

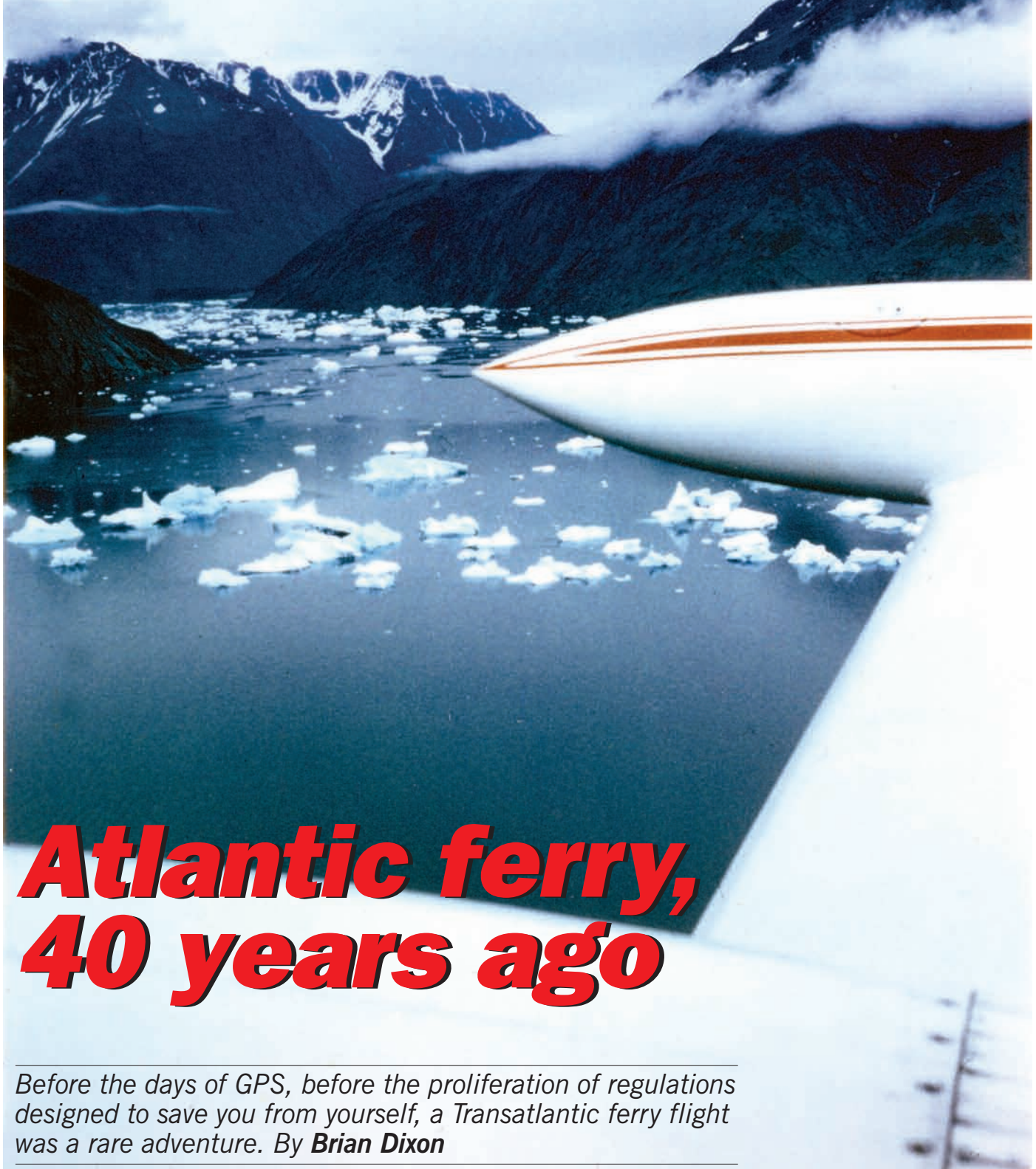
A Transatlantic trip in a brand-new well-equipped executive jet aircraft, with three pilots, described recently in the AOPA magazine *General Aviation* sounded quite exciting. They were lucky to make the trip in good weather, and it was great to see their photographs of what we would have liked to have seen during our descent through thousands of feet of thick cloud over Greenland, before we groped our way up the right fjord to the little airstrip at Narsarsuak, relying on a photocopy of a hand-made drawing of the airfield as an approach aid. That was almost four decades ago, and things

