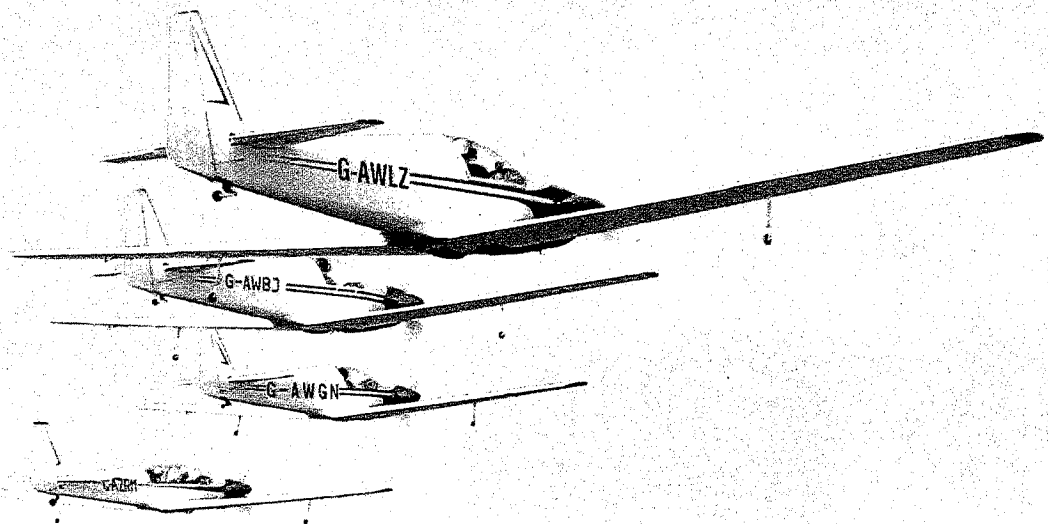


Fournier Days

with
Club Fournier International



Gap-Tallard 2007

by Dave Bland

The four ship
formation preparing to
run in to St Quentin

Well we did it. My little Fournier RF4, G-AWLZ and I made it all the way down to Gap/Tallard and back in one piece with not a missed beat from the engine, no huge oil usage nor any major dramas.

Washing and polishing LZ on Sunday after my flying partner James' return from a little jaunt around Southern England, my confidence was boosted by the lack of oil on the airframe. Dave Townsend's engine rebuild and Jon's new breather were clearly doing a good job. However, my hard work was wasted when the aircraft was flown again on Monday, leaving it just as 'buggy' as before when eventually got around to loading my gear that evening.

The plan was that Paul Cooper and I would fly in loose formation to Headcorn on the Tuesday evening, to make sure we were not delayed by weather for the Wednesday midday rendezvous with the rest of the gang.

As planned, Paul turned up from Seighford in his RF4 G-BXLN, and after a quick re-fuel we were ready to go, once I had thrown a lot of stuff out of 'LZ after deciding there was just wasn't enough room for everything and me. The flight went Nympsfield, Sandhill Farm, Petersfield, Heathfield and Headcorn, glider style (i.e. looking out of the window and reading the map) and established that we were happy flying in formation. Our arrival at Headcorn was a nice formation run in and break. Gordon Franks (former Sportair Flying Club CFI and Fournier expert) was on the radio and was well chuffed. He said it had taken him back 35 years to have a couple of RF4's do that! And how nice that an airfield actually welcomes that kind of arrival these days.

Gordon took us to the Chequers, a nice 14th century pub where we were staying,

Wednesday morning dawned with my previous sniffle having taken a turn for the worse, so after deciding that a slice of toast was probably a better option than the fry up, what with my iffy tummy, I went to the village store and stocked up with Paracetamol and throat sweets. On return to the pub I was quizzed by the landlord if I'd had a good night, it turned out that I had taken the haunted room. I assured him



Headcorn is a welcoming aviation Mecca and the Chequers pub in the village continues the trend. A great place to stay, despite the ghosts.

that ghosts have no chance against a few pints of Wife Beater!

