

Flight of the Condor



Sometimes you can learn as much by not getting there, and you can have memorable times anyway. By David Horton

News of the intended closure of Berlin's Tempelhof airport in October 2008 inspired my flying buddy Martyn and me to plan a summer trip to that illustrious destination in our group's Rollason Condor G-AWFP. 'What summer?' You may well ask! Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, the weather conspired against us, and we didn't quite make it to Berlin. Nevertheless, we had a very interesting and educational trip in the attempt.

The original plan was to depart from White Waltham, taking four days for the round trip. Anxiously reviewing the synoptic charts during the week prior to 18th August, we decided to give it a try. Having been chauffeured to White Waltham by our respective wives, on arrival my optimism over the weather proved misplaced, with low stratocumulus and poor visibility. Over a coffee, we decided to postpone for a week.

The following week, with an improved outlook and a promise of even better conditions over Germany we set off, booted and spurred with life vests and PLB. We had filed direct to Calais as our first stop on the Continent for customs and fuel. A SVFR clearance from Heathrow Radar direct to Ockham VOR was obtained from the ever-helpful controller. Heading towards our Channel crossing point at Folkestone the SCU kept us below 2000ft, but visibility was still VMC. On nearing the coast however, conditions rapidly deteriorated to IMC and I decided to do a quick 180° and divert to Headcorn, which was bathed in brilliant sunshine! After a leisurely lunch, the coastal cloud base and visibility improved and we continued on our way. With hindsight, refuelling at Headcorn would have been sensible, as despite recent price hikes it would have been cheaper than Calais – apart from the amount of Excise drawback I could have claimed on a full tank of avgas! (Fuel prices are quoted at the end).

Calais is a disappointing aerodrome now, with no restaurant or café, although refuelling and air traffic services are quick and efficient. You pay the aerodrome fire service (Les Pompiers) for the fuel, then trot over to the tower and up four flights of stairs to file the onward flight plan. Under the terms of the

Schengen Agreement customs notification is not required for flying within the EU. However a flight plan is required to cross international borders. In our case we were crossing Paris LFFF, Brussels EBBU and Langen (German) EDDG FIRs. It's worth preparing these before leaving the UK, to save time en route. There are several PC programs which will virtually do the job for you. I use RANT XL for all my flight planning, which prints out a prepared ICAO flight plan at the click of a button. Of course, if you have room to take a laptop, so much the better!

We took Jeppesen VFR/GPS charts for the intended route. These included EG/LF, as the UK 1:500 000 Southern England chart does not quite cover the bit between Calais the western edge of the EB/EH chart. They are not my favourite charts, being very cluttered and without much topographical detail. However, they are designed for use with GPS, without which navigation would have been rather tough. Our only other navaid was a VOR

receiver. In future I would try and source national topographical charts. The other navigational resource was a Jeppesen trip kit for Germany, courtesy of Pooley's Flight Equipment. Although useful for procedures and regulations, the manual covers the whole of Germany and is quite bulky and rather unmanageable in a confined light aircraft cockpit. It is printed on flimsy paper, which does keep the weight down – a necessary consideration in our case. A better idea may be to print out airfield information from www.airports.de. Many airfields also have their own websites. With hindsight, it might have been prudent to have included a Belgian trip kit, in case of diversion, as the Belgian AIS website gives only basic information for small

Top: FP flew 11hr 35 min in fairly dismal weather and didn't quite get to Berlin
Below: approaching Calais harbour in weather that was fairly typical for the whole trip



aerodromes

(<http://www.belgocontrol.be/belgoweb/publishing.nsf/Content/Operational>). We did, however, take aerodrome charts for Antwerp, which, as it turned out, we really needed on the return trip.

Since the Condor now operates on a Permit to Fly, we needed to establish which countries would accept it in lieu of an ICAO CofA. The LAA website indicated that written permission was required from the Belgian CAA. Although officially requiring 10 days notice, I faxed the necessary documents to a very efficient lady in Brussels and obtained the necessary authority via e-mail within two days. There was a sting in the tail though – a charge of €84! The other en route countries appeared not to require special permission.

