

Since doing my silver distance two years ago I have, among other things, made a bad job of flying cross country. I decided to cheat and go to Husbands Bosworth for their task week in August where the cloudbase is usually higher and the ground is (usually!) lower. Despite this ploy, between my own ineptitude and the weather, it was the second Saturday before I set off on a proper cross country. The set task was 300km to Cirencester, Saltby and back 'for those who needed a 300k'. I wasn't sure if I really 'needed' a 300k but this triangle has the advantage of being very 'flat' so that if you can't make Saltby you can flop back into Hus-Bos as you pass. Cirencester still looked a long way on the map, even if it was downwind, and I dithered between that and the shorter 200km task until persuaded by John and Sylvia McKenzie to 'go for it'. Sylvia kindly, but rather rashly, offered to retrieve me if necessary. I swiped a declaration form from Andy Parrish, the Hus-Bos manager, who suggested, that as a 'non combatant', it would be a good idea to set off before the task launch window opened. Being unfamiliar with the area (and a confirmed wimp) I decided to attend the formal briefing. I was later to pay dearly for the hour delay this cost.

I launched at 1250 and did not waste time in making my first blunder. The theory with aerotows is that if you hit a big thermal on tow you pull off and climb. By dithering about pulling off I not only lost the thermal but also only got a 1500 foot launch instead of the usual 2000. Never mind. I soon found a thermal, climbed steadily to about 3800 feet, and set off. The nominal track would have taken me just north of Daventry but the clouds looked better to the south, so I headed more towards Northampton. After a couple of thermals I turned a bit more westish and flew just south of the masts on the ridge southwest of Daventry before again being attracted to more southerly clouds. I passed just north of Hinton (or is it Hidden) in the Hedges. Things were going quite well as I plodded on over the disused Barford with its nasty looking aerals and later to the north of Enstone.

It didn't last of course. Lulled into a false sense of security my brain decided to probe a hitherto unsuspected source of confusion. The 1:500,000 map has a curious means of depicting small towns and villages as squares for ones of 1 - 2.5 square kilometers and circles for smaller ones. This sometimes has the interesting effect that you can have two adjacent towns, presumably just under and just over 1 square kilometer where the apparently bigger one is marked as a circle and the smaller as a square. To make things even more exciting the fiendish cartographers have also made it possible to have nominally roundish towns which appear as squares and squarish towns which appear as circles. I was thoroughly confused by Chipping Norton (square) which from the air looked big enough to appear as it's actual shape. In retrospect I wonder if the good people of Chipping Norton would, perhaps, like a nice big sprawling new housing development. Another helpful idea would be to flood most of Bourton on the Water or at least change its name to 'Bourton by the Small Duckpond'.

By now you may have begun, as I did, to suspect that I might be getting a bit lost. Despite this, I decided to saunter on on the grounds that (a) there was no immediate airspace problem and (b) the air I was in was becoming so full of gliders that if there had been any airspace problem it would have been a mass trespass. It would have been useful to me, if a bit hectic, if these gliders could have given me a clue by all heading for Cirencester, but they seemed to be going everywhere. I thought I'd cracked it for a while as I followed a Duo Discus thinking it was Andy Parrish from Hus-Bos, but, of course, it turned out to be a craftily deployed decoy from somewhere else. As I slowly made my way the swarm of gliders gradually dissipated until eventually I was left hanging about in a light thermal pondering the relative merits of living in squares and circles.

It now seemed that I either had to backtrack until I recognised a definite landmark or, as I knew I was south of the nominal track, I could fly approximately west until I found a landmark somewhere on track. I took the second option blissfully unaware that I had craftily obliterated the major landmarks Northleach roundabout and the road to Cirencester with my track lines on the map. Stupid yes, but surely anyone who has driven through Swindon or Milton Keynes can be forgiven for not realising the significance of a roundabout as a VRP. My other helpful trick was to fold the map so that I could see the name of Cheltenham, but not it's actual position.

So there I was, wandering around north of Cirencester (in full view but unrecognised) wondering if I would get even more lost trying to backtrack. To add to my problems the sky had gradually become more and more blue after Banbury so I couldn't just hop from cloud to cloud. I decided that the best plan would be to sit at the top of a thermal and keep looking at landmarks until I got a definite fix. Some revolutions later I realised I was looking at the edge of the Cotswolds and thought I ought to be able to identify Birdlip and the Cirencester/Swindon road along which I have driven a number of times. Eventually, as the dawn of enlightenment finally drove the mist of ineptitude from the land of the lonesome brain cell, I realised that town (expected to appear as a square) I was looking at was, in fact, Cirencester (actual shape!). The square next to it, Stratton, is of course actually triangular. They don't make it easy. Cirencester looks quite pretty when you drive through it but is just another town from the air, and that big airfield, South Cerney, is nothing like as big as I thought. Anyway it was time for the turn point fiasco.