are different now. The large modern terminal at Gander International Airport (as it is now) did not exist in 1973. I wonder if they still have that exhibition of aircraft models they had in the old terminal – aircraft that had set off for the Atlantic crossing and disappeared without trace! Was this designed to cheer up the intrepid aviator? If so, it didn't work.

Even airline travel was very different in those days. At 08.15 on June 16th 1973 I flew to Brussels on a BEA Trident, arriving at 09.10, then boarded a flight to Luxembourg where I caught an Icelandic Airways flight to Nassau, Bahamas. Due to

headwinds we landed at Shannon to refuel. An airport vehicle loading catering supplies hit the aircraft, denting the fuselage and resulting in an overnight stay to check the damage. We were given good accommodation at Shannon Airport Hotel where among a group of young university students, I met a very attractive girl. She and I shared a table for dinner and spent the night together. It's an ill headwind that blows nobody any good.

Next day I flew



Atlantic ferry, 40 years ago

*Before the days of GPS, before the proliferation of regulations designed to save you from yourself, a Transatlantic ferry flight was a rare adventure. By **Brian Dixon***

from Shannon to Nassau in the Bahamas, and on to Miami International Airport in a Lockheed Electra. A few days later my old friend Stephen 'Ned' Halliday, a photographer, arrived from London to join me. Ned was a non-pilot, so it was quite intrepid of him to come along, and I appreciated his company. That evening, in the motel bedroom, we tested the life raft I had bought. It operated OK, so we carefully repacked it. I had also purchased an HF radio transmitter, for which one had to reel out a long wire through a duct at the back of the aircraft using a given length to tune the correct frequency. It never did operate very satisfactorily!

On June 30th I passed my examination for a US Commercial Pilot License, doing my check flight at Opa Locka airport, where I had done my training at Burnside Ott Aviation training school; I also got my US radio licenses, including HF operation. The next few days were very busy as I made arrangements to prepare N1720 for Transatlantic flight, getting ferry fuel tanks installed behind the front seats. I had bought the aircraft from North Perry Aviation at Opa Locka airport, which was run by Jack Ritter. The aircraft was owned by Rit-Air Inc., a North Carolina company. Mrs Dotty Ritter was also a signatory for the company, and she was quite a hard

business lady! Fortunately her husband's commitment on price prevailed.

Given that only an American citizen or company can own an American registered aircraft, a lawyer friend, Larry Freeman, kindly signed the purchase documentation. Larry had been a fighter pilot in the Vietnam war and had been shot down three times. Twice he had landed behind enemy lines and was rescued by helicopter. His three ejections had crushed some of his vertebrae, but nonetheless he went on to become a highly successful lawyer.

I had also organised a transfer of funds from my bank, and arranged a meeting



Left: with willing helpers, the author tests his liferaft in a motel bedroom in Miami
Centre left: ferry flight from North Perry to Opa Locka to have ferry tanks installed at MAC Aviation
Bottom left: landing at Bimini in the Bahamas on July 4th 1973 to avoid Florida taxes

with Mr Frank Puffer of the Florida Revenue Commission. While I was with him in the State building there was a bomb scare, and everyone was evacuated. He gave me a letter confirming that my purchase of the aircraft would be free of Florida state tax, providing I took delivery in the Bahamas. So Ned and I flew to Bimini in a friend's Bonanza. Jack and Dotty Ritter flew the Cessna 310 there to sign the documents, then returned in the Bonanza, while Ned and I flew back to Miami next day to clear customs, then went on to Opa Locka for the completion of work on the ferry tank.

