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Microlight Flying

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Which one's yours?

The Song of the Journeyman Balladeer

By Andy Oliver



The Journeyman

'The life so short, the craft so long to learn' – Chaucer

At 49, I have to recognize that I will never be more than a recreational flyer. However, you might allow me to see myself as a Journeyman. The Journeyman was the intermediate of the medieval trades system, a competent worker at his craft. My four-year personal journey to competence has taken more than 450 hours of flying, and some 600 landings at 155 airfields. I know that the thousands of hours and the A-Z of ratings held by the Master Craftsman are not within my reach.

But the sense of satisfaction and pride in achieving this technical level does not fully catch the joy of flex. It does not explain why this microlight pilot incurs an annual fixed cost of more than £4,000 (insurance, servicing, hangar space and depreciation).



The Balladeer

*'A wandering minstrel I,
a thing of shreds and
patches, of ballads, songs
and snatches'*
– Gilbert and Sullivan

Imagine. Dusk is gathering. Around you the air is still, a tangible presence of a summer evening in France.

Below you people are in their gardens, long shadows sharply defined, smoke rising vertically, dog walkers with extra-golden labradors, kids on bikes, lovers on hillsides. The A/G frequency is silent, the join overhead on politely low revs. Below you a single hangar door remains open as the last aircraft is pushed home for the night.



Landing on that October Sunday evening at Ste Foy la Grande, a grass strip on hills to the north of the Dordogne, closed a 300-mile touring day for G-SITA, a Pegasus Quantum 912. A 'questing day' that ranged from rotor at 10,000ft over snow-capped mountains to the deep pleasure of a deserted strip at Ste Marie d'Oleron, with eagles soaring over a lone pilot brewing coffee on his petrol stove, stripped to the waist in the autumn sun.

There is no regulation to account for the wonderful hospitality offered by the French to touring aviators between the mandatory part of the flight (the landing or *atterisage*) and the subsequent voluntary take off or *décollage*. My host on this occasion had the smartest Air Création 912 you ever saw. He had never flown further than 60 minutes from Ste Foy, a practice that he referred to as *'faire un ballade'*. The word is descended from *ballare*, to dance. A ballade is also a form of romantic medieval poetry, with its implications of the self-sufficient troubadour wandering across Europe.

This struck a deep chord. Dancing in harmony with a 205kg butterfly.

The Journeyman Balladeer

*'The space where your spirit
can open its wings is in the
wide blue silence'*
– Antoine de St Exupéry

The Journeyman Balladeer combines the technical aspects with the pleasure of dancing in a well ventilated aircraft.

The two characters combined express both the satisfaction gained from developing a skill and the emotional and personal fulfilment of flying for fun. The Journeyman Balladeer is neither Dr Jekyll nor Mr Hyde, but a package of two sometimes conflicting opposites.

The Journeyman knows what PVVS stands for.

The Balladeer actively seeks empty beaches, open farmland and moors, so he can get sea spray on his wind shield and wheat ears in his mud flaps.

The Journeyman can state the table of separation from clouds at various visibilities and altitudes.

The Balladeer is at his happiest when skiing off the top of cumulo-nimbus.

I have heard this expressed as the difference between a pilot and an aviator. One is a technician, the other is an artist in love with flight.

To the earthbound, the experience of flight in an open microlight is best expressed as 'motorcycling in three dimensions'; the associations of freedom and the open road, being carried on the wind, the small independent figure in a large skyscape.

The recent article 'Mull Magic' captured both the Journeyman ('every pilot is permitted one uninsured out-of-hours landing within a 12-month period') and the Balladeer ('We had set out without an itinerary and with an open mind'). I am not alone in seeking Easy Rider country.

Aloft

*'I believe that the right
question to ask is this:
Was it done with
enjoyment?'*
– John Ruskin

My best microlighting experiences hang on the balance point between my pilot skills and the demands of the activity. The true enjoyment comes from the pursuit of attainable but challenging goals.

One psychologist recognizes this state of enjoyment and gives it the label 'Flow'.

Flow is a state in which you are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The experience itself is so enjoyable that you do it for the sheer sake of doing it.

Above: The author, at ease over Exmoor

Facing page: (top) In a field near Albi, southwest France; and (bottom) over the foothills of the Pyrenees

'If you want to grow old as a pilot you've got to know when to push it, and when to back off' – Chuck Yeager

▷ The Journeyman Balladeer moves into a flow state when far from home, collecting airfields with map, compass and stopwatch. With the motto 'Intent and Capability' emblazoned on his heart and the Royal Tank Regiment crest ('Fear Naught') sewn on the breast pocket of his flying suit (black, obviously), the Balladeer felt ready for adventure.

