

Maurice 'Flying Vet' Kirk



Philip Whiteman

'MAD, BAD, AND dangerous to know.' Lady Caroline Lamb was writing of Byron, but these epithets might just as well be used for Maurice Kirk. The self-styled Flying Vet reached the zenith of fame in the flying world through entering an ancient Piper Cub in last year's England to Australia air race, and simply not giving up until he got there—that act alone would be enough for most people to call him mad.

Time and again he has faced prosecution at the hands of the authorities, especially the CAA—so they would certainly call him bad. As for the dangerous to know? Well, having spent some hours in his company, all I can say is that he turns out to be a rather likeable chap and a most considerate host—especially when it comes to topping up the wine glass.

However, once he has started chasing down a hare, Maurice is a very intense man indeed. He has thought deeply about the things he says, and all this reflection seems to have boiled off many of the usual conversational niceties. That is not to say that he is an uncivil or uncivilised character—far from

it. Rather, there remains the impression of turbulence below the surface, a volcanic temper, ready to erupt if one becomes too much of a fool to be suffered.

Press cuttings, and the polemics expressed in his colourful website, suggest a spring trap of a man, liable to snap on the unwary. In cyberspace, his electronic portrait fixes the surfer with a quizzical glare—peering over his half-moon specs he looks unsettlingly like Richard Ingrams. In person, this impression fades—he is all sinewy arms, grey hair standing out like wire and intense staring eyes—his craggy features somehow change to remind me more of the former Rhodesian Premier, Ian Smith.

Certainly, Maurice rather put the wind up me, the first time I met him. Clearly very tense and agitated before the start of the air race at Biggin Hill, he gave me his quarter-million map so I might help him prepare the “bloody silly” flight plan the organisers had insisted on. Given the circumstances, I was expecting something neatly folded and new.

Instead, I was handed a highly-wrinkled sheet that looked like a sweet wrapper fetched from a

Above: 'a very intense man indeed.'

*Eccentric maverick, adventurer and legal warrior. He flew to Sydney in his Piper Cub, and aims to complete a circumnavigation. **By Philip Whiteman.***

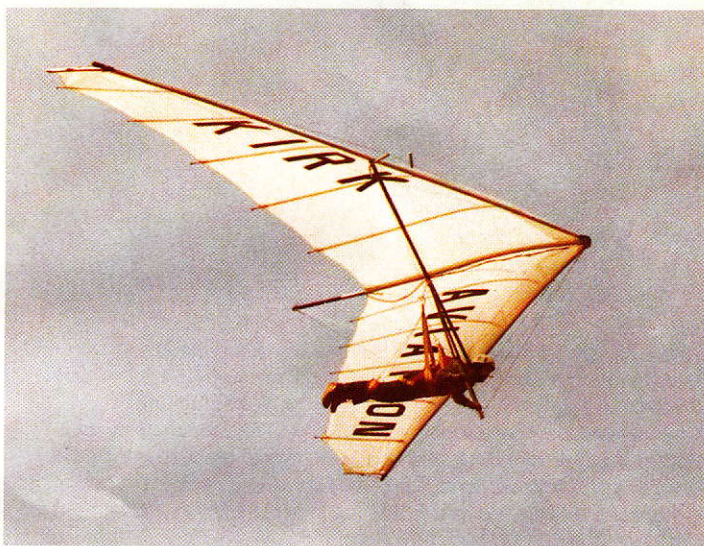


Above left: Maurice Kirk's father, the original 'Flying Vet'

Above: for years, Maurice has been a great exponent of the Stampe.

Below left: University Air Squadron days.

Below: hang-gliding venture quickly led to broken bones.



"Champion of individuals' rights, or a public menace?"

schoolboy's pocket (his en route video suggests that stowing maps in a tightly-crumpled ball is typical Kirk practice). Maurice was supposed to have measured track distances and calculated times, but—minutes before the off—had still not done so. As he also seemed to have lost his scale rule, I made a quick check of distance against the scale printed along the margin. On seeing me do this, his face clouded. "Didn't they teach you anything!" he snarled, "Measure it against the longitude lines, for God's sake..."

Having wished him luck and bade him farewell, I retreated to watch from the warmth and comfort of Biggin's terminal building. Very quickly after getting airborne the heavily-laden silver Cub disappeared into cloud.