On July 6th we set off from Opa Locka en-route for Gander and our Transatlantic flight. Five hours and 784 nautical miles later we landed at Salisbury, Maryland, and stayed the night at the Sandman Motel. Next day we flew over beautiful countryside to Halifax, Nova Scotia for another night stop. The last time I'd been in Halifax was aboard a small Greek Line ship called the *Seven Seas*, on June 4th 1956, en route to New York where I had disembarked as an immigrant at the age of 22.

Next morning we flew north east over an incredible landscape – Glace Bay, Cape Breton Island, then a part of the Atlantic to Newfoundland and Labrador, passing to the east of the small St Paul Island. We flew over the scenic bays to the west of Grand Bank, Newfoundland, then across miles of unspoiled pine forests to Gander, itself on a lake and river, a flight of about 500 miles. After landing formalities and a cup of tea Ned and I went to explore. We walked down a track into the beautiful pine forest, and as the sun went down we were 'dive bombed' by huge mosquitoes. I think we broke records as we ran back up the track and out of the forest! That night we stayed at the small Hotel Gander,



where we had an excellent meal and welcome night's sleep.

Before leaving Florida we had tried unsuccessfully to get charts of Greenland. At each stop we tried again to obtain them. On reaching Gander, we again had no luck – we were simply informed that we would have to obtain them from Denmark, and they would likely take two weeks to arrive. However, one of the flight controllers was able to supply us with a photocopy of a hand drawing of the approach to the tiny airstrip of Narsarsuak, Greenland. This proved invaluable to us as we arrived there in really awful weather with a cloud base between 400 and 800 feet. At Gander I did manage to acquire an RAF high altitude en route radio chart of the North Atlantic, which I used for the entire Atlantic flight.

At Gander, checks were made on single-engined aircraft to ensure they were in good enough order for a Transatlantic flight. However, for us no checks were necessary as I was flying a twin engined aircraft. When I filed my flight plan it was no different from submitting a flight plan from one UK airport to another.

Until about 1972, there were three weather ships moored on station between Gander and south west Greenland, midway between there and the south of



Right, from top: N1720 with Air Canada DC-8 on the apron at Halifax, Nova Scotia. Breaking cloud at around 400 feet after a descent from 12,000 feet near the mountains. A welcome sight, Simiutak NDB in Greenland, after an 800 nm flight from Gander. After five hours we sight land, and it's not the inviting kind

Iceland, and between there and north west Scotland. In 1973 there was only the first one left. We were flying just above the clouds at around 11,000 feet, so when about 50 miles SW of the weather ship, we asked them to put on their NDB, which they did. We reported who we were, with our departure and arrival points. A few minutes after we flew over the ship, they said they had us on their radar and advised us to turn to starboard by about 30° to correct our track. This did not seem right. Five minutes later they contacted us again, advising me to turn to starboard by 32°. After five minutes more, they called again advising a turn of 35° to starboard. However, by this time I was getting a weak signal from Prince Christian NDB on the southern tip of Greenland, which although to the right of our route gave me a good indication that our own track was correct. I reported this to them. A few minutes later they called again to say they were "having electrical problems on the ship" – and suggested we carry on under own navigation! In 1973 there was a magnetic variation of approximately 30° in this part of the Atlantic.

The flight of about 1,000 nautical miles





Left: eeny, meeny, miney, mo... choosing the right fjord is paramount
Left centre: finally, the welcome sight of the runway at Narsarsuak
Bottom: the map, with Narsarsuak circled at top, shows how easy it would be to fly into the wrong fjord, possibly with terminal results



from Gander to Narsarsuak took five hours. There was an NDB on an island just off the coast by the entrance to the fjord we needed in order to find our way to the World War II airstrip. We had to descend through dense cloud from around 12,000 feet down to between 400 and 600 feet before we broke cloud. The height of the coastal hills was unknown to us, so we descended in tight circles. As we broke cloud we were not far above, and quite close to the tall antenna of the NDB. It was a relief to see it! At the entrance to the fjord a helicopter pilot contacted us to let us know that in the fjord the cloud base increased from 4 to 7 or 800 feet in places!