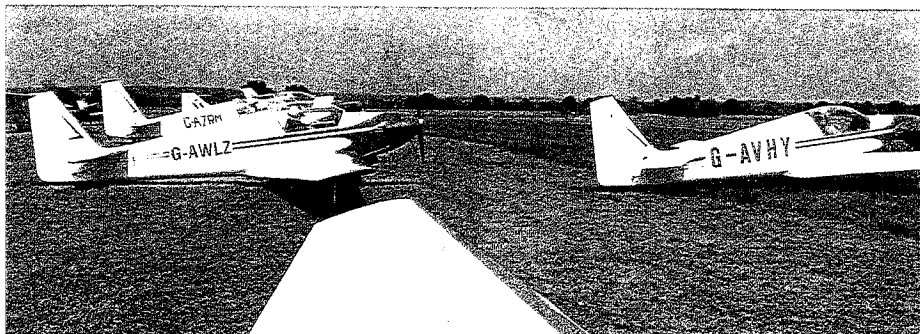
Back at the airfield Mike and Amanda Miller in RF5 G-AZRM were the first to appear. Mike, a former Shackleton and Victor driver, was our leader and the driving force behind this trip. They were soon followed by Adrian Hatton in RF4 G-AVHY, Neil Bigrigg in RF4 G-AWBJ and Nic Hart in RF7 G-LTRF.

The plan was to brief at 1200 and then depart for France but the Devon contingent had not arrived, having been delayed by

had better things to do than worry about a group of Fournier pilots heading for their ancestral home.

After refuelling we pushed on to St Quentin via Amiens, with some of our number down in the weeds pretending to be Mosquitos during that daring WW2 prison break. We even managed a reasonable four ship echelon starboard formation for the run in across St Quentin, our night stop where we met Vincent Pesche, owner of RF3 F-BXLE, and airfield bar owner Pierre who also has an RF3. The meal he laid before us was an excellent buffet that must have taken a great deal of effort to prepare but I was feeling too rotten to enjoy it. Some hay fever pills from Paul did seem to help though.

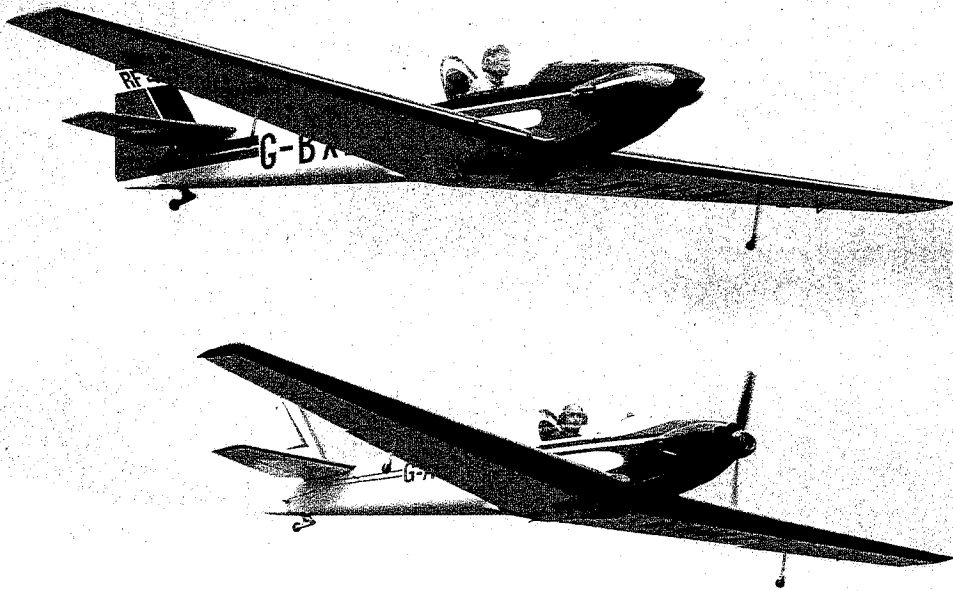
Thursday morning found my cold a little better, but not my stomach and I had by now eaten half a pack of Imodium, or Sniper's Friend as Andy McNab calls them. LZ in contrast, had only consumed a little oil, not a problem, but her tailwheel bearings had disintegrated, leaving the wheel to rotate rather loosely and loudly as she coasted back to the airfield.



About to leave Headcorn for the crossing to Abbeville. Mitch (HY), the author (LV), and Mike and Amanda (RM). Taken from the cockpit of LN.

and after a couple of pints of 'Wife Beater' we were joined by Brian Stevens (ex director of Sportair) and Gordon for an evening of Fournier reminiscences

poor West Country weather. Eventually they turned up, Ian Mitchell in RF4 G-AVHY plus Dave Weston with Ian Harrison in RF5 G-BACE and Mike and Amanda



Mike Dentith and Bob Grimstead playing at Gap.

