

TIM HALLS 2005 BRITISH ANTARTIC EXPEDITION ARTICLE (from *Skywings Magazine*)

My incredible journey really began with my introduction to paragliding, a 1 week novice paragliding course in Chamonix in August 2004. On completion I returned to the UK to gain support from possible sponsors, to negotiate the provision of a Bailey CorsAir paramotor and to collect a Kinetic 27 paraglider from Windtech (UK). Fly Bubble came up with an excellent deal on a reserve canopy and I returned to Chamonix within the week to gain as much free flying experience as I could in the short time available to me before a December departure for Antarctica via S. America. En-route back to Chamonix I visited Sup' Air in Annecy who joined my growing list of sponsors with the provision of harnesses, reserve canopy deployment systems, clothing, maillons and other essential items. Over the next 5 weeks I flew 51 times around the various Chamonix sites as well as at Salève & St Hilaire de Touvet. Word of my 'mission' quickly spread and daily I was on the receiving end of plenty of free advice and spontaneous appraisals of my aerial 'antics' from the local pilots & instructors, thanks to all of you!

I visited Coupe Icare, the free flight festival at St Hilaire. Here, a chance meeting with Italian engine manufacturer Oscar Meschiar from CorsAir Motors secured the loan of a spare paramotor engine & custom engine parts. Oscar deserves ALL the credit for warning me about the dangers of flying over water which as it transpired was worth more than a dozen of his engines!

In early October I returned to the UK. I collected a new paramotor from Bailey Aviation in Royston & with Paul Bailey's warning about having 'proper' training ringing in my ears I drove home to Shropshire. The following day I went 'cap in hand' to Mark Dann of Beyond Extreme. Despite being busy Mark generously found the time to accommodate me and following the BHPA powered paragliding training syllabus & with Mark's guidance I was airborne under power within a week. Over the next 8 weeks I flew at every opportunity thanks to the neighbourly farmer who owns the land behind my house, a derelict wartime airfield.

I'd meanwhile amassed a mountain of expedition clothing & gear to equip me for sailing, skiing, mountaineering, paragliding & paramotoring along with all the necessary equipment to make a film about the expedition. All this for an expedition to one of the world's most hostile environments. My sanity had been tested to get me to this point, I wasn't sure I'd passed the test, I was in too deep, I couldn't back out now even though sometimes I thought it would be so much easier to do so.

Leaving the comfort & security of family & home, going to the airport was a nightmare. Once there the check in procedure maxed out my credit card & my blood pressure. Transiting Atlanta & then Buenos Aires was hell save for a light hearted SMS message from a friend that ended, "safe journey & good luck my friend.... you nutter!" On arrival in Ushuaia, Argentina, the worlds most southerly city I saw to my despair 2 taxis loaded with my equipment disappear into the sunset. I thought it a bit much to be on the receiving end of an airborne 1000lb bomb from these people during the 1982 Falklands War but to make off with all my gear at this stage of the project really took the biscuit! My initial panic turned to relief as a fellow taxi diver beckoned me into his car and gave chase. We arrived at the yacht club and my destination at the same time as my presumed stolen luggage. The previous few months of manic preparation to get me thus far had taken its toll..... I was shattered!

Over the next few days the other members of the expedition, 7 sailors & mountaineers of varying degrees of experience, sanity & personal hygiene, assembled having travelled from various global backwaters. Together we readied the 47ft yacht 'Gambo' for the voyage ahead under the guidance of the skipper Dr. Alun Hubbard.

Our initial 2 days of planned 'yacht' preparation dragged into 10 as we did what we could for 'Gambo' & thereby improved our chances of a dubious safe return. Our waterborne neighbours suggested that our chosen vessel suffered a little from neglect bought about by the obvious lack of any maintenance plan, previous adventures to the higher latitudes and

many months unkept between the austral summer seasons. Having twice previously expedited on Gambo I knew that, engine, sails, radar, communications, life raft & any visual means of comfort aside she had a strong hull so if not a lot else she would 'stay afloat', we hoped! I also knew that the skipper's reputation & our unorthodox 'can do' approach to 'going South' was the envy of some and the bane of others. Either way we were out to have some fun, on the cheap, & this was only going to add 'bonus material' to my planned film!

