

# FERRY PILOT DIARY

By Captain Joe Drury



**3/20/17 - 4/11/17: 8,600 miles flying Last Chance for Animals (LCA) and Cindy & Michael Landon Foundation's donated Cessna 206 N161VP from Alamosa, Colorado to Entebbe, Uganda. Plane's final destination - Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo to join Virunga's AirWing to help protect the park, the rangers, the wildlife and the mountain gorillas**

Dear Cindy at LCA and the team,

Four and a half hours to go until the final destination of Entebbe, Uganda, the aeroplane has not had a single fault, and all is looking good. It is my 65th aircraft delivery and on each one, during the last leg, I get the chance to reflect back on the entire trip, so I thought I'd share with you, a bit like a diary.

The Colorado Rockies



## **Leg 1: Alamosa, CO to Kankakee, IL – 863 miles, 6h11**

It was a real pleasure to pick the plane up and meet the team, a bit of a rush to get all the kit onboard and then a group photo. On takeoff I did a flyby for the film crew which was fun, and then off through the beautiful high Colorado Rockies to the flat plains of Kansas, onward to Illinois. Amazing how much open farming country there is, this area is real "small town America". Got to know the plane a bit better, finding the optimum power settings and altitude for best cruise. My stuffed dog "Lucky" has been my mascot on all 65 ferry flights, he is of course in his usual place on the dashboard overseeing things.



Crew group photo before takeoff

## **Leg 2: Kankakee, IL to Bangor, ME – 865 miles, 6h12**

Took off in fog at Kankakee, no problem for this plane, it's got all the kit. More importantly the pilot is fed and happy, and climbing up through the cloud, the sun sets. I make tea from my thermos (important for an Englishman far from home). Another 6 hours to Bangor in Maine, my favourite US state. Bit of heavy weather encountered and worked with Air Traffic Control to find a route through and around the worst bits. Once into Maine however, all is well and it's a smooth last hour of the flight. Here for 2 days waiting for the weather to clear across the Atlantic and fitting the ferry tank and HF (long range) radio. Because I pass through here 3 times a month, I have friends in Bangor and they always make me welcome. Also last chance to pack, check survival gear and give the plane a thorough once-over before launching north into the wilderness.



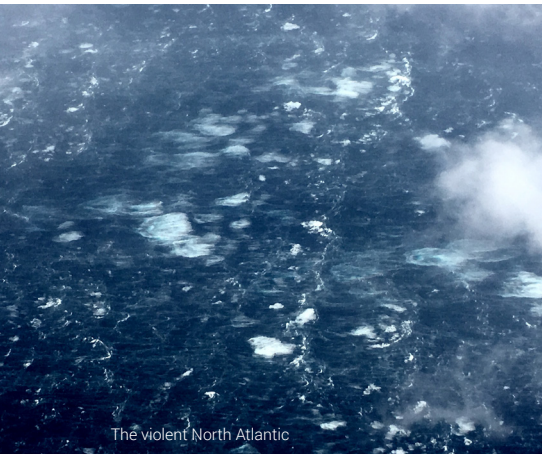
My stuffed mascot dog Lucky

Beautiful sunrise



### **Leg 3: Bangor, ME to Goose Bay, Newfoundland – 608 miles, 5h11**

I hate getting up at midnight. Just about manage to drag myself out of bed and into the plane, off at 1 am to pick up favourable weather across the Atlantic. It's freezing cold, -20 degrees, blowing a gale when I get to the aircraft. Inside it's just as cold as outside and the motor takes a long while to start in this cold weather. Any colder and I'll need to heat it up with a blower, but eventually she goes, one cylinder slowly coming alive after another, until all are firing nicely and the heater is thawing my frozen feet! Off in the dark to Goose Bay, occasionally catching glimpses of isolated Canadian outposts below me. The sun rises spectacularly over the Canadian back country illuminating the icy lakes and forests in an amazing pink and gold glow. This is one of the definite benefits of being a pilot, and I have a coffee and a bun to celebrate the dawn (and to keep me awake).



