



How to fly longer distances

The right stuff

Having the right mindset is critical. The psychological element of gliding has been explained by George Moffat (*How to be a winner*, February-March 2000, p22). It's not about inherent personal characteristics; it's about the right mental attitude (which training can help create).

For me, it's a blend of inspiration and determination, balanced by healthy self-awareness. A little of the American "can do" attitude helps, as long as it is matched by realistic targets. The other fundamental success factor in gliding is decision-making. The actual mechanics of flying are relatively unimportant.

It is the ability to make decisions that distinguishes the good pilots from the average, and the ability to make decisions at multiple levels simultaneously that makes the great pilots: continually assessing the rate of climb, where the lift is strongest, whether to continue climbing or to press on.

On a tactical level, where the energy lines are, which clouds are building, which clouds are collapsing. On the strategic level, what's happening to the weather, is it developing according to the forecast, is it worth diverting to a better area? The thinking pilot collects all available information, compares it to their experience, makes the analysis and decides. It's about positive decision-making, not floating around in a daydream.

Preparation

The weather pattern in early June had been steadily improving. A telephone call with one of my syndicate partners convinced me that a big flight was on. The next day he was to attempt his Diamond goal in the Discus so I would fly the Vega. While the extra two metres supplied by the tips may not make a noticeable performance difference, the aileron handling is transformed, making it easier to extract the best from every thermal.

I arrived at Gransden Lodge to find the first private glider already being towed out and a frenzy of rigging activity. Clearly others were convinced that the day was going to be good.

I was fifth in the ensuing speed-rigging contest thanks to automatically connecting controls – a Slingsby innovation – no water, and much practice at rigging and de-rigging.

At the launch point I discovered that Richard Baker (no relation) had already set off on a 750km flight so chose the same declaration: Gransden Lodge – Doncaster – Goring – Sheffield North – Gransden Lodge. Mistake number one – with hindsight, I should have had tasks pre-planned. I was fortunate that I could default to Richard's.

The Rollings Theory

Take-off at 10:12. Richard, Steve and Rob were ahead of me, all on the same task. An immediate 4kt climb at Caxton Gibbet

to 3,300ft confirmed it was going to be a stonking day – and that I'd already missed out on 30-40 minutes of soarable weather. With time to make up I began using the Chris Rollings Theory of cross-country flight.

As you might suspect, the Rollings Theory is based on the analogy between gliding and poker. Professional poker players do not gamble, they calculate the odds of having a winning hand, based on all the information available.

The application of this theory to gliding is balancing the probability of finding a better climb against the probability of landing. While climbing, there is only one question to ask: "Of the clouds/thermals within reach, what are the chances that the thermal strength under any one of those clouds will be stronger than the current true climb rate?"