▶ to carry out a repair, it was deemed safe to continue.

Departure was interesting, the grass being at least a foot long and concealing more than a few molehills. Acceleration was sloooow, even with LZs 'big' 1600cc engine and I felt for those with their lower powered engines as I sneezed skywards in my now pollen filled cockpit. At least there were no trees or wires at the end of the runway. Nic, in his two litre RF7, had the right idea and went off downwind on a bit of mowed taxiway.

The run to Dijon was straightforward, and the first hour was spent inspecting Vince's tailwheel as I practiced my line astern in the smooth morning air. It was lunchtime (from 1100 – 1600 it would appear) when we arrived for fuel, and the fuel woman did not seem too happy to see us. She got even stroppier when some of us actually offered cash rather than a credit card for payment – good old service with a smile eh! However, Nic and I did find a hangar with a Corsair, a Spitfire XIX (with a non standard contra prop) and a FW190 (one of the new build ones I would guess) into



Part of the line-up at Dijon, by now a 13 aircraft gaggle. The Apex (Robin) factory is in the background.

which, in contrast, we were welcomed. Then a team of CAP231 aerobatic aircraft appeared, cycling their props and trying to make as much noise as possible to wake up the folks at Apex, the Robin and CAP factory. For some reason two landed one way, and two in the opposite direction. Well it is France I suppose.

Dijon to GAP was another fairly straightforward run, and by now I was getting the hang of the style and meaning of the French 1/2 million maps. Around St Jean Daveland (what a great place that must be, Daveland), we saw a glider thermalling and another on aerotow, the first aircraft we had seen in flight on the trip thus far. Then we were into the mountains proper at Grenoble at about 6 – 6500 ft, above the hills and in a loose gaggle. Perhaps Vince should have told everyone to fly line astern because at this point I was off to his right when I watched him fly straight at a spine of rock and rocket upwards. Once he was several thousand feet above me he rolled off over the other side of the ridge.

Just when I needed it the radio wouldn't transmit and I was bricking it; on my own,

not able to call for help, not really 100% positive of where I was (one huge lump of rock looks pretty much like any other), and not really sure how mountain lift works. There was only one thing for it, I would fly at the rock and hope it worked for me too. Sure enough when I did up we went, with lift off the clock until 10,000ft and across the 9000 ft ridge to chase after the others for a tour around the Gap region.

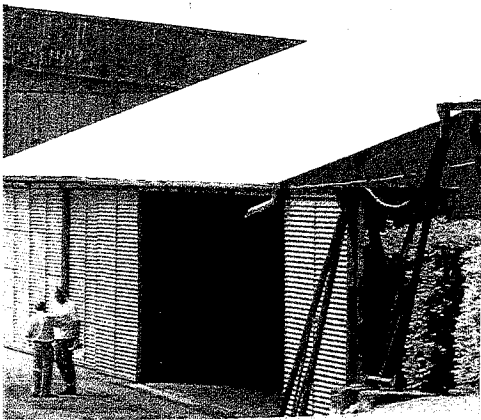
After refuelling and booking in we set up camp at Philippe Tarade's skydiving and air sports' centre and found the bar. We ate that night at a pizza place just down the road, not exactly French cuisine but to be honest I was not in any fit state to care.

Michel Leblanc of Club Fournier International (CFI) had arranged a breakfast deal with the airfield bar/café, so on Friday morning we met brother of the Dijon fuelling woman who grudgingly served us coffee and a croissant for five Euros, and then got confused and stropky over who he thought

I could see why Fourniers were so expensive. There was no production line as such, more a case of fabricating individual aircraft – start on Monday with the plans and a pile of wood and work until a finished RF3 goes out the door on a Friday several weeks later.

By Saturday morning I felt dreadful so I asked organiser Michel to sort me out a doctor. He was great and between him and Jean-Paul they got me taken to Gap. If I want to see my own doctor I'm lucky if I can get an appointment within three days, but here in deepest France I was seen within five minutes of arrival at the surgery. And my prescription of four items cost just 11 Euros!

