



SCOTTISH  
GLIDING CENTRE

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# THE GLIDERS

## newsletter

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### Editor's note

This month we have one interesting article about aerotowing a glider across the Atlantic during the second world war. Thanks to Richard Lucas for this.

This month saw the start of the popular evening lectures again, albeit still by Zoom. The first one was on the 21st of November, "Going cross country in wave from Portmoak" by Sant. If you missed it the recording is available on the club's YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DXLs1Nd3R8&t=9s>.

We have started a Bronze Theory

course again and if you haven't heard about it yet but are interested, check the messages on the forum.

On the 3rd of December, there will be a members update meeting with information about the changes made and changes still coming as a result of the member's consultation. There will also be an update on changes to the club governance and management to get more members involved in the running of the club. Watch out for the zoom details for this meeting coming out soon.

*Wolf Rossmann*

## Aerotow across the Atlantic



This may sound like a crazy proposition but amazingly it has been done and the flight ended in Scotland. During the Second World War, the UK was reliant on supplies from North America, most of which crossed the Atlantic by sea in convoys that were vulnerable to attack by U-boats. Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick William Bowhill, who commanded Ferry Command from 1941 to 1942 and later Transport Command, conceived the idea that transport gliders might have a role in delivering urgently needed cargo to the UK or flying aircraft ferry crews back to North America. To test the concept, a trial was to be undertaken. He called Wing Com-

mander Richard Godfrey "Dickie" Seys, an experienced ferry pilot, into his office in Dorval, Montreal to inform him that he had been chosen for the task. He and another pilot would fly a cargo glider across the Atlantic. Seys was understandably horrified at the idea, but orders were orders.

It is unclear if Seys had any previous gliding experience, but he returned to the UK to learn how to fly transport gliders and then went to the US to convert onto the Waco CG-4 Hadrian, the type chosen for the trial. The actual glider to be used, which Seys named Voo-Doo, was one of the early examples made by a maker of piano parts, Pratt, Read & Company, a firm with no prior experience whatsoever in the manufacture of aircraft.

In the spring of 1943, Seys used another Hadrian

and the Dakota flew a return flight from Dorval to Goose Bay in Labrador, a world record at the time. Aware of the need for training over open waters, in early May the Hadrian and the Dakota flew from Dorval to Nassau in the Bahamas, with a few stops on the way. On the return trip, in a flight lasting just under 9 hours, they flew direct to Virginia, establishing a new non-stop distance world record of 1,910 kilometres.

On their return to Dorval, Seys, Gobeil, Longhurst, Thomson, Wightman and Wormington believed they were ready to cross the Atlantic. They would follow the well-trodden ferry route linking the US and Canada to the UK: Montreal - Goose Bay - Bluie West 1, Greenland - Reykjavik, Iceland - Prestwick. The transatlantic flight began on 23 June 1943 at Dorval with the first leg to Goose

Bay. The heavily loaded Dakota, which was fitted with additional fuel tanks, struggled into the air at the end of the runway towing Voo-Doo loaded with around 1500 kg of assorted cargo consisting of blood plasma or vaccine destined for the Russian allies, as well as radio, engine and aircraft parts, together with some bananas put on board by Seys to give to his family.

A Catalina maritime patrol flying boat joined the Hadrian and the Dakota soon after take-off. Its crew was given the task of rescuing the crews of the other aircraft if they had to ditch. Given the presence of extensive ice packs and heavy seas, the chance of a successful rescue must have been low, particularly

as the Hadrian had no emergency exit on the top of the fuselage. The first 4 hours of the flight were uneventful. However, the near perfect weather slowly deteriorated and massive storm clouds came into view. Unable to climb above them, Voo-Doo, the Dakota and the Catalina were forced to fly below them, where they encountered very heavy turbulence. One moment, the glider was 20 feet above and behind the Dakota. The next, it could be 100 feet below and off to one side. The Hadrian's airspeed fluctuated from close to 140 kts to 50 kts in a matter of seconds. The strain on the tow rope was tremendous as it



to conduct a series of test flights of increasing length and with more and more cargo on board. He shared the controls of the glider with a Royal Canadian Air Force pilot, Squadron Leader Fowler Morgan Gobeil. The tug, an RAF Dakota, was flown by Flight Lieutenants William Sydney "Bill" Longhurst from Canada and Charles William Halliwell Thomson from New Zealand. Two other people joined the crew of the Dakota at some stage. They were H. Gordon Wightman, a civilian radio operator from Canada, and Pilot Officer R.H. Wormington, an RAF flight engineer from the UK. In April 1943, during the test flying, the Hadrian



went from hanging limp to snapping taut (we've all been there!). In an article published in the July 1944 issue of Skyways magazine, Seys himself wrote "For the next 3 hours, we took a terrific buffeting. The glider was thrown all over the place and the towplane made some pretty exciting lurches. We ran into three snowstorms, accompanied by thunder and the snow and ice were so thick that the towplane, for the most part, was invisible. Only 15 feet or so of the towrope could be seen. The going was very tricky." This latter comment must rank as one of the most extreme examples of the classic British stiff upper lip and understatement. The cargo in the glider began to shift and ice began to form on the wings. The glider and Dakota crews discussed over the radio on several occasions whether they should turn back. They decided to carry on. After 3 or so hours in hellish conditions, the airfield at Goose Bay came into view. Seys and Gobeil released from the tow and landed without a hitch. Longhurst and Thomson in the Dakota followed them in. Every crew-member was exhausted.

