

A Crack in Heaven

When Nephew James won his place at United World College, the carefully planned family holiday was urgently rescheduled, and the knock on effect was that the Old SLAPAS (The pensioner's branch of the Solent Light Aircraft Passengers Association) tour of Europe was postponed to September.

Our initial objective was to visit "Auntie Joan" at Cologne, but on Monday G-BASH was still at Fair Oaks airport having its new radio fitted. By 1.00pm Alan Watkins had finished the job and G-BASH was wheeled out onto the apron. A flight plan to Calais was filed, the luggage loaded, the tanks topped up with fuel, and at 1.30pm local time we took off and headed south-east direct to Calais in nice sunny weather.

This fine weather was not to last however, at Calais we topped off the tanks, and filed two flight plans, the first to Liege, and then the second onwards to Bonn Hangelar, Cologne's GA airfield. The TAFs showed cloudy conditions all the way but with a minimum 3000ft cloud base and 10K visibility, actually very good. Hardly had we left Calais, when we ran straight into solid IMC, we crossed the FIR boundary in the clag and called Koksijde to check the status of their danger area EB R 25. Changing to Belg Control we obtained weather for Ostende, Brussels and Liege. All were OK and we could hear other VFR traffic at low level, so we concluded that we were in local conditions. While watching our MSA (only 1100ft because Belgium is very flat!), we pressed on. I gave a position report North of Kottkijk Wevelgem, which seemed to cause some hilarity in Belg Control. Within 15 minutes we broke into good VMC conditions, were cleared into Brussels class B airspace and told to report at Waterloo. Looking back we could see that we had passed through a weak front, which looked brown and menacing in the evening light.



The exhibition at the Schloss Augustberg, was this the Crack in Heaven which let in the water for our holiday!

The monument at Waterloo VRP

Waterloo VRP is shown clearly on the map as a Mon! or monument. It is in fact, the very monument constructed to commemorate the Victory of the Iron Duke over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1812. The sculptured Lion on top of the famous conical mound is said to have been cast from the French cannon captured during the battle.

We pressed on to Liege, and carried out the first of several approaches without plates. The only VFR plates available for the Benelux countries and Germany are from the Jeppeson flight guides at £300, although they do also cover Switzerland, so we were assured!

Stopping only for a visit to the toilets we were soon airborne routing direct to Bonn Hangelar, using the Bashers favourite trick of selecting a convenient airways intersection as a waypoint at the FIR boundary. It seemed that Liege had not heard of PODAT, but we bluffed it out nonetheless by reporting simply "at the FIR boundary" where we were handed over to Dusseldorf radar. Dusk was setting in as we crossed the The Eifel region which rises up to 2000ft while in the distance we could see the Siebengebirge (the seven Mountains) which rise to over 3000ft, with its famous Drachenfels (Dragon Cliffs). In no time it seemed we were ready to duck under the Koln-Bonn approach, we crossed the Rhine to land at Bonn Hangelar. in the rain and the dusk, into a blinding setting sun. The landing was classed as excellent, not only did we walk away from it, but we were able to fly G-BASH back to the UK afterwards, it seems such good value to fit in 2 landings for the price of one!

Crossing the Rhine at Bonn with the Drachenfels in the distance



Collected by Thomas from Bonn Hangelar

Joan phoned Bonn Hangelar and asked them to fit "Kloss". At the airfield next day we found that the aircraft had not been chocked. It was not until we returned to the UK that we found we had mistranslated, and had asked for dumplings to be placed under the wheels instead of Klotz (pieces of wood), fortunately the airfield management had not complied with our request!

We spent the day sightseeing in Bruhl. The Schloss Augustusburg which had been run down and neglected in 1962 has been restored to its former Rococo splendour, and it is here that the German state had entertained Heads of State and political leaders such as the Queen, Margaret Thatcher and President Bush. An exhibition was being staged in the Schloss of German social History entitled Der Riss in Himmel (The crack in Heaven) and we decided it was this, which had let the rain in this summer and perhaps they had better get it fixed. Having been educated we wandered around the town window-shopping and came across a tromp d'euil building painted on the end of a block. This was the hospital in the old town we were told.