After a rather low level Channel crossing due to the cloud base, we refuelled at Calais then flew direct to our first night stop at Grefrath-Niershorst, near Düsseldorf. Transiting Belgian airspace was straightforward after contacting Brussels Information, with additional clearances through Koksiede (military), Antwerp and Kleine-Brogel (military) airspace. We then crossed into Dutch airspace, where a call to the pleasant lady controller at a rather quiet Budel (EHBD) airport had us cleared through their CTR and ATZ at 2300ft. Before the trip, reading that the Dutch now required Mode S above 1200ft, I had anticipated problems with only having a Mode A transponder; no Mode C. However, although we were requested to squawk C several times, our response 'Negative Charlie' claimed no adverse reaction whatsoever. What was comforting though was that both Brussels and Langen Information gave us a squawk code,

and monitored our progress on radar throughout the journey.

Our arrival at Grefrath (EDLF) was uneventful. The aerodrome operator spoke only German, but being reasonably proficient in the language and pre-armed with appropriate phrases, such as 'Gegenanflug' (downwind) and 'Endenanflug' (final), we coped pretty well. The operator popped out of his tower to help us refuel, then in true German style, gave us explicit instructions as to where on the grass to park. After covering the aircraft, we then had a pleasant walk of about 1km to our pre-booked hotel. We found that all airfields in Germany charge a modest landing and overnight parking fee, but be warned, the small aerodromes do not usually open until 11 am. I had to cross the aforesaid operator's hand with silver to obtain an early departure!

Next morning our ever-helpful operator brought up the GAFOR information on his PC, which shows the forecast ceiling and visibility for each area in Germany as a colour code (subscription required). It looked poor over the Harz Mountains which lay along our route. A local aviator who owned a Bücker Jungmann spoke to us, as he was intending to fly to Swansea and was seeking information about flying in the UK. He advised us about routing north towards Hannover, should we be unable to climb over the Harz Mountains.

Departing Grefrath, we routed below the class C zone surrounding Düsseldorf, cleared through Dortmund ATZ without any problems and continued via Paderborn towards our intermediate stop at Höxter-Holzminden (EDVI). Visibility by this time was deteriorating and the ceiling of SCu lowered to below 1500ft. We were on the edge of the Harz

range when I saw a gap between the hills and thought we might make it through. Suddenly we were enveloped in orographic cloud, and following anguished cries from Martyn, I executed a smart 180° to remain VMC. Unfortunately this took us towards ED(R)112, the Paderborn firing ranges! At the time we were in contact with Langen Information, who immediately leapt into action and in no uncertain terms advised us to turn east! I said we were trying to remain VMC and requested a diversion to Paderborn/Lippstadt (EDLP). The helpful Paderborn controller offered us QDMs to the airport and we landed there to decide our next strategy.

Heeding the advice given at Grefrath, we considered routing north via Hannover. Unfortunately the forecast there was again poor, although fine for Berlin. We were also becoming concerned that should the current weather pattern not improve in the next couple of days we might be unable to return. These suspicions later proved correct.

Reluctantly, we decided to retrace our route back home. One objective we did manage to achieve though was to 'do' the Möhne Dam. Having studied the chart carefully, we decided to divert to Arnsberg-Menden (EDLA), which is located just west of the Mönese at 794ft above the Ruhr valley. We were made most welcome there and were able to park FP in a hangar overnight, again for a reasonable fee. Although operations did not officially commence until 11am, one of the aircraft engineers working there happened to be English and offered to open up the hangar for us at 9am.