"That," said James Gilbert, standing beside me, "may be the last we see of Maurice Kirk."

Five minutes later, as I was driving south along the airport boundary toward Biggin village and the M25, I looked up and glimpsed the outline of a Cub, made a phantasm by the enveloping cloud and heading in the opposite direction. Could Kirk have become lost already? Or was he coming back because of the impossibility of the conditions? I pulled

over and waited to see if he did indeed return. The steady stream of departing competitors continued unbroken, all modern machines with IFR capability, but there was no sign of the lonely Cub. I climbed back into my car and drove on feeling gloomy. Perhaps this really would be the end of Maurice Kirk...

Had I the measure of Maurice's immense experience, or some idea of how steeped he was in aviation, I might not have been so concerned. It was his father who first earned the 'Flying Vet' title, when he did his farm rounds in a BA Swallow during the late 1940s. Kirk senior took the four-year-old Maurice for his first flight from Westonzoyland in 1948. When Maurice took up studying veterinary science at Bristol University, he became one of the 150 or so applicants for the seventeen places available in the University Air Squadron. As he had been the youngest member of the Devon and Somerset Gliding Club, one might have thought he had an advantage. However, there was one skeleton in the cupboard. "I had visited eight countries by that time..." he says, "One too many."

Arriving late for his interview, thanks to one of his 1927 Austin Seven's many breakdowns, he had to sit on his hands when asked ▶

“...a volcanic temper, ready to erupt.”



This page: dressed in Nazi uniform, the better to wind up Guernsey’s authorities; as seen at flying events around the country, Maurice and his faithful Piper L-4 Cub; banner-towing “Is it legal?” he asked the author, when the kit was seen in an old caravan by Maurice’s house).

where he had travelled abroad. The eighth country had been part of the Communist Bloc, and Maurice’s visit had been highly illicit. He was involved in a canoeing trip along the Rhine (easy stuff, after the Channel crossing he had already made) and had reached Austria. Rather than go on a trip to the opera in Vienna, Maurice decided he would visit Czechoslovakia alone. He had already observed one of the gunboats patrolling the river border, and noted that a bend in the river put it out of sight long enough for a man to swim across. Maurice did just that—but he had underestimated the current. On the return trip he was carried well downstream of his departure point and was met, naked and out-of-breath after the hard swim, by Austrian police. When they discovered his pre-war Voightlander camera, he was arrested. After much talking, he was thrown out of the country.

Despite the Czech adventure, Maurice did get a place in the University Air Squadron. Here he managed to do more flying hours than any other undergraduate, partly through the fact his exams took place earlier in the summer, and partly through his ploy of getting the other UAS students so drunk that the following day’s hangovers left the field clear for Maurice. “I flew four different Chipmunks on one morning,” he says.

Building up 130 hours on the Chipmunk, Maurice won the Cooper Trophy for aerobatics. As a result, he was invited to RAF Chivenor, where he enjoyed an hour and ten minutes in a Hawker Hunter jet trainer. “We did *everything*, including aerobatics and going supersonic,” enthuses Maurice.

Was he interested in a military flying career?

“After that flight, I’d have signed any piece of paper they put in front of me!”

It was when he moved to Guernsey to join a vets’ practice that Maurice’s seemingly never-ending battle with the judicial system took off in earnest. “I was sent to prison over thirty times,” comes his startling admission.

How on earth could a professional man end up in such extraordinary conflict with the island’s authorities?

“The corruption in tax havens is in a different league to the UK,” asserts Maurice. Catalyst to the whole problem was the mental illness of his partner in the veterinary practice. Maurice was appalled at the treatment the man received, and began “rattling the cage of a cosy environment”. His protests took the form of digging up the island’s uncomfortable wartime history—involving a rather greater degree of collaboration with the occupying Nazis than the latter-day authorities were prepared to admit—in a very public campaign that included stunts like Maurice publicly dressing up in SS uniform.

I asked him on what grounds he was arrested.

“Oh, I was framed,” he shoots back airily, “framed and taken to court, and denied a lawyer from England.”

Looking back on it, Maurice concludes that his life in Guernsey was “ten years of life wasted”. Fixing me with his intense stare, he counsels me, “Never trust people born to privilege. On Guernsey they assumed I would join them...”

