

THE DATE.....THURSDAY 18TH JUNE 2009....

THE CREW.....Robert Lough-Jones (Pilot/Owner)
Dierk Reuter (Pilot/owner)
Edwin Brenninkmeyer (Pilot/Owner & Lead Pilot)
Tim Nathan (Pilot/Owner)
Al Rosser (formation-flying Guru & all around Nice Guy)
Diana Green (FSD Trustee)
Andy Lewis (FSD Scholar)
Caroline Begg (FSD Scholar)
Steve Hopwood (FSD Scholar)
Emma Suddaby (FSD Scholar)
Stuart Cook (Photographer)
Farzi Nasari (Sponsor)

THE AIRCRAFT.....2 Piper Aztec and 2 Cessna 210

THE MISSION..... In an attempt to win Pooley's famous Dawn 2 Dusk Challenge and to raise awareness and funds for Flying Scholarships for the Disabled, 4 planes, each carrying one able and one disabled pilot must fly in formation, landing at nearly every one of beautiful Britain's outlying island airports, between the hours of Dawn and Dusk in one day. This will involve over 10hrs flight time and cover a distance of around 1500 miles. The mission must start from Jersey at dawn and end in Inverness before dusk falls.

This was the mission of a lifetime and I jumped at the chance of taking part. I knew it wasn't going to be easy but then the best things in life rarely are, are they? The weather was looking a tad dodgy as we gathered at Marshalls Business Airport to fly across to Jersey in readiness for starters orders at dawn the next day, and we all had our fingers crossed and iphones set for weather updates – so what's new in British aviation?!

I'm a very newly qualified baby-pilot and so the thought of flying in tight formation with three other aircraft for a flight of over 10hrs crossing pretty much the length and breadth of our beautiful island was making my brain boggle a bit – not to mention the old titanium bits, many and various, and I wasn't even going to be piloting, I'd only be required as a passenger.

I have a struggle to accommodate my artificial hips, knees and elbows on short flights so this was going to be a challenge and a half – and I know the other FSD scholar's must have been having similar worries. Not to mention the guy's who would actually be doing the flying, but however worried they might have been they all appeared calm, unruffled, and fully confident as pilot's in command.

Still, after a brief and restless nights sleep, come dawn the next day, I think we all felt better having Al Rosser, Chief Test Pilot of Marshall's Business Aviation and formation-flying Ace, along for the ride, and he'd obviously done his job well as we took off from Jersey airport at 04.33 for the start of our adventure.

There's something about taking off in formation... I've never done it before and, taxiing onto the runway, a plane on our nose, wing and tail, four engines purring through their checks, four propellers thrumming in anticipation, it seemed like a very silly thing to be doing... All of my pilot instincts were telling me it was madness to take-off so close to other aircraft but the reality of four roaring planes becoming airborne almost as one, was ballet in motion. Or, to use Al Rosser's more macho description, "the most fun you can have with your clothes on!"

The sky was a sleepy and beautiful place as we flew towards our first target of Guernsey and as island authorities wanted to keep it that way, only one aircraft, Tim Nathan's, was to be allowed to perform a slick touch and go on the slumbering island, still wrapped up in it's misty duvet. Beautiful though it was, it was hard to get too carried away with romantic descriptions of it all with Andy Lewis making funny faces at me through the passenger window of Tim's aircraft, once more flying alongside us before breaking formation to do the same at Alderney.

I was flying with Robert Lough-Jones and Al Rosser in Robert's lovely, comfy Piper Aztec, with Caroline Begg accompanying Dierk Reuter & co behind us in Dierk's Cessna 210 and Steve Hopwood along for the ride with Edwin Brenninkmeyer & co in the other 210 and lead aircraft, ahead of us.

Morale was high as we cruised through the skies on the beginning of our epic journey and I watched the star shape of our four pointed shadow, race along the green folds and blue ripples of Britain below.

We managed the first raft of stops in good time, leaving us with a welcome opportunity to land at Haverford West for a quick breather. There had been some re-fuelling issues in the planning of the trip as Avgas is not available on The Scillie Islands. It's an awful long way from there to Ronaldsway, the next fuel-stop, and some of our formation would have struggled to make it. But staff at Haverfordwest saved our bacon, literally, by volunteering to tip-up to work early and provide us with fuel and more importantly (as far as I'm concerned, at least) BREAKFAST! Never has a full English gone down so well...