The turn point was a church on the north side of town near an alleged lake. I eventually identified the miserable puddle, so where were all these gliders that should have been doing wing overs and taking pictures? They'd all heard their GPS loggers bleep and gone, which, I suppose, at least saved my embarrassment. Hopefully not too many Cirencesterians were looking skyward at the time either.

The particularly astute reader will probably by now have guessed that I was not flying with GPS or a logger. Now, you and I well know these GPS toting instructors who unerringly assure us that this turn point photography business is really quite simple. You fly along the bisector and about 15 to 20 seconds after overflying the turn point you do a graceful Chandelle snapping the target as you go over the top before coming out on track the opposite way. Easy.

In reality it goes more like this. You start off OK, flying down the bisector isn't so hard, but then you have to guess when you are over the target. You can't see it because it's underneath so you're looking at the radial roads and 'umming and arring'. You finally think 'I must have passed it about ten seconds ago', count to five, decide to give it another five, then another, and then haul the thing over. At this point, if you're lucky, you will already have remembered to wind the film on, otherwise it's a scramble for the lever. You look along the wing and entirely fail to recognise the turn point so you crank the wing down a bit more. This is the cue the glider has been waiting for to slip a few hundred feet as you optimistically press the button. You come out of the dive in some random direction not knowing whether you really did get the right picture and have to turn back and fly around in a sensible manner and look for the thing properly. After about 5 minutes and 3 pictures later you are about 800 feet lower. You decide you've had enough and limp back towards the now weakened thermal from which you originally came still not able to convince yourself that you checked that the camera was loaded before you launched.

Back to the live action. Things were not so bad. Despite the aerobatics my breakfast was still more or less in the correct place and it was now safe to go outdoors in Cirencester. Thankfully, the thermal I had left before the photographic sortie was still working sluggishly and I slowly recovered most of the lost height. The sky was now mostly blue, I was flying into wind and it was getting difficult to decide where to try for lift. Thankfully at this point I got a boost in the form of the other ASW15B out of Hus-bos which had arrived to help out. With two matched gliders it was good fun flying together but still slow against the wind under a blue sky. With the other pilot and myself seeming to make a reasonable team we stayed together for about forty minutes, sometimes with him in front and sometimes me. Between thermals we would take slightly diverging tracks and whoever ended up with the weakest thermal could run across to join the other. This all worked quite well until, on a glide near Banbury, I suddenly lost a lot of height. I turned under the track of the other glider but just sank away from him and it was soon apparent that I was on my own again under a completely blue sky.

The sink was obviously going to be a problem, so in accordance with 'thermal street' theory I turned crosswind and headed northwards over Banbury itself. A small initial climb followed by a succession of weak thermals saw me getting quite low over the airstrip at Shotteswell. This didn't look too good for a glider landing as the strips were quite narrow and bounded by a fence and what looked like long crop. I sized up my chances of making Shennington (Edge Hill) which was now downwind. Although the thermal over Shotteswell was only giving me a meagre climb, it was slowly drifting towards Shennington. I stayed with it and as I neared

Shennington I carefully watched a glider land in order to get an idea of the circuit. The climb had improved slightly and by the time I was almost over Shennington I had enough height to search about a bit before being committed to land. A short search revealed a glider circling low down over which I was rewarded with a slow climb. Sticking with it the climb rate eventually began to increase and I finally topped out at 4200 feet.

Although it was difficult making headway into the wind I realised that, if it was necessary and I didn't get too low, I could easily run back to Shennington from some way towards Hus-Bos and give myself the chance of an aerotow retrieve.

My first upwind run ended just east of the M40 and I scuttled back to Shennington again. I connected with a better thermal this time and got a few miles further upwind. I was just about to run back a third time when a faint cloud appeared a mile or two further upwind giving me the clue I needed to get on with it. The cloud gave a good climb which, after the previous fracas, I would like to have taken to cloudbase but I was now under the Daventry CTA of FL45. I left the thermal which was still working strongly and, as if to rub it in, an airliner appeared from the south passing surprisingly low overhead towards Birmingham.

There were enough clouds now to make things relatively simple but it was getting a bit late and Saltby seemed unlikely. Around Daventry I thought about a final glide into Hus-Bos but decided to stay high anyway rather than risk ending up in a field just short. Arriving over Hus-Bos at about 5 o'clock I looked at the state of the sky towards Saltby, decided I had had enough and landed ten minutes later.

Walking back to the clubhouse after parking the glider I met Sylvia. I don't remember anybody ever being so glad to see me. It seemed most pilots had either got back a long time before or were, as John was, on the ground at Saltby which is notoriously difficult to find by road. Now there's a place that deserves the name Hidden in the Hedges. I think Sylvia was imagining having to retrieve two gliders, one from Saltby and one from Cirencester and arriving back at about 6am. Luckily, John later got an aerotow retrieve so she had to do neither.

Was I bothered about not making the 300k? I'd flown 200k over unfamiliar ground, got lost and sorted it out, done a bit of team flying, nearly bombed out, recovered under a blue sky and got back with a good turn point photograph too (the first one!). It was hell, see you next year.

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