

HANGAR FLYING

Crossing the Channel

by Jeff Percival

On October 6, 1991, a group of British pilots converged on Dover, England to attempt a crossing of the English Channel. We met for a briefing at 4 AM at Dover Castle. We had just checked out of our hotel, and were eager to learn whether or not it would be possible to cross the Channel this morning. The wind was from the north, but ideally it needed to be from the northwest to give us the shortest trip across – about 19 miles. At 5 AM, the officials said “no go”, and the event was cancelled. We returned to our hotel to replace our disappointment with a full English breakfast.

“But,” said the hotel manager, “you checked out at 4AM. There will be no breakfast for you!”

After some serious negotiations, we got our breakfast, which had been included, and left for home. No sooner had we started for home, the car mobile phone rang. We were told that a number of balloons were going to fly, despite the advice of the event committee. We headed to the launch field, seven miles northwest of Dover Castle on the A2 to Canterbury. Twelve balloons had already launched, and were headed in a satisfactory direction to the southeast. It was now 8:30 AM. We raced about. The crew prepared the envelope, while a fellow pilot and I changed inside a balloon trailer into the required wet suits. They were two sizes too small, and we later learned that survival in the water with these suits would only have been a matter of minutes. We also put our required life raft on board, but it was only a one-man life raft!

We inflated and in our haste to depart as quickly as possible, left the inflation tank, only half-filled with propane, in the bottom of the basket. Normally we would have left it behind. We took off. It was now 20 minutes since we had arrived at the launch field. In that short time, the winds had shifted from northwest to north, making our projected track across the Channel much longer.

But we were already over the cliffs of Dover and there was no place to land, and no turning back. We were required to have three hours of fuel on board. We had 4 and a half hours, so we flew on, oblivious of our fate.

Several other balloons were going our way. We were all staying low, trying to get that hook to the left that would take us to the nearest land in France. We had to be careful not to fly too low, or the basket would be caught by a wave.

This did indeed happen to one of the balloons, and their basket was swamped. They burned hard, and got free of the surf, but not before losing all their radios.

As we headed south, we did not get that left turn, and so found ourselves paralleling the coast, with no prospect in sight for an early landfall. One of the balloons near us, larger and with less weight on board, became concerned for our safety, and issued a PAN alert to the nearest airport in France. Calmly they replied, “Please advise us when the balloon has ditched.” If there were any rescue services, no one was telling us about them.

We were about one mile offshore, paralleling the coast of France. By now, our fuel was very low, so we made plans. Because I could not swim, I was to get the life raft. My fellow pilot would stay with the basket, which, with seven empty propane canisters, would continue to float. We would separate the envelope so that it would not have the opportunity to drag us down.

By now we were shaking each tank, trying to get the most out of every one. At the same time, we were skimming the waves, hoping that would bring us closer to shore. At this point, I called my wife in England to let her know that the flight was not cancelled as she had supposed, but that I was almost across the Channel. Still flying the balloon, I had my hands full.

Finally we left the water behind and crossed over sand dunes covered with gorse. To the great surprise of my fellow pilot, who wanted to land and kiss the ground, I did not land, fearing to harm the brand new envelope, but pressed on to a sports field one quarter mile away, using the very last of the inflation tank to get us there. Local children stopped their football (soccer) game to watch us land, and then helped us pack up.

We began to walk to the nearest village, but were stopped by friendly Frenchmen in a car, and taken to the nearest pub. While waiting for our chase crew to cross on the ferry, we celebrated with beer and champagne. Our successful channel-crossing flight had lasted four hours and forty minutes.