

RENDEZVOUS WITH DOUBLE EAGLE II

17 August 1978

The time signal.

'This is the twelve o'clock news . . . The three Americans who have become the first men to cross the Atlantic by balloon have now crossed the Dorset coast at Poole and are drifting out into the Channel . . .'

Like many others, I have followed the progress of the balloon Double Eagle II since its take-off from Maine five days previously. Yesterday it made its landfall over northwest Ireland, and thereby the crew of three had succeeded where seventeen previous crews had been beaten by the vagaries of the Atlantic weather. I listen to the radio for a few more minutes, waiting for more details of the flight. It seems that the balloon is tracking southeast towards the French coast. Wouldn't it be marvellous to be able to see the historic craft before it landed?

Yes, now I come to think of it, why not fly out to rendezvous with the balloon as it sails across the Channel? After a few moments' consideration, I pick up the phone and dial the flying club at Wycombe Air Park. Good, it looks as if there might be an aircraft available for a two o'clock take-off. Over a cup of tea I try to calculate where the balloon will be at, say, three o'clock. The newspaper weather map



indicates light surface winds, 10 knots or so, and the isobars show a slack pressure gradient. If the balloon is making around 20 knots, that would put it about 30 miles southeast of the Isle of Wight at three o'clock. Anyway, I would be able to intercept it well before it reached French airspace.

At the flying club I check Notams and weather. No problems with the latter. The whole of southern England is CAVOK, and the forecast confirms the BBC's light northwesterly winds. It's now one o'clock, and I tune in to the news on my car radio for the latest details. The balloon has last been reported off the southern tip of the Isle of Wight. On my half-million topo I draw the probable track of the craft and add time markers to help me assess the location of the rendezvous point.

It looks as if, at three o'clock, Double Eagle II will be about 40 miles south of Brighton, ten miles or so inside the London/Paris FIR boundary. The only snag is that its track will take it

through a group of danger areas. According to the Air Pilot, these areas are 'active when notified'. Of course, if the balloon should happen to fly through them, one would expect the Navy to stop their firing practice! I'll check up on danger area activity through the FIS once I'm airborne. I consider taking a passenger with me but then decide against it, on the grounds that it would be unfair to subject another person to the possibility, remote though it is, of a ditching in the Channel.

Tango Charlie arrives and taxies up to the fuel pumps. This is the aircraft I shall take on my flight. That's good, because for some inexplicable reason it has a more sprightly performance than the rest of our fleet of Cherokees. I finish my preparations, checking that I have my Jeppesen plate for Bournemouth and noting the Shoreham frequency, in case I need to stop for fuel on the way back, if the search turns out to be protracted. Fifteen minutes later I'm at the holding point, checks complete, ready for take-off. I'm wearing a lifejacket . . . just in case. The time is 1347 local.

'Tango Charlie, take off at your discretion.'

My route takes me to Woodley, then Midhurst. 'TC has a VOR receiver, but nothing else in the way of nav equipment. I fly 100 feet beneath the base of controlled airspace to stay above the rest of the VFR traffic. The sky is quite busy. South of Farnborough I see an Air Force Hercules manoeuvring beneath me, 'parachute dropping', the Farnborough controller tells me. I look at my chart. In the clubhouse I decided to follow the Midhurst 170 radial out to the FIR boundary. If my estimate of the balloon's track and groundspeed is correct, I shall meet it at about 1445 over the middle of the Channel. I call up London Information and tell them my intentions. I ask whether they know the balloon's present position.

'Tango Charlie, the latest we have is that he's approaching Le Havre, about 20 miles south of 50 North, at 30,000 feet.' Oh dear! That's wildly different from my estimation. The balloon is much further south, already in French airspace. This information brings problems for me, for I have no charts covering the French coast, as I did not expect to need them. I feel uneasy about entering the Paris FIR without charts, and consider abandoning the flight.

After a brief contemplation I come to the conclusion that no harm will be done if I fly to the FIR boundary and then decide whether or not to turn back. Besides, I might even catch a glimpse of Double Eagle II from the boundary without the need to penetrate French airspace. I'm about 10 miles north of the coast now. Ahead, slightly to the left is Littlehampton. I start a cruise climb to FL35. At 1419 I pass the disused aerodrome at Ford and cross the coast. Having considered the London controller's position report on the balloon. I decide to fly a DR track of 180 to the boundary. With the excellent visibility, I should be able to spot the balloon when I'm still a long way from it. This track will take me through the danger areas, but the controller has informed me that they are inactive. I estimate arriving at the boundary at 1447.

Well, I now have five minutes to run to the boundary, and I haven't seen anything yet. It looks as if I shall have to turn back. What a waste of money! I curse myself for not having considered the possibility that the balloon would travel so far south. I should have brought some French charts with me.