Asking who he means by ‘them’, it emerges that he is referring to freemasonry, or “evil devil worship” as Maurice terms it, absolutely straight-faced. Wrong-footed, I wonder for a moment if he is serious. In fact, there is no great trace of humour or irony in this whole discussion. Maurice means what he says; he *loathes* the island and the type of people he associates with his travails there, and his website bears testimony to these feelings to this day.

Rough School of Flying

When he returned to the mainland, it was for his flying activities that Maurice drew the attention of the British authorities. He was a devotee of “real flying”—aviation far removed from concrete runways, modern American aircraft and the whole drift toward greater regulation. “The last place you should take an aeroplane to is an airfield,” he says, “where



This page: with drinking companion actor Oliver Reed; Maurice's D.H.2 replica—here with broken prop—was seriously considered for the London to Sydney race; attending to a spaniel at the practice in Barry; one of many accidents in a long flying career.

everything you do is associated with some sort of fine and you cannot do anything without permission."

In the early seventies, short-field types like the Auster were giving way to new Cessnas and Pipers, and the emphasis was perhaps shifting to a more glossy type of flying. In reaction to this, Maurice and a small group of like-minded individuals set up the very informal Rough School of Flying.

A ready source of cheap old aeroplanes existed just across the Channel. At the time, the French were either neglecting, or actively divesting themselves of British aeroplanes (especially the wooden ones) and there were all sorts of interesting Continental stuff (like Stampes) available too. Maurice happily joined the ranks of those importing machines from France.

It wasn't easy and, frequently, it was barely legal. Maurice remembers flying over to recover a Rapide, only to discover that the French had decided to put a match to it shortly before he arrived. The engines were the only salvageable items. Other aircraft had to be spirited away before officials arrived to scotch the movement of aeroplanes the owners were otherwise very happy to sell and be rid of. Of course, there was the whole issue of how they should be moved. Untroubled by formalities like airworthiness documentation, Maurice tended to rely on his own judgement of what could, and could not, safely be flown away.

Even if you discount some of what he tells you, he went to the most extraordinary lengths in getting his machine. In one instance, when it became clear that Maurice would not be allowed to fly out one particular Jodel he had just bought, he concealed himself in the long grass on the aerodrome until everything fell quiet for the usual, long French lunch break. Seizing the moment, Maurice emerged from hiding, bearded over to the machine, set the throttle and switches, and swung the Jodel's prop. When the engine started, his hosts proved rather more alert than he had allowed for; people poured out of the clubhouse and quickly commandeered the fire truck to block the runway. They were too slow—

after a moment of Keystone Cops hilarity, he was away with his prize.

This moment of triumph looked to be short-lived. As Maurice climbed away, the cockpit began to fill with smoke. "I thought this was it. I was certainly going to end up in prison this time." Half expecting to lose the door, Maurice unlatched the canopy... and the smoke cleared. Once the little Potez engine had burned off its coating of oil, it continued to run smoothly all the way back to England.

To help bring back machines from France, Maurice roped in other young pilots, eager to build up their flying hours. The whole import business was highly informal. "Sometimes we didn't quite make Customs at each end," he admits. Maurice knew that his days as an aircraft importer were numbered, but he was caught out in a way he had not anticipated.

The trouble started in France. Maurice accompanied a low-time PPL, collecting hours for his commercial, to Morlaix to collect an aeroplane, but the export paperwork was not ready. Having enjoyed a boozy meal with his French host, Maurice decided he had better leave the piloting duties for the return flight to his less experienced companion. Finding difficulty in contacting Bournemouth, they changed frequency to Southampton. Hearing nothing, Maurice seized the hand-mike and sang the Marseillaise to his companion, to check the mike was working. Unfortunately, this was the first transmission heard by the Southampton controller—"something the media later got totally out of proportion".

The weather was poor, and Maurice's companion requested information. This came back, but Maurice drew further ire from the controller by telling him that he was wrong—a technical point on which Maurice was correct, a fact the court later appeared to ignore. Maurice feels they were influenced by newspaper reports that he had announced himself as 'Captain Kirk of the *Star Ship Cessna*'. He did talk to ATC of bagging the hares hopping around the runway threshold, as they were on finals, something that did not perhaps help his case, even though he has always claimed that it was nothing more than a ➤