The Journeyman had 220 hours in the logbook, 21 empty October days in the 2003 diary, a route plotted, maps (including 1:500,000 US Military Tactical Pilotage Charts), Jeppesen Guides, and a good set of touring kit piled on the living room floor. They agreed that it was Morocco or bust!

In the event, it was bust. The Balladeer's imagination was caught by the oasis of Zagora, a small Moroccan town on the borders of Algeria and the Sahara.

Fellow Journeymen would advise him that the round trip of 4435 miles is nearly 90 hours flying, or some 250 miles a day. Master Craftsman would immediately have advised our eager novice that the distance game is a different game. And, of course, it's a game of two halves: You gotta get back!

But there are no lessons like the ones you learn yourself.

The Journeyman is naturally a pessimist, so he insisted on the compromise of crossing to France by ferry. The French use the term '*un raid*' when referring to an expedition, so Day Two saw the rigging of the 'The Apprentice Raider' beside the tower at Le Mans airport in north west France. The Journeyman and the Balladeer seek and keep different memories, and take different photographs.

Below are some extracts from their diaries, written up every evening.

Day Two. Le Mans to Chatellerault

Journeyman: Only 45mins out of Le Mans, and the large occluded front that has been moving in on my right demands immediate action. Sarthe is very agricultural, but now most fields are ploughed or have late crops. Find a 200m field in a wood, slight uphill slope, into wind, sheltered, major pylons 300m from approach. Do low pass, quick go around and land in misty rain.

Balladeer: Rain comes down for two hours while I sit under my poncho and read my novel. Cook some noodles under the wing on the new petrol stove. Brilliant. Cold to boiled in four minutes. Farmer appears, with dogs and a basket of mushrooms, offering help. He wishes me bon courage. It helps!

Later...

Journeyman: Cloudbase was 1000ft with six miles visibility. Cross the Loire some five miles east of my way point. Wind has been pushing me about 25° off course. More rain threatens. Reposition over the Loire-Vienne confluence and track down the main road to overhead Loudon, then decide to turn east for a 28-mile divert to Chatellerault. Interesting 30 minutes, because:

- forget to start the stopwatch
- wrong mental calculation on aiming off for the wind
- not realized faster ground speed due to wind
- now under the Poitiers TMA
- farmland gives way to woods
- lack of detail on French 1:500,000 map
- visibility drops to three miles

Use old orienteering trick, deliberately aiming off to the south of my intended track, knowing that I must cross the River Clain and then follow it north to rejoin the Vienne. Fortunately, the airfield is right by the river, and I had the Jeppesen airfield vicinity map in my map case.

Day 3. Chatellerault to Villefranche-en-Rouergue

Balladeer: Only did 25 miles before lunch, due to early mists. Lovely run to Perigueux. In the Perigueux tower the lone Anglais making his way to Maroc, in a ULM, sans GPS, is shown some respect, and the business jet gets second precedence when I depart.

Journeyman: Getting to be very accurate on compass, stopwatch and markers, especially with the course changes. It helps to plot a route via clear markers (eg rail/river/road intersections). The power lines are marked very inaccurately.

Day 4. Villefranche to Lezignan

Balladeer: As I drop off the escarpment at Albi I run from blue sky to thick low cloud down to ground level suddenly, like a wall. 180° power turn and run back a few miles, then climb to recce a way through. None.

Journeyman: Spot a good field, so tell the Toulouse FIS I am landing. In response to their questions I repeat many times that I am not in trouble nor do I need assistance. 'Je suis un ULM' and 'c'est un bon pré'. But the field's not that good, for there are small stones in thin grass. I fit the rubber skirts on the spats to protect the prop. This takes more than an hour.

Later...

Balladeer: Swoop into Lezignan, out of clear sky evening sky, and in sight of the Mediterranean. A car appears by the lonely tower in a cloud of dust. It's Serge, flying instructor and all-round bon oeuf. 'Are you G-SITA?' My fame precedes me!

Journeyman: There has been a hue and cry, and Serge claims to have been called by five authorities trying to find me. I phone Toulouse. With polite patience the controller points out that if a plane does not sign off an FIS they have to follow up. Serge explains that French ATC are not used to their little lambs taking time out in fields, then popping up again. The official response to bad weather is to divert or return to base. To be clear, I had signed back on after the Albi field event, but lost radio contact and not signed off.