Another aircraft calls up on the Information frequency. From his transmission. I gather that he's also headed for the balloon. *'Do you have a Brest frequency for me?'* he asks the controller.

'Try Paris Control 125.7,' comes the reply. I note the frequency on my log. My watch tells me that I'm almost at the FIR boundary. I'll have to decide now. Go on or turn back?

'London, Tango Charlie changing to Paris Control 125.7,' I transmit.

'Roger, goodday.'

'Paris Control, this is Golf Alpha Xray Tango Charlie.'

No reply. I must be at the boundary now. I repeat my transmission. This time there is a response.

'Aircraft calling Paris say your callsign.'

'Golf Alpha Xray Tango Charlie.'

'Bravo Charlie go ahead.'

'Tango Charlie,' I correct, 'present position is estimated 40 miles north of Le Havre, FL 35, request permission to proceed to Le Havre to rendezvous with the balloon.'

No reply. Am I talking to myself? I try again.

'Roger, Bravo Charlie, you are clear at FL 35. Maintain Victor Fox Romeo.'

On the strength of this exchange I decide to press on. I'll speak to the controller again in a few minutes to confirm the clearance. The next thing to sort out is navigation. If the clearance is to Le Havre, it will not be satisfactory just to point generally in the direction of the French coast. There might be airspace restrictions that I don't know about. The air is a little hazy and I can see neither the English coast behind me nor France ahead. Is there nothing I can use to help me?

Yes, there is. In my briefcase I carry a folder of useful Information Circulars. One deals with the General Aviation Weather Forecast Service and includes a small diagram showing the UK and northern coast of France. Unfortunately there are no place names annotated on it. My memory tells me that Le Havre is at the mouth of the estuary due south of Beachy Head. That means an alteration of heading to the left. But is my recollection correct? Is that indentation on the coastline marked on the diagram the right one? Then, belatedly, the brain wave hits me. Why didn't I think of it before? Of course, airway Amber 34 routing out of Midhurst passes a few miles to the east of Le Havre. I dial up 164 on the VOR and turn onto a southeasterly heading, as demanded by the needle. I don't see any reason now not to continue. After all, I've got a VFR clearance to fly to Le Havre at FL 35, and that's just what I'm doing.

The minutes pass by. I've been carefully scanning the sky for the last quarter of an hour. One or two aircraft have flown past above me, but I see no sign of the balloon. I transmit my intentions again to the controller and ask if he has information about the balloon. He replies that it has been reported near Le Havre at 13,000 feet (not 30,000!) and he thinks 'it may have landed'. Does he mean made a landfall or actually touched down?

The haze is thinner now and gradually a white-cliffed shoreline emerges. The VOR needle says I'm on track, but it's wavering, and at this distance from Midhurst there could easily be a 10-mile track error.

But the coast reveals its details as I approach and crystallises into a large promontory with a wide estuary behind it. There is a city on the north bank of the river. It must be Le Havre. The topography certainly matches the view I've seen previously looking down from cruising height on Amber 34. I tell the controller that my position is 10 miles north of the coast and he asks if I intend to land at Le Havre. I assure him that I do not and request an update on the balloon. He gives me a bearing from 'Charlie Alpha November' which I cannot decipher. That must be the beacon at Caen, which my memory places midway between Le Havre and Cherbourg. The controller adds a cross-bearing of 100 from Cherbourg, but again I cannot make out clearly what he is saying, Did I mishear 'Cherbourg'?

This is ridiculous. I must be close to the balloon and in this visibility I should easily be able to spot it. After all, I can see the coastline sweeping round to the Cherbourg peninsula and even the eastern shore of the peninsula itself. Where in hell is this thing?

I'm now a mile off the coast, and I decide to set off on a track of 240 across the bay, announcing my intention to the Paris controller. I spend a minute or two searching the sky, but to no avail. This is crazy! I bank the aircraft gently to the right and lean forwards to see upwards through the windscreen.

There it is! Above me to the right, quite high, with half a dozen aircraft circling it like wasps round a jam jar. Why didn't I see it before? It must be because from my angle of approach the balloon was directly into sun.

I tell the Paris controller that I have seen the balloon and he asks me its position and height. Our roles are suddenly reversed. He is asking me for the information I sought from him only a few minutes ago. I transmit to the controller that the balloon is 10 miles north of Le Havre and that I estimate its height as 10,000 feet. Surprisingly, there's very little traffic on this frequency, and I wonder to whom the other attendant aircraft are speaking. But then another English voice calls up. *'Tango Charlie, this is Hotel Golf. We're at FL 95.'*

He must be one of the circling aircraft. I ask him if he is on a VFR plan and he replies affirmatively. He tells me that the balloon is at about 12,000 feet. I ask the controller for clearance to climb to FL 100, and he offers me 95 or 105. Of course in French controlled airspace VFR traffic must use these intermediate levels. I choose the latter and start a climbing turn.