We found our way up the correct fjord to reach the airstrip, flying at 400 feet, just below the cloud base. We were happy to see the shipwreck, marked on our photocopy of the rough drawing of the fjord, as well as a small fishing village on our left side. Beneath us there were lots of icebergs with a bluish green glow. One more bend in the fjord, then we took a left turn into the outside 'Y' of the fjord and soon spotted the runway a short distance ahead on our right side. It was all quite



majestic, but a great relief to see the little airstrip. We had been told that it was most important to find it first time, otherwise if one came to the end of the fjord there might not be enough room to turn around!

The tarmac was in poor condition; Narsarsuak was then an almost abandoned ex-military airport used for utility purposes by the Danish government. The US Air Force had left 'Bluie West One' in November 1958 and the airbase was closed, but the Danes reopened the airfield soon afterwards. From November 1959 the Danish Air Force had three Catalinas stationed at Narsarsuak making ice-observation flights along the Greenland

get even worse over the next few days. I filed our flight plan for take-off two and a half hours later, giving us time for a good meal and a complete check of the aircraft. Luckily we had not used our oxygen and still had a full cylinder. The Danish airport people took us to their mess and insisted on hosting us to a first-class steak dinner. Ned had a large glass of Scotch, in which the ice crackled like an iceberg. Quite normal, they told us, since this was real ice that had been under huge compression for centuries. It was already dusk as we took off into the same low cloud base. We had no alternative but to fly westwards as we slowly gained altitude, remaining west

tip tank like a beautiful yellow halo. The sun remained in this position for more than two hours, before it started to rise again; so for us the sun didn't set that night. About three hours into our flight I realised we must have been blown some 50nm north of my intended track by very much stronger than forecast southerly winds. Just able to receive weak, distant NDB signals I estimated our position and made a course adjustment to 080°M. 40 minutes later I managed to speak to a US Air Force bomber, to whom I gave my estimated position as 63.30°North x 33° West. The bomber crew had me on their radar and confirmed my estimated position



coast for broadcast to shipping. Today that work goes on, but a Eurocopter AS350 helicopter has taken over the role of the Catalinas.

It was a relief to be back on terra firma, and to arrive in a beautiful, fascinating place in spite of the weather. An airport operative came over to us, and I asked for fuel. Almost the first thing he said was that we needed to pay landing fees of about \$20. In America it is quite rare to pay landing fees – so at this isolated little airstrip in Greenland I was quite surprised, and asked him why it cost so much? Abruptly, the man disappeared. When we went to the control tower to meet the Danes who control everything I apologised for having upset the man. They told me not to worry about it; he would probably disappear for two or three days but when he came back, all would be forgotten. It was, apparently, nothing unusual.

I paid our fees and arranged fuel for our next hop to Iceland. There were no fuel bowzers, so a flat trailer brought large barrels of petrol to the aircraft inside a container. Our two main wingtip tanks, the two auxiliary tanks in the wings, and our own barrel inside the cabin were filled by an operative using a hand pump.

We had intended to spend the night in Greenland, but when we checked with the met office, they advised us to leave that same evening due to rapidly deteriorating weather conditions which were going to

Above: refuelling with a handpump from a container full of barrels mounted on a flat truck at Narsarsuak

of the mountains of Greenland until we felt safe to turn onto a southerly course prior to turning onto our planned track of 093°M (60° True) at an altitude of 13,500 feet. This used a substantial amount of our precious fuel.