Another pilot there kindly gave us a lift into the local town of Neheim, where we found a comfortable hotel with Internet facilities and a good breakfast, all for €49. I would have no



Left: Arnsberg did not officially open for business until 11am, but special arrangements were made

Below left: the Möhne Dam, a target of the Dambusters raid, lies close to Arnsberg-Menden

Below: memorial in the main street of Neheim commemorates the dead of the Dambusters raid





Above: flying above the river Ruhr in borderline visibility



hesitation in recommending this location for a stopover. The town is very lively with good cafes and restaurants, and offers a pleasant walk along the River Ruhr. It also has an interesting past. Following the Dam Busters' raid in May 1943, the town was flooded, resulting in great loss of life. Tragically, most of the casualties were slave labourers from Russia and Eastern Europe and not local Germans. This was revealed to us by a local

- Top: FP with Yak 52 converted to tailwheel configuration at Gefrath**
- Above: British Robin 200 awaiting spares at Gefrath had been carefully mowed around**
- Left: on long finals for Antwerp, where fuel was costliest of all aerodromes visited**
- Below left: Antwerp city centre, easily reached by bus from the airport**
- Below: whatever the weather, eat well; this is afternoon tea in Antwerp**



man who, on discovering we were English, pointed out his childhood home on the main street and where the water level came to. There is a memorial to the events in the Hauptstraße, but we encountered no animosity whatsoever – quite the contrary. Departing from Arnsberg, we flew along the Ruhr, past Dortmund and back to Gefrath for fuel and refreshment. Behind us in the queue for fuel was a Lithuanian registered Yak52, converted to a tailwheel. Languishing some distance from the tower was a G-registered Robin 200, with the grass carefully mown around it! Apparently it was abandoned six months ago and now awaited spare parts. After Bockwurst and chips in the delightful restaurant, which contains numerous model



Top: visibility improved greatly as we crossed Belgium - this is abeam Ghent
Above: accommodating the Patrouille de France meant a quick refuel in Calais
Below: Martyn (left) and David with group-owned 1968 Condor FP at her home base of White Waltham

aircraft suspended from the ceiling, we filed for Antwerp (EBAW) as our next overnight stop.

Approaching Dutch airspace we contacted Dutch Mil and received flight information service through Budel's CTA to the Brussels FIR. From here on, visibility and cloud base deteriorated, and after 1hr 15min flying into a 25kt headwind it was with some relief that we landed at Antwerp. Given that Antwerp is an international airport, the landing and parking fees were reasonable, although fuel was the costliest of all the aerodromes visited. A B&B hotel near the very imposing central railway station had been pre-booked via the internet for €69 and was easily reached by bus from the airport. This hotel also had a free internet facility, so we could check on the weather before departure.

The following morning the METAR for Antwerp showed 4000m and cloud base 900ft, but the TAF looked better. France and the UK were VMC, so we headed out to the

airport. The briefing room was unmanned, but contained all the necessary paraphernalia for getting met reports and filing flight plans. Following the clear instructions, I faxed the flight plan to Brussels ATCC, then picked up the phone and received confirmation that it had been received. After clearing security, FP was refuelled at the BP station. If paying by cash or BP card, the transaction can be completed there and then. However, as I paid by credit card, this involved a ride in a fuel bowser across the apron to the flying club. On the return journey the driver had to stop at the edge of the apron, get out of his cab and be frisked by security before proceeding. I was allowed to remain in the cab!

The departure from Antwerp involved reporting at a VRP. Before leaving home I had downloaded Antwerp's aerodrome chart, although we had not scheduled a stop there. That was just as well! Visibility and ceiling improved across Belgium and we landed at Calais for fuel. On arrival we were warned that an air display was due to commence in 40 minutes time, so we had a record breaking turn-around to get ahead of the Patrouille de France. The flight back direct to White Waltham was uneventful.

Altogether FP flew 11hr 35min. We encountered no problem with having no noise certificate or having only a Mode A transponder. A summary of expenses is shown below. ■



Fuel price per litre including VAT (in Euros)

Calais:	2.13
Grefrath:	2.40
Paderborn:	2.42
Arnsberg:	2.39
Antwerp:	2.50

Landing/Parking fees

Calais:	9.35
Grefrath:	8.40 (Overnight stop)
Paderborn:	11.54
Arnsberg:	18.88 (Overnight stop)
Antwerp:	42.25 (Overnight stop)

Belgian Permit to Fly: €84.00

Charts + Trip kit: £70.77