

## Bill and Bob's Excellent Adventure

On the last day of October 1966, Bill Howarth and I set off in the Piper Colt, EI-AMI, for Portsmouth to collect the Morane Saulnier Rallye, EI-AMD.

I had delivered EI-AMD to Portsmouth in early September to have the engine overhauled. (And that's another story!)

We flew down the east coast to Tuskar Rock before heading across the sea to Strumble and then on to Cardiff for Customs. With the exception of some poor visibility near Tuskar, the weather was good and we completed the trip with a 1:10 leg from Cardiff to Portsmouth.

Next day started bright and clear with a north-westerly wind.

Bill flew the Rallye while I stayed with the Colt. We landed at Cardiff again for Customs and fuel, then set off for home.

The early Rallyes had a badly designed fuel system. The two wing tanks fed into a one-gallon collector tank under the floor and then through a single fuel cock. The problem with this was that if the tanks were full and you taxied on sloping ground, some of the fuel from the lower wing tank would spill through the tank vent as the fuel from the high wing pushed across through the collector tank. Some of Cardiff's taxiways had a slope and I could see some of Bill's fuel dripping out as we taxied for takeoff.

The weather over Wales was good until we got near the coast where the cloud base came down and it began to rain. Bill called to remind me to stay out of the clouds and we swung off to the left towards the Bristol Channel. The bay was covered by a danger area and the Royal Navy had an airfield named Brawdy near St Bride's Bay, so I thought it best to call and advise them of our need to fly through it.

At that time, radio frequencies had not been standardised and many aircraft had no radios or ones with a limited number of channels. The Colt had a modern 90-channel set and a separate tuner for VOR, but no indicator was fitted for this.

In contrast, Bill had a 23-channel Radiostal set which hadn't got a great range. I knew that most military fields in the UK used 117.9 Mhz as a common frequency. The sets we have now don't go below 118.0 Mhz but my transmitter could go down to 117.9 Mhz. so I could call them and keep a listening watch on 117.9 on the VOR receiver while I switched back and forth to Bill on 123.5 Mhz.

We headed across the bay with Bill ahead to my right but when I looked over, I saw a Fairey Gannet slowly overtaking him. The Gannet was a big, fat anti-submarine patrol aircraft powered by a Double Mamba turboprop driving two contra-rotating propellers. When cruising, half of the engine could be shut down and one of the propellers feathered.

I called Bill and said, "There's a Gannet behind you" and I think at first he thought that I meant a bird!



*Fairey Gannet*

After following us for a while longer, the Gannet peeled off to the right and left us to our own devices. It had become very turbulent and I was going up and down 200-300 feet. It must have been worse for Bill because the slats on the Rallye slam open in updrafts and don't close again until you get back up to 80 kts. We ploughed on through the rain for a while but eventually it stopped and the visibility became very good. After an hour of this we made landfall at Cahore Point and I thought that our troubles were over. Wrong! A short distance up the coast we ran into more heavy showers, so we turned inland to go around them. I offered to climb to try to contact ATC but this left me well behind Bill because of the slower speed in the climb.

A while later, Bill said that he was running low on fuel and was going to land on the Curragh. I continued towards Dublin and was approaching the south side of the city when everything went white as it started to snow. It was past sunset and, with less than an hour-and-a-half of instrument flying logged, I was not going to continue into the snow, so I turned around and headed back to the Curragh. Luckily, the Colt had cockpit and navigation lights so I could at least read the instruments. Of course I didn't know where Bill had landed and he was now off the air, but I spotted what looked like a long patch and decided to land.

In theory, when you want to make a precautionary landing, you fly over the field at altitude to assess it; then you make an approach and go-around to check the surface and finally you come around and land. All very well in theory, but in the dark I didn't think any of that was of use so I positioned for a landing straight away.

It was very rough at low level and the wind was partly across the landing area. I turned on the landing light and when I got close to the ground I could see white things flitting across in front of me. They turned out to be sheep, so I had to add power to clear them before touching down.

During the rollout, I had to keep the wheel hard over to the right and even then, the wing started to lift but I ruddered out of wind and it settled down again. I logged 3:50 from Cardiff to the Curragh.

The Colt sits high and some people call it the Milk Stool and were cautious because it could turn over in strong winds. It had been blown over before we got it and after it left us, the same thing happened again.

Shortly after I had shut down, a man arrived driving a Ford Cortina. He had seen me landing and come to investigate. I asked him to drive slowly ahead of me until we could find somewhere to park.

He set off at a fast speed but shortly after, the track went down into a hollow which helped to shield the aircraft from the wind. I found a house nearby where they let me ring ATC to close the flight plans for both of us.

They were also able to give me some rope to tie the Colt down.

While doing that, I saw lights moving about in the distance and having been told that the Army would come and collect us, I thought it might be them. (I had landed near the magazine of the Curragh camp but luckily, there was no such thing as a prohibited area in those days!)

I asked the Cortina driver to point his car towards the lights and flashed my call sign, MI in Morse on the headlights in case Bill was with them. It turned out not to be the Army, but they did arrive shortly after with Bill.

They took us to the camp to wait for one of our engineers to come from Dublin to collect us.

Bill was on duty next day, so Paddy Robinson and I travelled down next morning with a jerry can of fuel for the Morane.

I paced a stretch of field to make sure that I had room to take off and had a nice, calm 30 minute flight back to Dublin.

We wanted to keep a low profile about all of this, but the newspapers got wind of it and wrote about two light aircraft landing on the Curragh in the first gales of winter!



*Piper Colt EI-AMI (Copyright © A Scholefield)*