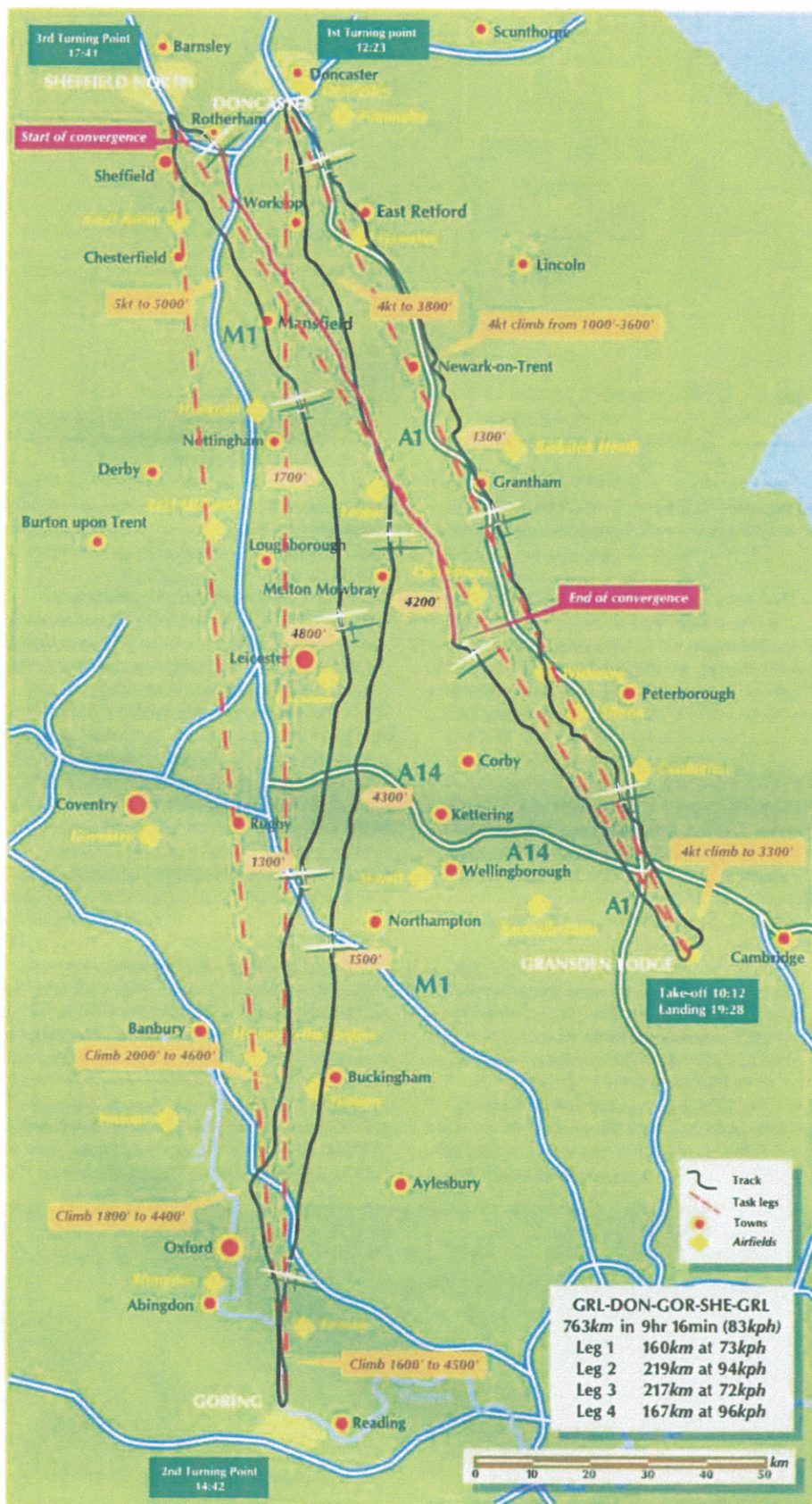
If the judgement is that the current climb rate is the best available, then stay climbing. Otherwise go. The decision process is the same, whatever the height. It's as simple as that. The theory only breaks down when there are lines of energy such as cloud-streets, or storm fronts.

An important success factor is to have some good soaring techniques that work for you.

North and south

Any long task requires an early start, when cloudbase is low but thermals are generally >

750KM IN A VEGA



Iain Baker shares his seven success factors to help your flying this season – based on his experience of flying 750km in a Vega one English summer

I WAS CONTEMPLATING a cold beer on a hot day in Le Blanc, when Brian Spreckley said casually: "I hear you had a good flight recently".

I murmured assent, presuming he was referring to a 750km flight I had made the previous month. "And what did you do it in? An LS8?" Brian asked.

"A Vega," I replied.

"A Vega?" he echoed in incredulity, doing a passable impression of Dame Edith Evans.

"A Vega," I confirmed with satisfaction.

Brian's disbelief is the typical reaction. The common perception is that 750km flights are the domain of the überpilots (which I certainly am not) flying the newest, sexiest gliders – not something designed in the mid-1970s. (The Vega 17 was the subject of the possibly apocryphal comment by Chris Rollings: "Fly it – I wouldn't walk underneath it!")

The reality is that by engineering the winning factors, minimising mistakes, and with a little luck, I believe that 600-750km flights are within the grasp of the average cross-country pilot.

(It's rash statements like this that cause an increase in outlandings – Ed.)

But remember that the right success factors will not just happen – they need to be managed. So what are the success factors for that dream flight?

Main picture: Iain Baker returning to Gransden in his 17-metre Vega

(photo: Martin Boycott-Brown)

Above: Iain's epic flight. He says that by engineering the winning factors, minimising mistakes and with a little luck, 600km-750km flights are within reach of the average UK cross-country pilot

(map: Steve Longland)