Fortunately for me the weather over the next 24 hours was dreadful so my being crashed out was no great loss, other than I was very disappointed to miss Rene Fournier's talk about the early days of Alpavia. I finally surfaced around lunchtime on Sunday, feeling very much



Matt Hill, former Skyhawk display pilot, in the cockpit of LZ at Gap.

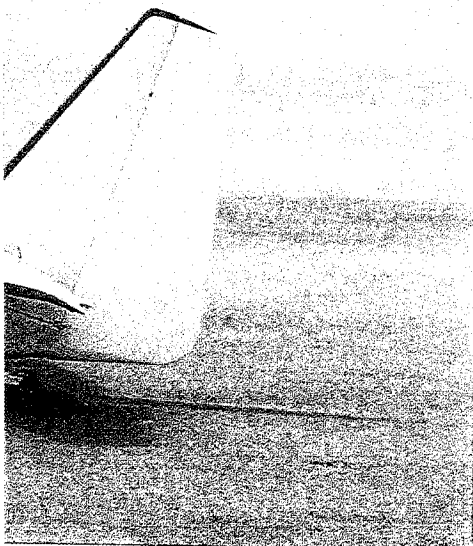
had paid or hadn't. For some strange reason they don't take your money with your order and when other people come and sit at the same table they get in a tizzy. This seemed the standard operating procedure.

The rest of the day was spent mooching, fixing tailwheels (thanks Bob) and using Philippe's pool. It was very warm as it had been during the previous days, and my cold was fighting back, and the hay fever pills were doing nothing to combat it. CFI had put on a huge buffet in the old Alpavia workshop that evening but I was feeling so ill that I scuttled off to bed at 8:30, missing the evening's social activities.

Seeing the size of the factory building and looking at all the old photos on display

better. The weather too had improved so I let Bob Grimstead and ex Skyhawk display pilot Matt Hill have a play in LZ during the afternoon.

Mike Dentith wanted to put up a formation in the evening with those he thought up to it and I was dragged off to a briefing with an assortment of ex military guys and ex Skyhawks display pilots. Mike was to lead with a couple in echelon either side and me bringing up the rear to form the first diamond box. Matt led the second diamond, latched onto my tail. By all accounts it worked and I am honoured that they thought me good enough to fly with them as part of the team, they were even complimentary afterwards!



FOURNIER DAYS ■ Dave Bland

► The after dinner speakers that evening were Mira Slovak, who flew an RF4 across the Atlantic, unfortunately crashing it on arrival at his home field during a formation fly-by), Bob Grimstead on winning an aerobatic competition in an RF4, and the Skyhawk guys talking about some of their exploits. A great evening, though drier than you might expect as there were thoughts of departing the next day due to a poor weather forecast.

On Monday morning I was woken by the dawn patrol and wandered off to get my breakfast from Mr Grumpy. On the way I met Frank, a German pilot, who suggested we go to the Travel Lodge next door; even as non guests we were welcomed and enjoyed all we could eat and drink for six euros. Pity we hadn't discovered this earlier.

The forecast showed increasing winds and lots of frontal activity after Tuesday. Adrian, Nic and Neil had made their decision the previous evening and departed at 0800. The rest of us bar Mike Millar, who was staying an extra day, pulled out lots of met and decided that we too should head north. Professional pilots Paul (a 767 driver) and Mike D became our mentors and leaders, and we set off at 1400, only to return fifteen minutes later when our path was blocked by rain and low cloud! Also the Devon boys could not communicate on our Fournier frequency, so probably it was just as well we had to go back. Paul's mates in an RV9 who left about 1100 fought fifty knot headwinds and torrential rain, so perhaps we didn't miss too much. We heard nothing of the other group though.

Eventually we got a text to say they had made Abbeville, then later that they had reached Headcorn where it was blowing more than thirty knots. They hangered their aircraft and went to the pub, lucky beggars, at least they were back in England.

I drank water and didn't eat much other than some more Sniper's Friend, and went to bed about 10pm. It was the coldest night yet, coupled with the fact I was worried about the mountains and the strong winds that were forecast. Needless to say I had a poor night's sleep, the wind howling around the tent just to wind me up even more.

My first visit to the toilet block was at 0400 on Tuesday morning, when I discovered the wind had dropped a bit and the sky was clear. It was pointless trying to get back to sleep so I got up at 0530, checked over LZ and packed my gear away ready for the off.