Postscript

G-SITA is now sold; a sad parting for me but, I hope, a new and fulfilling departure for another apprentice. I'm ready for more flex, more speed, more range and greater lift capacity. I'm too much a Balladeer to train as an AFI, too much a Journeyman to move up a class of aircraft. I'm eager for the spring, the new wing and the far horizon. Raise your glass to, or say a prayer for, G-JoBa. And remember:

'Life has no meaning other than that a man gives it by the unfolding of his powers'
– Erich Fromm

'It is a good thing to learn caution from the misfortunes of others'
– Publilius Syrus

Day 5. Lezignan to St Gaudens

Balladeer: Perfect weather for an international flight. I phone a jolly lady at Marseilles ATC to file a flight plan. She is most amused by the ULM en route for Maroc. How we laugh about how many carnots (life rafts) I am not carrying.

Journeyman: I am approved for the flight to Ampuribrava in Spain. Call them to check conditions, then away at 11:45. Reach the Med at Narbonne, and turn south along the coast. Call Perpignan. Nothing. Nothing from Tower or Approach. Call back to Lezignan. Nothing. Radio says 'CL_NG'. Land back at Lezignan at 12:45. Two hours of testing, phone calls and Internet searching for a fix.

Balladeer: The radio is clearly BU_ST. 'I have no radio. Can I cross the frontier without one?' I say to the jolly lady at Marseilles ATC. She is even more amused. 'What, you again?' But she does her best to find out.

While waiting I realize that I have done only 12 per cent of the expedition in 25 per cent of the time. It can only get harder, even though the weather seems better. I sense that it is not possible for me to do all these miles (and back) in time. Not even I want to cross the Straits of Gibraltar without a radio.

Hours have melted away during the day. The pressure to make progress is frustrating, and caused me to go up when I should have stayed on the ground. I have at least tasted the tyranny of distance, and realize that I prefer touring. A large weight is lifted from my shoulders. I plan to head west for the Atlantic, tucked under the Pyrenees.

Day 6. St Gaudens to Ste Foy La Grande

Balladeer: Feeling a bit despondent. Is it the lack of Intent or of Capability that has caused me to quit?

Consoled by a fabulous day's touring. Climb into the Pyrenees. Get to 10,000ft, about five miles back of the top ridge and the border in eerie calm. Wham. The wind from Spain. Camera smashed against the front strut. Plane drops. Regain control and flee, no messing (apart from the laundry). Cross denuded ski-runs in a bleak grey landscape. If that was a taster for the High Atlas then perhaps I have made the right decision.

Journeyman: As I pushed out on the bar, leaving Nogaro, I noticed that the ASI read zero. I was in the air by the time I had computed this unexpected input, but had runway left to cut the power and land. I had knocked the tube from the ASI intake in the nose while stowing the oil container.

Day 7. Ste Foy la Grande to Pons

Journeyman: Mist delays me till 11:45. Head north west, following the Dordogne to the Garonne and the flat coastal wine country near Bordeaux. After 30 minutes forced down to 300ft. The ground is full of vineyards, all poles and wires. Turn north and divert to Libourne, whose details I had put in my map case.

Press north, only just find Jonsac in the rain. I am wetter than I have ever been before, visor useless, suit helpfully streaming the water into a puddle on the seat. In the doorway of the club house there is a big map of a NATO exercise. The whole of north west France is shut for 10 days to VFR unless in the circuit. I call the NATO number. Another polite official, but no transponder a no radio i no chance.

Perhaps I should have found it while planning, but the local clubs were taken by surprise too. They offer me a hanger at Pons, five miles away, and a legal hop between adjacent circuits.

Here the diary ends.

G-SITA went into the hangar at Pons and the pilot(s) went north for the car and the trailer. Thirty-six hours later they are all driving home. The Journeyman Balladeer felt embarrassed at failing, but was consoled by the thought that there were patches of the 'right stuff' in the attempt. ▶

▷ The Journeyman Balladeer is never in the bar or clubhouse, sharing sagas and stories, but he listens and learns from those who share his trade. The Journeyman reads CHIRP and GASC publications. The Balladeer (when his iPod is not plugged into his radio harness) reflects on his experiences. He offers his songs of the Dark and of Seduction for the education and enjoyment of his fellows.



the song of the dark

'A great horror and darkness fell upon Christian'
 – John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

The Balladeer's desire to keep pressing on, or perhaps keep on impressing, can lead him to attempt a field too far.

The first leg was to pre-position for the 70-mile Channel crossing to Normandy the next morning. The time to prepare and pack all kit (immersion to Jeppesen) meant that the engine fired up barely an hour before sundown for the 90-minute flight.

A brief delay in getting airborne and an inability to maintain planned ground speed saw the Journeyman Balladeer still 20 minutes from his objective when legally he should have been on the ground. His only light was the glow from the Flydat computer.

If an aircraft is able to land at about 30mph and in 160 yards (from 45ft) the novice pilot might believe that he always has the farmer's field option in reserve. Not in the dark, he doesn't. Suddenly, the definition of the ground disappears. He can't see the suitable surfaces, lone trees, wires and fences that are visible in daylight. Further, the map and compass are invisible.