The violent North Atlantic

### **Leg 4: The North Atlantic – Goose Bay to Keflavik, Iceland – 1,316 miles, 7h19**

The most dangerous part of the voyage warrants the closest look at the weather. Every contingency is planned and on this leg the survival suit goes on. The raft is close by and all the equipment is checked again. As I head out over the Davis Strait, the stretch of water between Canada and Greenland, I get an updated weather report of severe turbulence over southern Greenland, fairly normal to expect, as I thankfully have 70kt tailwinds. It will make for a rough, but quick ride across. Passing the spectacular peaks and glaciers of Iceland, I get shook violently but I make sure everything is strapped down. Poor Lucky goes flying around the cockpit, but he's fine, he's been through worse with me. Looking down over the North Atlantic, violent swells of 30 feet or more sweep across the sea, white spray driven by the gale-force winds. It's an awesome and humbling sight. I check the oil pressure somewhat more often than usual. Approaching Iceland, my mum (an airline pilot) gives me

weather updates on the Satphone. The wind is gusting to 50mph, scary for some but normal for Iceland, and I'm fairly used to it, but it's time to concentrate. Apart from a brief but exciting weightless experience which collided my head against the roof of the plane, I bring N161VP in for a fairly uneventful landing in 45-55 mph gusts. Snow flurries briefly obscure the runway but I manage to find it nonetheless. I wrestle and fight with the controls as I taxi in, the wind trying to blow me back into the air! The real hero is the refueller who braves the ice and wind on top of his ladder. The plane goes in a hangar, safe and warm.

### **Leg 5: Keflavik, Iceland to Wick, Scotland – 650 miles, 4h15**

The wind is still howling in the morning as I arrive at the flight briefing office, a few jet pilots are sitting around talking and worrying about the weather, as they do. I start to get into my red survival suit and they all turn to look at me and the room goes quiet. I pay my bill, have a last joke with the office guys, and head out to the little Cessna, which is dancing about outside the hangar, trying to get airborne without me. I imagine the other pilots think I'm crazy, but it doesn't bother me too much, I've checked the weather and it's as safe as it can be under the circumstances. I get airborne and when the turbulence has died down, see about fixing some breakfast and a cup of tea. Tailwinds push me swiftly to Wick, another very common stop for me, and I arrive in beautiful sunshine. At last I can ditch the uncomfortable rubber suit! Adrienne makes me some lunch and I catch up for an hour with her and the others.



Safe in the Iceland hangar overnight



Beautiful far north of Scotland



### Leg 6: Wick, Scotland to Blackpool, England – 281 miles, 2h51

This leg is great, beautiful scenery over Scotland and the Lake District. Heading past Glasgow I'm suddenly crossing the border into England and I'm in my home airspace!! Another tea to celebrate. I ring my mum on the Satphone and I drop into our little private airstrip, just north of Blackpool. I hand my laundry over to my dear mother, and after a big hug, you guessed it... another cup of tea. It's what we do. She actually flies with me for 10 mins over to Blackpool and on the way I tell her about the charity and where I'm going. I even manage to impress her with a fairly smooth landing, phew! Here I'll stay for one night before heading off all too quickly again southbound. It's so good to sleep in my own bed though!



Mum and me in Blackpool, Scotland



Stunning weather leaving UK to France

### Leg 7: Blackpool, England, to Avignon, France – 669 miles, 6h02

A bit of a slog, the tailwinds have turned into headwinds but the weather in U.K. and Northern France is absolutely stunning. The visibility is literally a hundred miles in each direction. I pass by the busy airspaces of London and Paris, and arrive at Avignon in Provence, France. If I'm coming north through here I usually do some serious cheese and wine smuggling... not today. I refuel and get on my way within 30 mins.

### Leg 8: Avignon, France to Heraklion, Crete, Greece – 1,064 miles, 8h05

A long leg this one. To be honest I'm a bit tired, but if I can get this over and done with, the next two days are easy thorough Africa. Passing over the famous and glamorous South of France, the weather turns cloudy and rainy... meanwhile in England it's still glorious, take that St Tropez!! Passing the mountainous island of Corsica the last of the sun shines through a gap in the clouds and lights the mountains up like a picture postcard. It's amazing, but as usual I can't seem to get a good photo of it; I file it away in my head instead. The weather now is getting quite dynamic, and the stormscope is really coming alive with lightning bolt symbols everywhere. I manage to swerve the worst of the thunderstorms but Victor Papa still gets a good drenching. She talks to me in rough weather; little sighs, whistles and squeaks like all Cessnas make, but I think she has her own voice, this one. Over Italy it calms down again and my major task is staying awake for the remaining 4 hours. As I get older I'm much better at managing my time so I don't get bored, and here's the key: I split the long flights up into manageable chunks. At the top of each hour I check my fuel, talk to ATC if required, have a half-bottle of water, and check the engine. I also dial the satellite and see if I've got any emails. My wonderful and long-suffering partner Fernanda usually sends me emails and messages of love to keep me going, even the most mundane stuff like the dog playing in the garden is a link to home which is so welcome on a long voyage that it can nearly bring a tear to the eye. In between the hourly checks, I try to mix it up, do something different to keep my brain alive: I mostly read, tidy up the cockpit (it always seems to go into disarray at the slightest excuse), do some paperwork, write lists of paperwork I should do and for some reason haven't done, and when I'm really tired, I watch TV on my laptop or listen to music. Sometimes I sing along. Don't tell anyone.

