

Avon Valley Ultralights

Gazelle Ferry Flight from Grafton NSW to Northam WA.



The flight started on Friday night 2315 on the 25th May 2007 when I departed from the domestic terminal in Perth WA. In due course I arrived next morning in Brisbane Qld and boarded a bus for Grafton NSW where I was met by the A/C owner who took me back to his place for a well earned rest. Next morning (Sunday) I awoke early to inspect the A/C and sign the various documents and transactions, the A/C was ours.

The countryside over the east was beautiful and green and it was a pleasant change compared to the dry dusty western part of the country.

The rest of the day (Sunday) was spent in preparing the A/C for its long haul across the country - last minute updates to the flight plan and 'phone calls, a check flight to see if the A/C was up to "scratch". She handled beautifully, landed and topped up the tanks ready for an early departure.

I woke early next morning, to be greeted by the first season's fog, which lasted until 0900. I said goodbye to mine Host and Hostess, fired up the Rotax 912, warmed the engine and took off. A fly-by over the farm saw us departing south for Grafton on track to Ballina. On reaching Ballina we turned west for Armidale.

When we arrived near Armidale, we gave the customary inbound calls and landed in due course. It was cold and windy, refuelled the A/C and myself with a sandwich. We were then airborne and headed for Manilla, Gunnedah and Coonabarabran.

After landing at Coonabarabran and being met by relatives, we secured the A/C, refuelled and booked into a motel for the night. We caught up with some family gossip and retired for the night. Next day an early start saw us heading for Narromine and a refuel. The caretaker filled the A/C while I filled up with coffee. It was cold.

The gazelle sports cabin heat but with the temperature being a low 6 Celsius, it did not much to dispel the chill. With a stiff westerly wind blowing, we departed for West Wyalong and our next refuelling stop. After refuelling, we headed for Narrandera and met up with an old friend, Wally Rudin. Wally and myself date back to Watts Bridge where we operated B. V. L. A. C. Flying Training Facility.

As the RA-Aus had notified me of a pending Flight Review and as Wally is fully qualified to check me out, we set out in his Tecnam and did my review. The Tecnam is a beautiful A/C. It was smooth and easy to handle. Thank you Wally.

The Gazelle rested in the hangar overnight while we rested at Wally and Wendy's abode for the night. Wendy served a very nice dinner.

Next morning after thanking Wendy and Wally for their hospitality and generosity, we departed Narrandera for Hay. The country around Narrandera was nice and green with plenty of water flowing in the irrigation channels. Heading nearly due west saw us abeam Hay. With the usual radio procedures

over saw a safe landing at Hay. Wendy had packed some lunch for me which was eagerly consumed. A refuel and we were on our way to Mildura, passing over some of the worst country I've seen in a long time. A while later we came to Mildura where we needed more fuel for the Rotax.

There were two microlights tied down (two chaps from Victoria) on a flying holiday on their way back. A Jabiru joined the circuit and landed, followed by the RFDS.

While I was searching for the refuelling agent, a fuel truck rolled by and the driver asked me if I needed fuel. "Yes please", was the reply. "I have to refuel the RFDS first but here is a swipe card. Help yourself". After filling the Gazelle to the brim and paying the man, we were on our way again. Renmark was the next stop and the last "leg" of a long day.

On reaching Renmark and announcing my inbound call, I was contacted by an A/C taxiing REX RPT that they would expedite their departure to clear the runway for me. Whilst I joined downwind, they cleared the runway heading for Adelaide. After landing, another RA-Aus Jabiru joined the circuit and landed.

The pilot, Andrew Lott came over and had a chat. He offered a hangar for the night and drove me to a motel nearby. A few beers later he took his leave as he was keen to get home after a business trip. Thank you, Andrew. There are still some nice people in the world. A nice dinner and a hot shower saw me settled in for the night. Next morning early a taxi was waiting for me and took me back to the Gazelle. The wind was blowing quite strongly.

The next waypoint was Waikerie (famous gliding field) a distance of 38 nm and took just on 1hr to complete, flying at 2500ft calculating a 35-40 kt headwind. I made the decision to wait for the wind to abate and landed at Waikerie.

On arriving at Waikerie and because the airfield was 6 km out of town, I rang the local council for a taxi number, when I was put in contact with the man that is in charge of the airfield. Paul White came out to greet me and proceeded to take me under his wing so to speak. Not only did he carry me back and forth with fuel but he also gave me a guided tour of the town. Paul is very proud of his town and airfield. Again thank you Paul for your hospitality and generosity.

The day was spent with some paperwork and washing, after which we took on the town with some sightseeing. The locals are very friendly and helpful. After a good night's sleep and a taxi to the airfield next morning, I was greeted by another two microlights tied down next to the Gazelle. The owners came over and commented about the Gazelle and asked numerous questions. It appeared that four of them have been on a flying holiday over the Flinders Ranges and two decided to return home a day earlier, hence the two over at Mildura.

After a check over the Gazelle, I was ready for departure to Pt Augusta. The wind had died down and for the first time I was able to make decent headway. In due course, we arrived overhead Pt Augusta and had three A/C in the circuit. One was the RFDS. We sorted ourselves out and landed. Taxiing to the refuelling bay there was a big twin being refuelled. That would take some time. I wandered over to the local RA-Aus flying facility owned by John Marsh who offered coffee which was gratefully accepted. After a chat and more visitors, it was time to refuel the Gazelle. Thanking John for his time and coffee, we took off for Ceduna.

The country we flew over was typical featureless outback Australia with little in between (keep going little Rotax). We arrived later that afternoon and after securing the Gazelle, I wandered over to the terminal and read the various notice boards. One offered a courtesy transport pickup if you were going to stay at their motel. A quick 'phone call saw me installed in a motel room for the night.