With the return of suitable weather, the second leg of the journey to Greenland took place on Sunday, 27 June. Voo-Doo, the Dakota and the Catalina were soon over the Atlantic. Understandably enough, all crew members were rather nervous. For most of the flight, the 3 aircraft travelled over solid cloud cover. Mountains in Greenland came into view about 5 hours after take-off. Soon after this, 3 squadrons of USAAF Martin B-26 Marauders passed the Hadrian and the Dakota. Their cruising speed was so much higher that Seys and his companions wondered if they were in fact moving backwards. The landing site at Bluie West 1 was an American air base located in a narrow fjord surrounded by towering, snow covered mountains – a somewhat daunting prospect when flying a heavily loaded glider. Much to their relief, Seys and Gobeil experienced no real difficulty, thus completing the first

landing of a cargo glider in Greenland. The following day, someone noted that one of the 3 strands at each end of the tow rope was almost worn through. While re-splicing the rope didn't take long, changes in the weather meant that the crews remained grounded for the next 2 days.

They departed Greenland on 30 June with the Dakota leaving the ground in the last 2 feet of the runway. Unable to clear the mountains surrounding Bluie West 1 with a heavily loaded glider in tow, the Dakota had to fly down a fjord filled with icebergs to reach the open sea, a procedure that no one had tried before. Unable to climb above the peaks of the Greenland ice cap, Voo-Doo and the Dakota had to follow the coast en-route to



Reykjavik in Iceland. As usual, the Catalina kept them company. Voo-Doo and the Dakota ran into thick low clouds, with intermittent rain squalls and heavy turbulence. Worse still was the fog, which extended right down to sea level. Seys and Gobeil soon lost sight of the Dakota. Violent gusts shook the glider and ice began to form on the wings of both Voo-Doo and the Dakota. Moisture in the glider's fuselage condensed and fell as snow. Meanwhile, the combination gradually climbed out of immediate danger. It began to snow but after experiencing some very violent bumps, Voo-Doo and the Dakota broke through the clouds. They found themselves in the clear between 2 layers of thick clouds. Their ordeal had lasted an hour. Seys again: "Our attention was chiefly riveted upon the facetious sounding

but vitally important, 'angle of dangle' of the tow-rope which seems to cast a hypnotic spell over one's eyes. Success or disaster depends on this 'angle of dangle' and it is impossible to keep your eyes off it, even if you are supposed to be relaxing. The noise of the glider was terrific, the rush of air sounding like a freight train racing on worn-out tracks. That sound does not begin to decrease until the speed drops below seventy knots. The cold also was intense; there was no heating system and snow frequently penetrated the cockpit. However, we were kept reasonably warm by the physical effort required to maintain the glider on an even keel. The sandwiches we brought with us were frozen stiff and we almost broke our teeth when we tried to eat them."

The clouds below them gradually disappeared, followed by those above. A while later, the mountains of Iceland were sighted on the horizon. They were much relieved by the prospect of landing earlier than they had expected. However, as time went by the coast line failed to appear. The men came to realise that what they had seen were massive clouds on the horizon. The same mirage appeared twice more before the real mountains of Iceland came into view. After their landing, it was found that the tow rope had been damaged. Unable to drop the rope on a grassy area near the airport because there were too many houses nearby, the crew of the Dakota had been forced to drop it over the airfield. The 2 metal fittings of the rope were badly damaged when they hit the hard runway surface. Ground crew at Reykjavik worked to repair the rope throughout the evening and night.

The 3 aircraft left Iceland on 1 July. Unwilling to fly into low clouds over the hills at the end of the runway, Voo-Doo and the Dakota had to make a steep right turn soon after leaving the ground. As the 3 aircraft began to climb, they were again faced with severe turbulence but on reaching their cruising altitude, the air became smooth. The next 2 hours were uneventful, if somewhat stressful, with bright sunshine above and solid clouds below. These gradually broke up but clouds began to form above them and the crews soon ran into very heavy rain squalls. The aircraft were again severely buffeted by turbulence. This stretch of bad weather went on for some time. They eventually reached an area of fine weather and an hour later, the crews sighted a

minuscule island. The UK was getting close.

As the 3 aircraft made landfall, in very thick haze, they flew into a captive balloon barrage which no one in Reykjavik had briefed them about. The pilots of the Dakota had to make a steep climbing turn to avoid colliding with one of the balloons resulting in it passing over Voo-Doo while flying in the opposite direction! By some miracle, they apparently remained on tow and were soon over Prestwick. They circled the area for some time, hoping that the newsreel camera aircraft which was supposed to immortalise the end of the journey would appear. It didn't. The sky became increasingly cloudy, threatening to obscure the airfield. Well aware that the welcoming committee had arrived, Seys and Gobeil released from the Dakota, dived through the clouds and landed without a hitch. The 2 men shook hands. Longhurst, Thomson and their crewmates landed in the Dakota shortly afterwards. The first and only transoceanic flight made by a glider towed by an aircraft was over. Voo-Doo and the Dakota had covered a distance of approximately 5,650 kilometres (3,500 miles) in 28 hours and 3 minutes of actual flight time, spread over 8 days at an average speed of 201 km/hr (108 kts). The glider was unloaded but Seys' bananas were ruined having been frostbitten during the flight.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a conference held in London around July 1943 concluded that the creation of a regular transatlantic glider service was not feasible given the limitations of the gliders and tow planes available at the time. However, given the successful conclusion of the transatlantic flight, someone in authority decided that Voo-Doo should be donated to a museum for future generations to see. In a sad footnote which underlines the outstanding skill, bravery and achievement of those involved in the Atlantic crossing, Voo-Doo left Prestwick on a ferry flight to England in July 1943 but crashed on landing. The ferry crew escaped uninjured, but Voo-Doo had to be scrapped.

This article is based, with kind permission, on one written by Rénaud Fortier for the Ingenium Channel in Canada. It can be found at <https://ingeniumcanada.org/channel/articles/it-was-magnificent-it-was-splendid-it-was-pointless>

*Richard Lucas*