Each day the boat sank lower into the water as we overloaded it with the multitude of things necessary for our expedition. I purchased 120 litres of aviation fuel from the nearby aero club. The petrol from the local gas station was not of the quality my hi-tech Italian engine requires. I assembled my paramotor for a test flight with this 'new' fuel & I honed my flying skills against the Patagonian backdrop having launched from the aero club. I demonstrated my foot-launched ability to the pilots of the nearby Argentine Air force base. Adversaries from 1982 Falkland War we had now become new found friends joined by a common interest in matters of aviation.

Once ready we slipped quietly away from the jetty & motored into the night down the infamous Beagle Channel and then out into open water before turning south & past Cape Horn. Seven days fair sailing took us across the Drake Passage. We were spared the tumultuous seas that this part of the Southern Ocean is famous for and we made landfall off the Antarctic Peninsula on Boxing Day oblivious that the rest of the world was reeling to the news of the Tsunami in Asia.

Two days later we steered Gambo through the last of the winter pack ice & forced our way into Dorian Bay a small natural boat harbour at a place called Weinke Island. Here I was landed among the snow & ice with 4 of the team along with all our equipment including a 3 metre inflatable boat with an outboard engine & 2 months supplies. This was to be home for the next 7 weeks. Meanwhile Gambo was returning North under charter to another expedition but would rejoin us at a later date.

Once ashore we established 'camp' inside a hut at Damoy Point. The hut is a time capsule from a bygone era of Ataractic exploration, had previously been inhabited by The British Antarctic Survey but not in recent years. The immediate vicinity is a hilly area which while being inclined towards the sea, sports a football pitch sized area of crevasse free & relatively flat snow covered terrain which was suitable for me to use as a takeoff and landing zone (LZ).

Surrounded by mountains soaring straight out of the sea, glaciers & the spectacular 150ft high ice cliffs that overlooked this ice berg strewn archipelago I made the first paramotor flight in Antarctica on 29th December 2004. With 24/7 daylight in the austral summer month's I was able to go 'night flying'. Numerous flights on and around Wienke Island followed, as and when conditions permitted, & by the time our team was picked up again on 12th February I'd made a total of 23 flights totalling some 15 hours duration.

The flights climaxed in the aerial filming of the climb to the summit of Mount Noble, 3500ft when I flew over the mountain while 2 of the mountaineers made a successful climb of this spectacular mountain late into the night of 6 – 7th February. With the two climbers closing on the summit of the mountain I launched from some 5 miles away and arrived overhead at 4,500ft in time to plan my precarious approach before filming them reaching the summit. With precipitous cliff faces falling either side of the mountain and little indication that there was any wind I made 3 low passes across the summit. It scared the hell out of me as any error on my part would have been catastrophic for me and the flying was made all the more taxing having to juggle with the HD Video camera. I was petrified that I might misread the apparent very light airflow over the mountain and be blown into the precipitous mountainside!

Despite the many difficulties bought about by weather & fickle localised winds this my longest flight lasted 1 hour 10minutes. Freezing temperatures at altitude were always a problem and a restricting factor in all of my flights. Being essentially a maritime environment I knew from my previous Antarctic experience that the average daily air temperatures at sea level were likely to be little worst that the UK in winter and this proved to be the case. Inland and away from the warming effects of the sea and at altitude it was a different matter, another world.

Twice during the expedition I made emergency rapid descents believing I'd frozen my hands having lost all feeling in my fingers whilst distracted with my camera work. I suffered only minor cold injuries.

All the flights were undertaken following an agreed flight plan either with a safety boat or yacht on the water or a mountaineering party on the ground that could come to my rescue if the need arose. All the terrain in Antarctica, being glaciated, is such that it can only be travelled safely on foot with skis and even then only as a member of a mountaineering party, roped-up as protection against crevasses. Had I landed out I'd have had to 'survive' with what I flew with while awaiting the arrival of my support team to help 'extract' me back to camp & safety. With that in mind I carried survival rations & additional clothing. I always flew while being monitored from the ground by VHF radio & I used a helmet and headset provided by Micro Avionics along with a remote PTT switch attached to my hand. Communication was my lifeline. My paramotor harness, made by Sup' Air had custom built storage for carrying not only cameras but survival equipment, as well as my WindSOS 35²m reserve parachute integral to the paramotor harness.