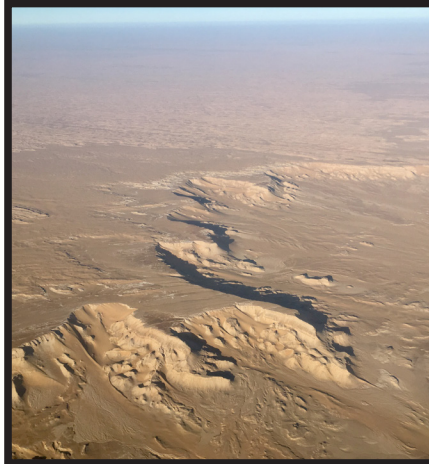


Refueling in Heraklion

Desert setting sun



Egyptian desert flying towards Sudan



**Leg 9: Heraklion to Khartoum, Sudan – 1,249 miles, 7h22**

Another long leg but after a good night's sleep after a tiring previous day, I'm ready and keen to get some miles under my belt. The route into Egypt is uneventful and as always, beautiful with the desert below. People always imagine the deserts in Africa as barren, featureless stretches of nothing, but it's not like that at all. From the privileged view from a light aircraft at 9000 feet, you see all different textures and features of the landscape at close range. I'm often fascinated by

the tiny farming villages, the isolation is extreme. As it's a bit hazy I don't get the best pictures but still I manage to capture the mood. Approaching the border of Sudan I see a curious round structure in the desert, maybe 5 miles across, circular striations of rock in the sand. It looks like an enormous wrinkled eye. Maybe a meteor crater. I land in Khartoum and taxi amongst the giant Russian cargo planes to my little spot, dwarfed by the others. I refuel with barrels and a hand pump, it's hard work and I do my share of the pumping. I tip the guys and go to the hotel, which has a nice soft bed, which is all a tired ferry pilot needs after a long day...

**Leg 10: Last leg: Khartoum, Sudan to Entebbe, Uganda – 933 miles, 4 hours and counting...**

I'll let you know how this one goes, apart from a nice departure overflying Khartoum and the joining of the Blue and White Nile, I've been typing so I haven't seen much! Time for a yoghurt I stole from the hotel breakfast buffet!



Arriving in Uganda

**Additional Notes:**

Something extra I'd like to say is apart from the occasional air ambulance, I'm mostly delivering rich people's toys, so to deliver an aircraft which will be doing a lot of good in the world, flown by skilled and passionate people, is something I'm very proud of, and very glad to be a small part of. As an animal lover and a great fan of the natural history of our world, I think the conservation work that you all do is vitally important and for many of you, a labour of love; your life's work. How fantastic, and for what it's worth, you have my and my family's support in what you do. I sadly cannot visit Virunga at this time but I would love to come back with my wife one day, and truly enjoy it.

The last hour of any ferry flight always seems to be a mixture of emotions, on one hand I'm always glad the long legs have come to an end, and I can deliver the aircraft very soon, but also I always feel sad to stop the engine for the final time. I build up an affinity with every aircraft I fly long-distance, and this 206 is no exception. In the last hour I finalise the paperwork as much as possible, tidy the cockpit and make sure she's in a fit state for delivery. As I pass 100 miles to go, the clouds break, the landscape stretches out ahead of me and I see Entebbe in the distance, on the shores of Lake Victoria. It's beautiful scenery and I'm grateful the

weather held out for the delivery. As I touch down, I taxi to the ramp and park next to some Cessna Caravans. Barry comes to meet me and shakes my hand, and snaps a few photos of me clambering out of the plane. He tells me he plans to fly it to a small airfield close by, and once I have my gear unloaded he jumps in and starts up. It feels strange, somebody flying MY aeroplane... and I have to remind myself that after 8600 miles my job is done. I chat with friendly Hassan on the ramp, and head to the local hotel for some well needed rest. Just as I pass through the security door I glance over my shoulder and see N161VP take to the skies, her paint job glinting in the bright Ugandan sunshine. She looks great, and this seems like a nice moment to close my diary. I hope I return to Virunga and fly in her as a passenger!



Safe arrival in Uganda

- Captain Joe