Fortunately our man had been here on two previous occasions and was able to use the lights of three known towns for guidance, setting his stop watch as he crossed a known feature of his route plan.

'Navigate' relatively sorted, he was concerned that the destination might still be active so chose to call them. Fortunately the frequency was legible on his route plan by the light of the Flydat. Unfortunately his radio was not illuminated. He held the radio up to the Flydat so as to see to change frequency, somehow disconnecting it. With the power cable impossible to find, 'communicate'

was no longer an option. Only 'aviate' remained – and keep a very good lookout.

His stop watch and general sense of position told him that he was close. He did a high circle at what felt like 3000ft, scanning the ground for the airfield. Seeing no activity or flashing lights anywhere on the ground or in the air he descended for another pass at about 1000ft, flying on the bearing of the runway, looking for a big, flat area or hangars, anything!

It was the white runway numbers that saved him. He descended in a tight spiral, within the perimeter, keeping his eye on those numbers and keeping the speed up. Once re-aligned, low over the numbers, he 'felt' his way down onto the safety of the grass, landing very long.

The Journeyman Balladeer reports his failure to recognize the potential disaster, for himself and for others, of an arrival in darkness as an illustration to those touring pilots seeking a field too far. Being on the ground, looking up, 30 minutes after sunset, offers much greater illumination than being in the air, looking down. Taking a torch or knowing the radio controls are minor lessons compared to recognizing the core failure of airmanship, the timely anticipation and avoidance of the dangerous situation.

In retrospect, he judges that a daylight declaration of a PAN situation would have been the right thing to do. If he had not found the airfield his only option would have been to find and land at an active airport, somewhere on the far side of the bright conurbation 30 miles away, without lights or radio and 90 minutes after sunset. A terminal event for flying reputation, career or even lives?



'You start with a bag full of luck and an empty bag of experience. The trick is to fill the bag of experience before you empty the bag of luck' – Old pilot saying

Sometimes the Balladeer gets into a situation from which the Journeyman must extricate him. A case in point occurred while questing along the north coast of Scotland.

The coastal distance from Kirkwall (Orkney) to Plockton (opposite Skye) is some 180 miles. Our Journeyman spends a half hour in the tower, discussing flying with a controller native to the empty waters and white beaches of these exquisite islands. Our Balladeer marks for exploration the prime sites of Scapa Flow's military past: the wreck of the Royal Oak, the ammo bunkers dug into the hills, the ex-Sunderland base and the airfield that provided the fighter cover (Twatt). Our Journeyman is advised by the controller to 'not go down on Twatt'; our Balladeer is not sure whether this counts as local knowledge, moral guidance or local humour.

The westerly wind and historical sightseeing mean that JoBa rounds Cape Wrath after more than two hours flying, with 100 miles to go. Those who know the area will recognize that this is the Empty Quarter as far as airfields are concerned. The reason is simple: nowhere is there 20 adjacent flat metres.

As JB turns south, the Outer Hebrides shimmering silver slivers on the western horizon, he starts to worry about fuel. The intention forms: find a field and pour in the 20-litre jerry can. After about 30 minutes, near the Summer Isles, he spots the first suitable field.

Even the Balladeer suspects he is in trouble when the aircraft stops in 10 metres! He knows it for a fact when the tyres have disappeared and mud is staining his nice white wheel rims.

It takes the Journeyman an hour to pace out various options (64 double paces = 100m), balance the benefits of slope and wind direction, and plant sticks to mark out the V1 point (ie the point at which he had to be away, or won't stop before the stone wall scratches his treasured black paint work). The chosen takeoff path is a bit of a slalom, weaving round large patches of tall wiry grass and a potential propeller-stripping scenario.

Journeyman wonders if he should recover by trailer, but Balladeer thinks that the 380-mile round trip should be the reserve option. So there we are, backed up in the corner, brakes on, slightly across a light breeze, power rising and the route through the grass and the 'STOP!' stick clearly marked in our mind.

JB would venture to suggest that his brother pilots, especially the 912 riders, usually don't worry that much about take-off distance. Bags of power to spare, accelerate to 50mph and you can't hold her down. On soft ground the experience is seductively similar, initially. The microlight teases you into thinking that you are away, and you push the bar forward. Nothing. Pull it back and whack it forward. Nothing. Try again. Nothing. The V1 stick flashes past. Split-second decision. Final try, pull and push.

The aircraft rises and the heart rate drops.

For the record, the available distance was 190 metres. The tyre tracks stopped about 25 metres from the wall. Two seconds from disaster? Our man was shaking as he climbed away and headed south.

Within 15 minutes the terrain had opened up. He could have landed anywhere.

the song of seduction