for his country. We look forward to welcoming Welsh Kenny to the UK team soon! A potential champion of the future if he can just stay out of Low territories.





Programme 2 - Free

The Free programme starts to separate the stars from the rest of the field and it was evident that there were some very capable Advanced pilots in the making. Star flight was the Oz Extra man Dee Ebeling, trained by none other than Mark Jefferies, with a near faultless tick-tack in front of the judges. Incidentally the judging team were camped out away from the airfield in the bush, with Cobras and Puffies (puff adders) for company. Ever fancied international judging! No, I thought not. Well done the Buckenhams for completing that test of endurance. Michel again put in a solid flight, but the UK star was the Accountant, winning a deserved World Individual Bronze for a delightful display. The Waltham Couple also scored well, having relaxed into the competition a bit and all UK pilots achieved their programmes without major error. Another very satisfying day at the office.



Programme 3 - Free Unknown

After the usual bun fight of figure selection, our experienced sequence designers came up with a nice little number well suited to the Slicks in particular. Alas, not all the pilots got to fly this as the weather conspired to fizzle the contest into a wet and miserable finish, with no flying at all on the last day. The medal ceremony was good fun though, with the Silver placed UK team entering to a rousing rendition of the Dambusters March, if not entirely in tune, then certainly in the spirit of the contest. Much carousing with our new found friends and much respect for our hosts who now have a new World Champion in Michel Leusch and a World Champion Team, to further boost their considerable talent pool for aerobatic competition. Our flag flew highest though and our team was last out of the bar, shoulder to shoulder with some

very fine South African pilots. Thank you for your outstanding hospitality and we look forward to hosting you in Europe in the not too distant future.



And so the journey home began as the adventure had started. A fine lunch of springbok, ostrich and kudu with some stunning scenery, a million laughs and great camaraderie throughout. The finest compliment for me was to be asked by the South African team to manage their next venture into international competition, but you know what, I wouldn't trade our British boys for anything in the world. Same again next year, chaps?

Toddy

http://www.civa-results.com/2014/WIAC_2014/indexpage.htm