By this point though we were all learning fast that unless the emergency toilets Diana Green had provided us all with were going to come into use, we'd better not be drinking too much tea... 10 hrs is a long time to be crossing ones legs, even if that had been possible inside the cramped plane interiors stuffed full of supplies and what with none of us scholars actually possessing crossable legs!

Off we roared once more, now fully refuelled in body and aircraft but the gentle pastels of dawn had begun to give way to the more familiar threatening greys of the true British summer. We ploughed on regardless and to my joy, arrived at RAF Mona. Like most private

pilot's I have a fascination with military aviation and was chuffed to bits to be able to land at a military airfield. As we posed in front of the parked aircraft for photos with the impressive RAF guys, we even got the chance to watch a trainee RAF flying Ace doing circuits and bumps in a Hawk jet above our heads. The speed of the military circuit made my head spin and I made a mental note never to moan about not having enough time in the comparatively pedestrian Cessna 152's circuit over my local flying club!

And still onward we pressed, with the weather getting ever greyer and more turbulent and at this point I have an embarrassing admission to make....Somewhere around the Newtownards point of our journey, I started to go a little green around the gills, (not something any pilot wants to admit), and as we punched, relentlessly through layers of lumpy clouds, the full English began to seem, in hindsight, like it may not have gone down quite so well, after all.

Not wanting to risk the success of the flight, I concentrated for all I was worth on the barely visible horizon, taking deep breaths and hoping I didn't look as green as I felt, but even the stunning shores of Islay couldn't break through my nausea and by the time we landed on Tiree Island, I knew that for me, the battle was lost.

Considering they had embarked on a Boy's Own adventure and now found themselves confined in a small plane with a puking, snivelling girly, Robert and Al were true gentleman. After a quick Team Talk on the ground at Tiree (while the amazingly kind Airport staff mopped me up and propped me up in the tiny Island Airport's café), it was decided by all that our team would divert to deliver me to Inverness early, while the rest of the formation would carry on regardless until Al and Robert could catch them up and so finish the challenge together.

Defeat is always hard to admit but at that moment the only thing worse than compromising the team's success was the thought of having to carry on twisting and diving through the turbulent skies for another 5 hrs and so I reluctantly accepted that for me, the adventure must end here.

As my flying Instructor used to love reminding me, being a competent pilot is all about knowing when it's safe, and when it just isn't safe, to take to the skies, and I knew that having to cart a sick and miserable passenger along would certainly not help the chances of the flight's overall success.

So I'm afraid that's where my commentary must end, though I know the remaining players reached their goal within time - just - and without further casualties.

Ironically, the diversion Robert took to deliver me back to Inverness was a real bright-spot. In a shrewd bid to distract my sickly thoughts from the twisting and churning weather, Robert let me fly his Aztec back to Inverness, and, wouldn't you know it, my nausea cleared right up! We flew along Loch Ness passing beautiful Tobermoray, amongst others but before I knew it, we were landing. It was with a heavy heart that I watched the boy's taking off from the window of my retreating taxi but I had high hopes for their success. With the last burst of concentration I could muster, I sent a wish for victory for team Dawn 2 Dusk,

onto their fast-disappearing tail, and lay my weary, banging head against the Tartan Taxi's headrest.

Meanwhile the rest of the team flew on to Benbecula and once the formation had reformed, took on the last stops of the challenge together. To Stornaway, where I hear they all got thoroughly soaked standing for photos through the storms. On to the atmospherically named Cape Wrath followed by Kirkwall and on to Shetland then finally, ten minutes before official dusk fell, the end of the road, the wonderful...Inverness.

Another adventure over, high's, low's and lot's of beautiful island's in between. And to me, this is what FSD is all about. Nausea notwithstanding, it's about trying hard to do something extraordinary and learning lots about yourself and the rest of the world, along the way.

I believe the challenge will raise about £20,000 to help FSD do what it does best. Inspiring, empowering and rescuing scores of people just like me from the constraints of our disabilities, year after year, reminding us all that it's the journey, not the destination in life, that really matters.

Emma Suddaby