I wasn't the only one unable to sleep. Bodies were on the move from 0600 and by

0630 we were all ready for the off except for Mike, who we'd told we would be leaving later in the morning. Mike told us he was a big boy now and was quite happy for us to leave and that he'd follow on his own, so we taxied out just before 0700.

Paul was concerned that he was not getting more than 2600rpm static, even though he had changed his plugs and adjusted his tappets the previous day. Mitch reassured him by saying he was only getting the same, so it was probably due to the altitude. LZ then chose to put out a puff of black smoke and run rough as the throttle was opened after a long time idling, just to twitch me even more. But off we went. It was a bit bouncy in the first part of the valley, becoming nothing short of bloody rough when we turned the corner. We climbed where we could, and went down where we couldn't as the valley headed south to Sisteron and St Auban. When we finally managed to get up to 6000ft the air was smoother, but we were still experiencing high rates of climb and descent, 8/10 knots down was not unusual.

The last ridge of the mountains between Manosque and Cavoillon seemed clear, with cumulus well above it so we cut across. The lift was working well and I ended up at 9000ft and on my own again above a broken cloud layer, but at least it was smooth.

For some reason the group seemed to have got split up, some above and some below cloud. I orbited for a while hoping to see somebody, or that they would see me. Mike Dentith identified my position from what I described through gaps in the cloud, but he and Gordon were well behind and still fighting high sink rates. He suggested we all rendezvous over Carpentras airfield, but I could not find the ICAO code to put into my GPS so in the end pushed on to our intended destination of Valence in the Rhone Valley, thankfully free of the rough air in the mountains.

After a while I realised that I could hear the others OK but they could not hear me. The radio hadn't enough power to transmit, although a new battery had been put in only a couple of hours earlier. I expected the GPS might die too soon, so it was time to get down through a hole so that I could resume eyeball navigation.

The visibility was good and navigation easy, but the headwind was very strong, I heard of 35kt ground speeds from the others and it seemed to take an eternity to get to Valence. I could hear the others calling from 20 miles out, and thankfully by now they twigged that I was having

radio problems. Valence is class D airspace and Mike called them on my behalf, with me fortunately being able to still hear their instructions. I set up for a non radio arrival (as if I'd be going anywhere else anyway; I was going to land, reprimand or not!).

God it was blowy on the ground. We struggled to get to the pumps and after refuelling I went to apologise to Madame controller for my radio problems. She was very nice about it but said I would not be able to depart without a radio. I said I would fit another battery and she was happy. However, the other battery didn't have enough power to transmit either. Buzzer!

Mike and Gordon too were having a radio flap, so the others pushed on leaving us to resolve our problems and catch up.

The eight ship formation down wind at Gap.



When they'd sorted their problem, Mike pretended to be me, which worked OK and we taxied out. The circuit suddenly got very busy with five aircraft on long final and four big S2 Tracker fire bombers doing a run in and break. I was cleared to depart after the last landing light aircraft and before the first S2, so I was soon away. I orbited over a village to the north waiting for the Dimona, which I thought had been cleared to depart, but after ten minutes I assumed I'd missed him and headed off to V.Tarare, our destination 150nm distant. In order to conserve what little power I had I left the GPS off and map read.

Mike was actually held for ages while the S2s landed and back-tracked, so I was initially well ahead, but by about 2/3 of the way I was very relieved to spot them a couple of miles to port as I was skirting

