

QAM AND THE EPIC FLIGHT OF EUROFOX G-GBNZ

The golden years of aviation were relived in December 2018 when QAM featured on the route of an epic flight from Great Britain to New Zealand. The flight was to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Royal Air Force, and the route was designed to include former RAF stations where possible. ("RAF Station Caloundra" was a late nomination!). The flight was to benefit the Royal Air Forces Association, the RAF Benevolent Fund and Save The Children. Another objective of the flight was to visit schools en route to encourage students to study STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

The chosen aircraft was a Eurofox 912(IS) which is a development of the Skyfox which was produced at Caloundra Aerodrome in the late eighties. (The QAM collection includes a recreation of the Skyfox Development Aircraft VH-CAL). The Eurofox making this epic flight was appropriately registered G-GBNZ and it wore a livery similar to that worn by aircraft of the RAF Empire Test Pilots School, fondly remembered as "Raspberry Ripple". It was flown by its builder Wing Commander Christopher Pote, RAF with co-pilot Officer Cadet Abby McGill.

The flight originated in Lincolnshire which is the spiritual home of the RAF. It departed on 16th October 2018 with its final destination being RNZAF Base Whenuapai near Auckland, New Zealand. The following statistics summarise the character of the flight: 17,000 miles, 26 hops, 100 MPH, 100 HP, 100 years.

With an empty weight of under three-hundred kilograms, the Eurofox weighs little more than a single engine of Smithy's Fokker *Southern Cross*. Although the journey was styled after the epic flights of the twenties and thirties, there was one major concession to the twenty-first century. Chris had to park the aeroplane in Perth for several weeks while he jetted back to his day job as a Tornado pilot in the RAF.

Eventually G-GBNZ arrived in Caloundra (from Cairns) on Monday 3rd December 2018. Shadowing the flight was Christopher's father, retired RAF Squadron Leader Dr Jonathan Pote. Jonathan was a member of QAM in the seventies at which time he also served in the RFDS as a medical doctor.

The original intention was to make the first non-stop, solo Trans-Tasman crossing in an aircraft with an all up weight of less than 500 kilograms. Unfortunately a closing weather window dictated a stop at Lord Howe Island so Chris had the benefit of a co-pilot after all. Prior to their departure on Tuesday 4th December, the crew made a whistle-stop visit to QAM where Chris and Abby paid homage to the Skyfox prototype and Chris renewed his childhood acquaintance with QAM's Canberra and Meteor. During their time at QAM, a crisis developed, necessitating several anxious telephone calls to the UK and New Zealand. Despite meticulous pre-planning and despite carrying all necessary safety equipment, the NZ civil aviation authorities were now denying permission for the final leg from Lord Howe to Auckland. In the best traditions of aviation pioneers, plus a bit of military can-do and probably a bit of input from the "Old Boys Network", a solution was found. The RNZAF would task a P-3 Orion to meet the aircraft halfway and provide SAR coverage to NZ. There - sorted!

In the event, the authorities relented and it wasn't necessary to scramble the Orion.

Prior to take-off on their Tasman crossing, Chris and Abby completed their flight planning in the air-conditioned solitude of QAM's crew room after which they made their way to the aeroplane to celebrate a typical hot and humid summer's day by donning immersion suits! Before departing, Chris taxied the aeroplane down the Caloundra flightline for a photo opportunity in front of the original Skyfox hangar. With this final nod to local history completed, they departed from Runway 12 presenting an unfamiliar sight as this tiny aeroplane tracked directly out to sea. Probably Caloundra has not featured in many aerial ocean crossings so this may have been a first. After overnighting on Lord Howe Island, G-GBNZ safely completed the final leg to Mangere Airport in Auckland on December 5th. Subsequently G-GBNZ was dismantled and shipped back to the UK.

(Story and pictures by Ron Cuskelly)



Abby McGill and Chris Pote kitted out in their immersion suits before departing to Lord Howe Island on 4th December 2018.



Eurofox 912(IS) G-GBNZ pays homage to the original Skyfox hangar at Caloundra before departing to Lord Howe Island on 4th December 2018.