The next morning, I was delivered back to my beloved Gazelle (I became quite attached to the little girl) during the flight across. Unable to get fuel the previous day, I was forced to ring the a/h number to get attention and fuel. The refueller arrived in due course and the Gazelle was topped up.

Giving my taxi call on the local frequency a voice came back on the radio, "The ultralight with all the numbers, this is the big bird with twin engines coming in from the east at 2500 straight in approach runway 29er". My reply, "This is the ultralight with all the numbers, will hold short big bird with the twin engines". Laughter was loud in my headphones as the reply came back, "Thank you little bird". Who said that pilots are a serious lot?

Arriving at the Nullarbor Roadhouse, the wind started blowing again from the north as we refuelled the A/C. The Nullarbor is a bleak place at the best of times but worse when the wind is blowing. Leaving the Nullarbor Roadhouse behind, we headed to Eucla arriving mid afternoon and after ringing the local motel, saw me entrenched in another motel room. At least they had a bar and a nice dining room. A few beers later I was ready to tackle the dining room and had a very nice dinner. A quick telephone call to my wife, and it was bed for me. It is quite amazing how a flight like that can sap your energy.

During the night a front rolled in and it started raining, the weather forecast was right this time. The following day was heavy overcast and showers. No flying that day. It was time for me to catch up with the mundane paperwork, and re-checking my flight plan for the next few "legs". One of the motel staff offered to drive me back during the day to refuel and check the little Gazelle. The staff at the motel were very friendly and helpful. Whilst staying there, I met up with father and son duo who were on a fishing trip heading for Albany. They too were full of questions and decided to meet up with me at the next stop.

Monday morning was clear and calm as I was again delivered back to the airfield and readied the Gazelle for the next "jump" to Madura Pass.

There were more clouds off the coast drifting inland, forcing me off track to stay clear of cloud. After reaching Madura and being met by my friends who ferried fuel for me, every opportunity was used to obtain fuel, as it is a long walk if you run short.

After taking off and heading west, again I was confronted by a dense cloud mass prompting me to return and sit tight for the day. Rain started falling and it kept up all day and most of that night. That night an aircraft crashed at Esperance, killing the three occupants. It was a terrible tragedy. All traces of the front had disappeared by 0700 next morning and the sky was clear. There was very little wind.

The next "leg" was to Caiguna. It was a pleasant flight but very cold. I landed and refuelled, then rang Balladonia to find out the state of the runway. I was requested to ring back in half an hour and I would get a full report (apparently the runway was closed the day before). I was given the "green light" and departed for Balladonia.

I had been informed before departing on this trip that the Balladonia strip can hold some nasty surprises for the unwary. There can be some severe wind shear on the strip. With that in mind my approach to the strip was "hotter" than I would normally have done. An uneventful landing followed and I was ready to ferry more fuel. It took two trips with the can to get the needed fuel, a quick lunch and we were off.

The next "leg" was to Norseman on the edge of the salt pans. The country west of Balladonia was rugged to say the least so I opted to follow the road (just in case). IFR I Follow Roads. To the northwest were some very large and distinctive salt pans. Overhead Norseman the airfield (unless you know where to look) was quite difficult to see. It is located about 6km out of town on a dried up salt pan. Joining circuit and set up for a landing, the strip, graded was smooth as. Taxiing up to the only structure on the field (a shipping container painted in St. John Ambulance colours), we tied the A/C down for the night.

I made a quick telephone call to the local council office to obtain the local taxi service 'phone number. The reply was, "Sorry Sir but there is no taxi in Norseman but if you wish, one of our office staff could come and collect you". After replying in the affirmative, a car arrived and drove me to the motel where I booked in for the night. Those mobile 'phones are a real boon.

The next day after filling the fuel can, it was a council officer that took me back to the strip and dropped me off. The overnight temperature dropped to -2 deg. It was cold, as was the Gazelle. The Gazelle was reluctant to start but was coached into life after some attempts were made. The next “leg” to Southern Cross (after obtaining permission to land) was made over some of the worst country I’ve flown over. It was definitely a case of flying from one clear patch to the next.

On arriving at Southern Cross, the landscape changed completely. From scrub land to open farm land, it did wonders for my morale. Again the local council officers came to the rescue (you guessed it no taxi) obtained some more fuel, a quick bite to eat and we were off. The last “leg” was very pleasant to fly, with an 8 kt tail wind. It was great to see Northam on the horizon as we neared our destination.

An inbound call into very familiar surroundings, let down to circuit height, down wind and final saw us back at Northam, where I was greeted by family and friends.

A great trip was had with a warm start, cold in central and southern NSW, cold across the Nullarbor to Norseman and warm to Northam.

The Gazelle burned approx 400 lt of fuel and cruised at a respectable 65 kts average.

The trip has taken 10 days with 3 days on the ground due to weather. I certainly met some very nice and helpful people on my trip. My faith in human nature has been somewhat restored. My thanks go out to a lot of people without whom this trip would have been impossible or very hard. Thank you, Jack, Jim, Michael and a lot of other people who helped me right across the continent.

It is also worth mentioning that as an ultralight A/C the Gazelle has taken the distance in its stride without so much as a hiccup and flew admirably. She certainly has earned her “spurs”.

11th June 2007

Steve Vette.

RA-Aus Member No: 2058 CFI, L2.

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PS: The Gazelle will take up duties as a training A/C at Northam in the Avon Valley Ultralight Flying Training Facility.

Steve.



Photo taken at the beginning of the flight