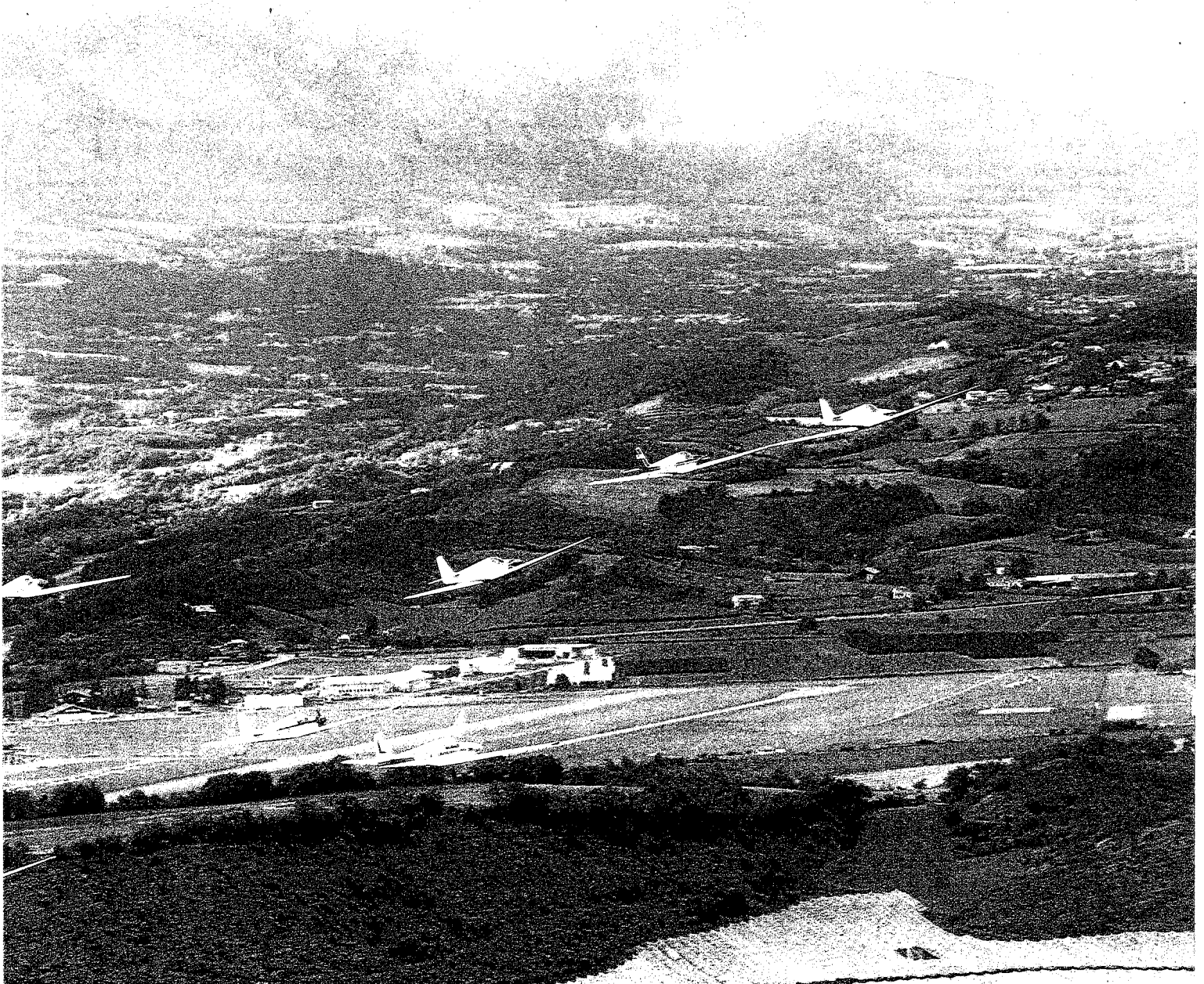
the Lyon zone, so LZ got the balls-out treatment to 145mph so I could draw level with them. No sooner had I done so than I also spotted Vince in his RF3.