On January 6th whilst making an early morning flight I crash landed in the sea. I was making a low level approach to the LZ across nearby Dorian Bay. Cold air sinking over the adjacent glacier ice cliffs is thought to be the cause. After some 10 minutes in the freezing water I was plucked from the sea & landed ashore by the crew of the yacht S/v Zazie, who were anchored in Dorean Bay at the time and witnessed the incident. Having been prompted by stories of fatalities I'd designed and manufactured a unique buoyancy system for my paramotor. Essentially it consists of 2 inflatable buoys packed in Velcro sealed fabric envelopes mounted on the spokes of the paramotor cage. The buoys inflate automatically using water activated valves on Co2 cylinders as used in self inflating life jackets. Whilst I also flew wearing a life jacket, again with a Co2 cylinder to inflate it, this I only fitted with a manual inflation system so that there was no danger of the life jacket inflating and trapping me in the paramotor harness. In the event I didn't inflate the life jacket at all as the paramotor buoyancy system worked!

I recall, while I was in the water, being very angry that it had happened because of the inconvenience rather than any immediate danger. I later learned that my radio headset had short circuited in the water putting my radio into transmit mode, I was shouting and swearing in frustration. My ground crew knew I'd ditched as they heard it all over the radio back in camp! In the Navy as aircrew we used to train to escape from a ditched helicopter using a simulator, there were many similarities between the two cold & wet experiences so in a way it bizarrely all felt rather familiar to me.

Following the incident & with the teams help I rescued all of the equipment which I washed down using fresh water from a melt-water stream & bought back into service within 48 hours. My digital stills camera didn't survive.

Throughout the flights a program of High Definition Video filming was undertaken. 50 hours of video was compiled of the expedition's activities both from the ground and from the air. I'm currently co-producing a documentary for TV about the expedition. Aerial stills photography of the area and our activities was also undertaken.

The Antarctic Peninsula is not the quiet backwater it used to be. In recent years there has been an increasing seasonal migration of cruise ships coming from the North with 'cargos' of ocean going tourists. Once word of my activities got out over the radio waves these maritime tourists came ashore, to what we began to refer to as 'The Peoples Republic of Damoy', in droves to meet us, 'the locals'. They were transported from there ships in over powered inflatable boats to meet 'the eccentric Englishman & his flying machine'. If they were lucky they got to see me close up launch down my makeshift 6 metre long runway of plywood boards laid out on the surface of the knee deep snow. The really lucky ones saw me fall flat on my face if I didn't get airborne before the end of the runway!

Throughout the expedition I was sensitive to the perspective that visitors to this pristine wilderness might take on the activity. No flying was undertaken when a cruise ship was off

Dorian Bay & nearby Damoy Point without the prior consent of the ship's staff. In all cases the visitors were intrigued by the project and looked on with incredulous & enthusiastic applause. Whenever the opportunity presented itself or invited to do so I gave an illustrated presentation to the visitors, usually on board the cruise ship, about the program and demonstrated the equipment. This generated considerable interest and good PR between the expedition and the visitors to the area & was a unforeseen pleasure! It also had the unexpected benefit of some excellent dinner invitations, hot showers & some respite from our otherwise Spartan & rather basic accommodation ashore & a great promotional opportunity to showcase my sponsors products!

All too soon 'Gambo' returned and our adventures took us North. We returned to Ushuaia in March to re-supply before setting out for South Georgia to do it all again 1,200 miles away but that's another story which ended at the end of April when we limped into Uruguay. By then Gambo, engineless & perhaps more critically a decreasing number of useable sails, was showing the effects of the season's abuse as were her crew!

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ConAir Sports (UK)	Conrad Beale	www.conairsports.co.uk
Micro Avionics (UK)	Eddie Cartwright	www.microavionics.co.uk
Beyond Extreme	Mark & Rachel Dann	www.beyondextreme.co.uk
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