After dinner of Wurst served with Red cabbage cooked with fruit and herbs, we tuned in to the weather forecast. Heavy rain was forecast for the next few days, and the temperature was dropping, and area of high pressure had pushed all the bad weather over the south of England and Northern Europe. We abandoned our hopes of returning along the Rhine and Mosel valleys for fear of being trapped under low cloud in rising terrain.

At Bonn Hangelar we arrived under dull skies and as forecast it started to rain. For met we could only get the Koln-Bonn ATIS, and it was in German! Using the mobile we obtained the TAFF from Liege which indicated that we had about an hour window. We took off in the rain and were relieved to find that we had 8K visibility and a 3000ft cloudbase above the wispy bits. 40 minutes later we were established on the Liege ILS in VMC. As we landed it started to rain heavily, the cloud-base descended to 500ft and there was gusty strong wind. We sat around at the airfield for what seemed like an eternity. The 18 hour TAFF indicated an improvement at 10.00 that night, should we fly the next leg at night? As I secured G-BASH I found that I had left the master switch on and the battery was flat. Johan Davies the cheerful Lufthansa engineer put the battery on charge, and promised to fit the battery back next morning. The man in the met office estimated that there would be a short gap in the weather as a warm sector went through, which might enable us to get to the UK. I secured G-BASH with chocks borrowed from an Airbus and then had what turned out to be an inspiration. I planned the flights for

Thomas was waiting for us with the car, and we headed for Bruhl on the outskirts of Cologne. Soon we were lost in the suburbs of Bonn; this is Injun country to a Bruhler. Joan was waiting for us, and Alex, Thomas's partner, cooked us pizza served with ham and cheese, served with fine German beer. I had last visited Bruhl in 1962 (I was 8 years old) for Auntie Joan's wedding and I endured an evening of appropriate anecdotes.

We were invited to stay on for a couple of days, and I suffered a restless night worrying that G-BASH had been left without chocks under the wheels. Over German breakfast of brown and black bread, cheese, ham, and wurst, I explained my concern. A German / English dictionary was found and Auntie



The Schloss Augustusburg



The formal gardens of the Schloss



Painted building in Bruhl



The Old Slapas badge drawn on a beer mat while waiting at Liege

next day and filed my flight plans in advance. We headed to town and found a cheap and pleasant hotel in the red light district. We wandered around Liege in the rain and found a cafeteria, which seemed to be serving anything you liked with Belgian chips, just what we needed.

Breakfast was the usual French meal of croissant and rolls, and the old Slapas, to my embarrassment prepared a packed lunch from the surplus rolls butter and meats. At 8.00AM we arrived back at the airfield to find the weather CAVOK. The battery had been refilled and the met office had picked up on my flight plans, and had a full met briefing ready for me. This included low-level charts and en route TAFs and METARS all the way to the UK.

Within 20 minutes we were in the air.



The Met forecast which persuaded us to head home

As we trudged along in smooth conditions we were handed from zone

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to zone, Beauvechain, Charleroi, Brussels info and then disaster (or so it would have been in the UK). Charleroi passed me to Brussels Info (whereas I had planned for Brussels 1). Soon I had a panic call "call Brussels radar you are in the TMA" I called Brussels 1 expecting a right bollocking, but they actually seemed relaxed about it and in no time I was passed through a little bit of their class B airspace and on to Chievres. Approaching Tornai I called Lille, and was asked to descend to 1500ft and report at Sierra Echo. No maps or plates showed Sierra Echo only Sierra alpha, but we soon had the traffic in sight and were asked to join left base number 2 to an Airbus on finals, great.

Despite the French strikes and disruption we filled up with fuel. Customs were there to check our passports, and after a good laugh at my passport picture we had a cheery farewell. We routed Cap Griz Nez, the shortest route over water at FL40 since G-BASH had developed a slight missfire. We could see Lydd from the French coast. At Lydd we paid the most expensive Landing Fee of the trip and headed back to Popham at FL40 routing from GWC to Popham in solid IMC, breaking out 3 miles from Popham at 1700 ft, and guess what, it started to rain!