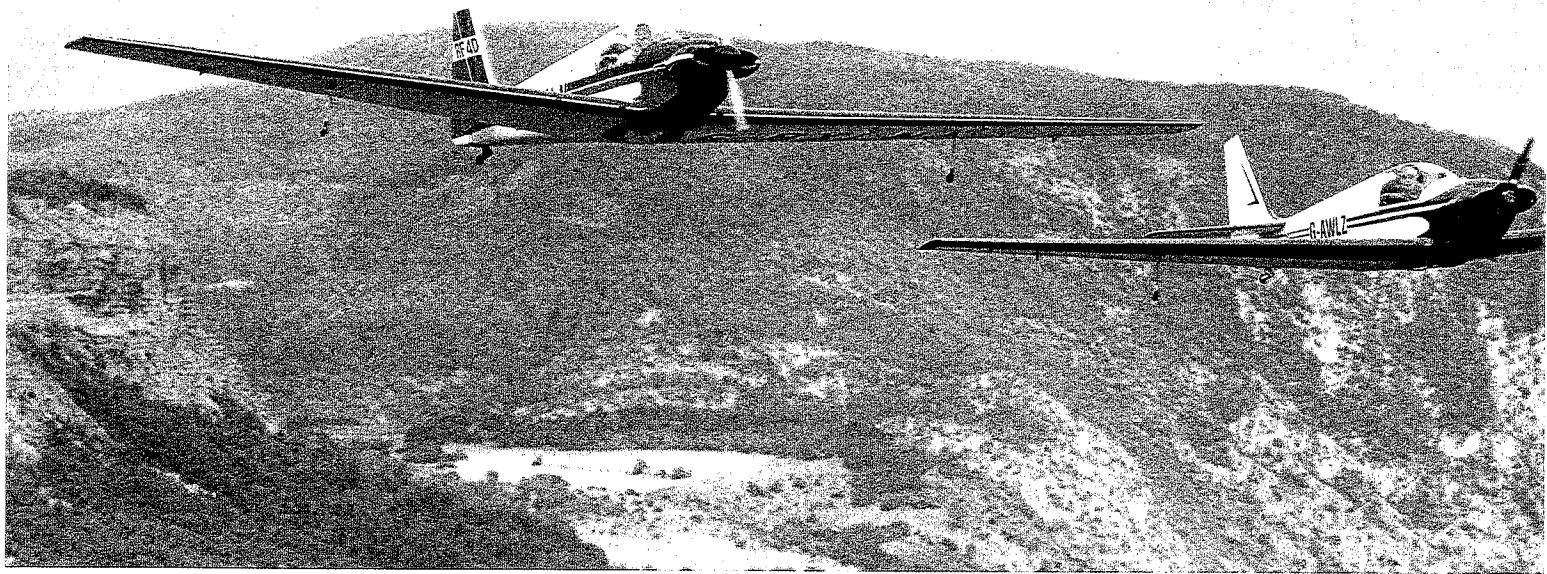
Leaving V.Tarare we headed for Troyes, another 150nm or so north. This time we stayed together, but by now I was completely non radio and non GPS. All was well until with about fifty miles to run, the oil pressure gauge started to fluctuate. I convinced myself it was surging or getting a bit of air in the line due to the higher than normal power setting I was using, 3000rpm rather than 2600, and that it probably needed topping up. It had been almost six hours since having last topped up at Gap.

A quick refuel and top up of the oil at Troyes and we left for Abbeville, the oil pressure now thankfully fine. Mike pushed

on ahead to try and get Abbeville to stay open for us and I stuck like glue to Paul. We cut the corner at St. Quentin by dropping down low to get under the Paris TMA. The land was flat and we had 1000ft to play with, but there was a huge forest to cross, wider even than the Channel, where at least there are plenty of boats and it's less likely to hurt if the engine stops.

We got to Abbeville with ten minutes to spare but the landing was our worst crosswind experience thus far, it was very difficult to get the aircraft to go where we wanted. Big bootfuls of rudder were needed, and RFs were swerving all over the runway. Refuelled and our flightplans filed, we battled the crosswind again and climbed to 5000ft for the Channel crossing from Cap Gris Nez to Dungerness, and then to Headcorn, where again the taxiing





► can only be described as interesting. More fuel, no interest from Customs and we were on our way again for the last leg home. Rather than my usual route around the south of Gatwick, I followed Mike on the more direct track between Gatwick and Heathrow, finally breaking off when

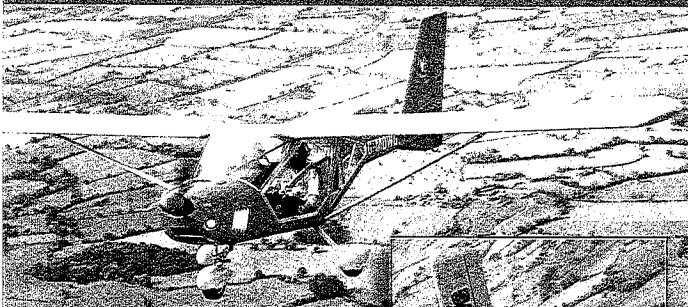
we got to Kemble. LZ and I finally landed back at Nympsfield at 2100 after no less than 10hours 50 minutes flying, all in one day in that tiny cockpit! It had only taken eight and a half hours on the outbound journey, and that over three days.

It's amazing what adrenalin can do, once

home I was utterly whacked out and confined myself to bed for a couple of days with Night Nurse. Good news was that we all made it back safely, despite the difficult conditions; the little RFs performed magnificently and we had a wonderful week away. Here's to the next adventure. ■

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