One and a half hours after take-off we caught a glimpse of the south-east coast of Greenland through a break in the angry-looking clouds. I decided this would be a good time to change the fuel from the main tip tanks to our auxiliary barrel in the cockpit. I selected the port engine first, then after a couple of minutes switched to our starboard engine. Both engines faltered and almost stopped. Fuel boost pump on, while reverting to the main tanks. Ned carefully checked the supply lines inside the cockpit, then one by one we switched to the auxiliary wing tanks, then changed the port engine back to the cockpit barrel of petrol, which we ran for 10 minutes before switching the starboard engine to the cockpit tank. It was a very great relief to have both engines running smoothly again from the tank in the cockpit.

The mountainous coast of south east Greenland came into view again for 15 minutes. Now above the clouds we had the setting sun surrounding our port wing

as almost 'spot on', which was encouraging. The USAF crew enjoyed our chat, breaking the monotony of their long stint of airborne duty. The USAF Strategic Air Command had bombers constantly flying 24/7, carrying Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), as the Cold War was still going on at the time.

In another hour we were approaching western Iceland and called Reykjavik control. The clouds were beginning to break up, so we had the pleasure of seeing where we were going during our descent. We were switched to the tower frequency for landing at Reykjavik airport, where we were guided to the control point by a 'Follow Me' truck. Our flight had taken us just over five hours. In 1973 the NATO Defence Force was based at Keflavik – only later did Keflavik become a commercial airport.

The tower staff kindly advised us of a suitable hotel, where we went for a 'slap up' breakfast and a short rest. Later in the morning we arranged to refuel the aircraft for next day's flight, and enquired where we could re-fill my oxygen tank. One of the young men in the control tower told us we would have to go across the island to obtain oxygen. He was about to come off duty and kindly offered to drive us to the facility. It was a nice drive, and chance to see something of the island. He was very happy to be our guide, and on our return journey he gave us a short tour of the

southern part of Iceland. After a good dinner and relaxing night's sleep, we woke up refreshed the morning of July 11th, 1973, obtained our met forecast and filed our flight plan to Ronaldsway in the Isle of Man.

On Tuesday January 23rd, 1973, a huge volcanic eruption had begun from a 1,600-metre fissure on the eastern side of Heimaey in the Vestmann Islands, near the town of Vestmannaeyjar. It became known as the Eldfell eruption – the name of the 200 metre existing volcanic cone, and it

Right: welcome home – our approach to land at Ronaldsway on the Isle of Man, July 11th, 1973



forced the evacuation of 5,000 people. Luckily, because of a recent force 12 gale there were many boats available in the harbour for the evacuation. This area is very close to the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano 37 years later in 2010. After our 10.40 take off from Reykavik we made a detour so we could fly above the spectacular Eldfell eruption, which was still billowing out streams of volcanic ash and steam.

We flew mostly at 11,500 or 13,500 feet, preferring to stay in the sunshine above the clouds. Further south east we had the Scottish islands on our port side.

We descended to 3,500 feet as we approached Bushmills NDB on the north-eastern tip of Ireland. The beautiful green fields of the Emerald Isle were a welcome sight as we flew along the north-east coast towards the Belfast area, from where we continued towards the Isle of Man. We landed at Ronaldsway at 17:10 in the afternoon, after a five and a half hour flight. After clearing customs and formalities we were met at the airport and taken to a house I owned at that time in Douglas. The adventure was over.

On the morning of July 13th we left Ronaldsway and flew to Elstree where I

took the aircraft to David Rimmer Aviation for the removal of the ferry tank. After business meetings with staff and others in London, I made the 30-minute flight from Elstree to Gatwick Airport on July 22nd to clear Customs, then continued on to Cannes Mandelieu airport in the south of France, where I had my yacht *Dream of Holland* moored at Port Mandelieu. For many years I had been flying to Cannes most weekends in my Piper Comanche 180, G-ARUO, and on to Malta nearly once a month. It was now quicker and better in the Cessna 310, with two extra seats for friends or passengers. ■

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