



ULRIC JESSOP

Neil Roberts, British Squad Training Manager, hammers his team into shape in the air

The squad (L - R): L - R: Aidan Toase, Neil Roberts, Nicky Moss, Bob Drury, Abigail Barr, Fiona Macaskill, Ulric Jessop.

How can I emphasise the success of such a brilliant week? It started with nervous preparation at take-off on Chalvet above St André les Alpes and ended in German-speaking Switzerland en route to the Austrian border, a final flight of 150km over the largest glaciers in Europe.

It was a simple plan: arrange a minibus, a knowledgeable driver and ask Bob Drury to take us touring.

Where we land we sleep, then take off again and fly on. Fly as far as we can till we run out of Alps.

Strutting around at St André take-off was merely a cover for the concern of landing in the bomb-out field. We nearly did! We struggled our way onto the Cheval Blanc only to be beaten back to

Lambruisse by strong winds, Nicky Moss and Aidan Toase kicking trees aside to stay up. We climbed again and snuck round the back on Cote-Longue, pushing into the big mountains where roads fear to tread. Eventually, I saw the monster Tete de l'Estrop in all its glory, waiting to swallow us whole.

Gingerly we flew onto its sun-baked flanks. Our climb seemed calm but still I worried. We topped out, looking over the snow-covered peak and glided quietly by. The monster slept. I even covered my vario fearing the noise might wake the beast. We crossed the dreaded shoulder and a whisper came over the radio: "I wish I had my camera!"

We crossed the ski fields leading onto the Dormillouse at cloudbase and could hardly make out the dot known as St Vincent les Forts.



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Across the river and over the Serre-Poncon lake and into the Ecrins. Bigger, higher and snowier-covered beasts, we climbed to 3,200 metres. But around every corner another dead-end wall of mountain, and in every direction a headwind. Late in the day we turned back out of the mountains to Embrun, 95km flown, in search for food and beds.

Next day we took off at Chorges. Pretty Alpine flowers carpeted the grassy launch site and fluffy cumulus began to form in our clear blue skies. All was well... till we took off! Then all hell broke loose. With wings rustling and collapsing we fight our way upward but top out to even worse turbulence. Bob cheers me up on the radio: "Neil, there's no wind worries today - we'll spend most of it in the lee of the rotor." Moving quickly on we jumped onto the huge cliff faces that line the south and west of the Ecrins. One minute a collapse, the next minute a moonbeam to cloudbase. Bob and I lead out while Ulric Jessop brought in the rearguard. The clouds were building bigger and stronger. Fiona Macaskill was seen disappearing into cloud next to Ulric, trying to spiral dive but only managing

a spiral climb. Anybody familiar with Ulric's understatement will know that, "You don't have to worry about me," fully translated means, "Arghhhh... we're gonna die!" Eventually they popped out at 3,800 metres to a clap of thunder, just as rain starts to fall on me some 10km ahead of any cloud. Instant descent required - big ears, speed bar and spiral dive all together! Almost 60km completed and we're en route for Grenoble. An hour later and lightning is striking across the mountains we would have been on.

Next day found us at Montlambert with plans to fly over the Bauges National Park, aiming to connect with the Aravis chain heading for Chamonix. Unfortunately the air was heavily inverted. We flew hard, watching all the locals land, and kept on fighting, hitting the inversion but never breaking through. We decided to land and head for higher ground above Alevard for a late-afternoon take off. Climbing out quickly, we raced down des Huiles for 30km to attempt a crossing at Albertville and onto the Aravis, but no! The day was too inverted and the climbs too weak. Nicky Moss won the day by getting closest to Albertville.

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That night we headed for Chamonix. If tomorrow was inverted we'd go east into the big mountains to stay above it; if it stormed over us we'd go west to Annecy and relative safety? A night of torrential rain, thunder and lightning didn't put us at ease, but we woke to clear blue skies and breathtaking views of Mont Blanc and the Aiguille du Midi.

Take-off was the Brevent with south-west winds forecast. Decision made: we would fly north-east.

The incredible climb above the Brevent with the Mer de Glace, Bossons and Argentiere glaciers in view simply takes your breath away. Go there, fly that valley - it's awesome! We pressed on north past Le Tour and over the Col des Montets, across the border and into Switzerland (nobody checked our passports). We climbed to 3,500 metres at the Fontanabran, and then we were on our way.

To cross the huge Rhone valley as it widens north into Lake Geneva, seeing the mouth of the lake, then looking north-east into the "big stuff" was almost more than I could handle. But Bob and Ulric sensed a big day ahead and we were moving fast. We flew into and over the 4,000-metre peaks (our highest point was 4,300 metres), big-eared out of cloud convergence doing 70km/h. Taking booming climbs above huge mountains, the Matterhorn to the south and the Jungfrau to the north, the "Rhone Riders" flew on across the mouth of the Aletsch glacier (the largest in Europe).

Six and a half hours later, Abigail Barr had flown 113km for her personal best, Aidan Toase made 125km and I was stuck at 145km and 2,700 metres, trying to follow Ulric and Bob across the Furka pass. Bob was so close to the snow I'm sure I saw him skiing at one point. They disappeared from view and the radio went silent. I tried to get higher but the day was ending. As I turned back to land down in the grassy valley the radio crackled into life - it was the minibus and the gang coming to pick us up. Yes!

Bob flew his personal Alpine best of 150km and Ulric flew a lifetime best of 155km. That night we spent in Andermatt, a beautiful village straight out of "Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang". The talk was of flying into Austria next day. Exhausted squad voices echoed, "Stop making me paraglide!" We slept well and deep.

Next day and the game was over; wave bars stacking across the sky and concerned phone calls telling us of high winds. The Rhone Riders must rest till the next boot camp. When can we go again?

NEIL ROBERTS



Neil Roberts in the big stuff



NEIL ROBERTS

Topping out at 4300 metres!



ULRIC JESSOP

Into Switzerland and over the Aletsch glacier



ULRIC JESSOP

Onwards and upward: Aidan Toase and Fiona Macaskill en route