Several minutes later there are still a handful of aircraft orbiting the balloon above me, and a helicopter, too. Now and then one of the pack leaves the circus, to be replaced by a newcomer. A Cessna dives down past me on his way home.

Double Eagle II hangs sedately in the deep blue sky, unconcerned with the visitors fussing round it. It's a unique sight, one that will remain in my memory forever. Climbing through FL 80, I'm still a long way below it. The controller calls me up and asks that I try to contact Double Eagle II on 121.5 to determine their intentions. Rather puzzled by this request, I ask him to repeat his message to confirm that I have heard him correctly. I would have thought that the balloon crew was already in contact with Paris ATC. Perhaps they're using a different frequency.

Changing the transceiver to 121.5, I hear a conversation in progress. A voice says, *'intending to land in Paris about three and a half hours from now'*. I don't know whether this transmission is from the balloon, or someone else relaying the information.

A different voice comes onto the air. *'Double Eagle, this is the 'Flight' aircraft. Good luck. You'll be in next week's magazine.'* I wonder briefly whether this aircraft is the 'Hotel Golf' I spoke to previously. I don't hear any reply to the 'Flight' aircraft's transmission, and decide against calling up myself. After all, I've got the information that the controller asked me to obtain, and no doubt the balloonists are tired at the end of their journey. Best to leave them in peace.

Back on the information frequency, I pass on my snippet of overheard conversation. I'm still gaining height, but at FL 100 my rate of climb has dropped to 200 feet per minute, even with the engine at full power. The balloon still appears to be about 4,000 feet above me, so I announce that I will climb to FL 135.

A new attendant appears on the scene — an Aztec it looks like. He's slightly above the balloon and at the moment he and I are the only two orbiting it, as far as I can see. I'm up to FL 130 now, and close enough to Double Eagle II to take some photographs. (With no film in my trusty Ilford 35mm I've had to bring my wife's battered old Instamatic. Better - just about - than nothing.) During the half hour or more that it's taken me to reach this height the balloon has drifted some three miles inland. The craft is poised serenely in space, motionless, the bright sunlight accentuating its bulbous silver envelope and oddly-shaped red gondola. A strange tube dangles down from the gasbag to the gondola. In that tiny cabin are three men who have made history.

I make a last circle round the craft at FL 135, grateful for not having brought a passenger with me, for it would have been impossible to climb this high with the weight of another person on board. The balloon is still slightly above me, but I shan't go any higher. For one thing, I have no oxygen in the aircraft, and for another, if I set off now, I'll have enough fuel to return to Wycombe Air Park direct with a good reserve.

A final glance at Double Eagle II. I turn onto a northerly heading and drop the nose. 'TC, reluctant to climb, now loses height enthusiastically. I set cruise power to achieve a good forward speed.

The Channel waters are quiet and even. Clearly there's not much wind at the surface. The air is smooth as glass, and 'TC hurries on its way with barely a touch needed on the controls.

Now I'm out of sight of land again, so I call London to announce that I'm entering the FIR. I've levelled off at FL 45, underneath Amber 34. With Midhurst 344 dialled up, the VOR needle lazily hovers around the centre of its dial. I cannot resist launching into 'O Sole Mio', but I must have been watching too much TV recently, for the lyric becomes corrupted into 'Delicious ice cream . . . from Italee . . .'

Land ahoy! Ahead to my left the Isle of Wight disguises itself as a vague black smudge. On the other side of the aircraft that hazy pink line is the cliff-lined coast reaching down to Beachy Head. There are no other aircraft around, but in contrast the smooth water below is criss-crossed with ships, and a hovercraft or two. One vessel is trailing an oil slick, a lighter green than the sea on which it floats. The slick is about 10 miles long and 200 yards wide. I pass on my observation to London, but then experience a twinge of guilt, feeling like a schoolboy telling tales on his classmates. Should I have kept quiet? Will that ship's captain incur a reprimand or fine? Well, it's too late now. The deed is done.

I cross the coast again at Littlehampton. The sun glints on vehicles lined up in rows in a car park. Snaking inland on my left, the River Arun wanders aimlessly northward. The visibility remains excellent. Midhurst . . . Farnborough . . . Woodley . . . Henley . . . I ease down to circuit height and join the pattern downwind. There's no traffic ahead, so I drop onto a tight base and then further round to line up for a short final. Saves time (and money). My wheels touch at 1713, almost three and a half hours after they left the ground. As I taxi in, I think again of the three Americans still floating high over northern France.

Congratulations, fellers! I hope you make it to Paris.

This article first appeared in BALPA's 'Log' magazine

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Postscript

Double Eagle II eventually landed approximately 60 miles northwest of Paris just before 7 o'clock BST on the evening of 17 August 1978. The crew, Ben Abruzzo, Maxie Anderson and Larry Newman were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for their feat the following year.