

# Daredevil duo take to the air to complete a record global challenge

A chance remark at a Woodford Air Show in June 1998 was all it took for two record creators to link up and launch off on an around-the-world adventure.

Colin Bodill had been invited to appear at the air show following his 49-day record-creating microlight flight from London to Sydney. Also at Woodford was Jennifer Murray, who had, one year previously, become the first woman to pilot a helicopter around the world, accompanied by co-pilot Quentin Smith.

While talking over their many experiences, Colin mentioned that he was planning a millennium world flight in his microlight, and "why don't you come along?" Thus the idea of what was to become The NOW challenge was sparked.

Two years of meticulous planning were to be finally put to the test as the pair took off from the historic motor racing circuit at Brooklands on May 31, 2000.

Flying alongside was a second Robinson R44 helicopter which was to act as the main camera ship for the entire journey. The equipment carried both on the microlight and helicopters also gave viewers live 'on-line' pictures, text and video, accessed through the Network of the World web site at [www.now.com](http://www.now.com).

One of the principal beneficiaries of The NOW Challenge is 'Operation Smile' a not-for-profit volunteer medical services organisation which provides reconstructive facial surgery to children in need. So far The NOW Challenge has raised \$1million for the organisation.

**New Challenges**  
Over 99 days Jennifer and Colin touched down in 29 countries and covered 22,300 nautical miles, flying across some of the most beautiful, yet hostile scenery in the world. Even though both were accomplished long distance fliers, it was no mean feat for either of the intrepid aviators, with every day bringing forth new challenges.

But it was also a great way to get your flying hours up!



by Paul Tomlin

Right: Colin Bodill finally reaches England. Stopping for the night at Barton Aerodrome

Left: Jennifer Murray in her Robinson R44 helicopter heading for London



**Stamina and skill is the key to success**

On Wednesday, September 6, 60 year old Jennifer Murray became the first woman to fly solo around the world in a helicopter. This achievement is testimony to her physical stamina as well as to her flying abilities. Previous man-made flights have been in jet-engine machines fitted with autopilots and hydraulic powered controls. Her Robinson R44 single piston-engined helicopter had none of these refinements and had to be physically hand-flown all the way.

Although born in Rhode Island, USA, in 1940, Jennifer grew up in Macclesfield. After graduating from London's School of Arts and Crafts with a degree in textile design, she returned to America where she worked and travelled until 1963.

Back in London she began work as a freelance textile designer supplying fabrics to many exclusive clients. It was at this time that she met and married Simon Murray. The couple moved to Thailand where they started a textile company, four years later the pair moved to Hong Kong where a new textile company was formed.

In between raising a family and running a business, Jennifer found time to trek through Nepal and Bhutan. In 1982 she completed her first London Marathon; hiked the Macle hose Trail (100km race) in 1994 and again in 1996, while in between staging exhibitions of her water-colour paintings. Last year she ran the Hong Kong marathon and the Kenya marathon for 'Operation



Above: Colin and Jennifer pose for the camera in their respective machines

Right: Jennifer Murray



## Why flying is the bag of gold medal winner Colin Bodill

Born 49 years ago, Colin grew up near the Rolls-Royce airfield at Hucknall, Nottinghamshire. He traces his passion for flying back to his childhood, when he first took to the sky after being dragged into the air clutching a large plastic bag!

Such was his enthusiasm for being aloft that he figured prominently amongst the hang-gliding fraternity who were experimenting with rudimentary designs in the early seventies, progressing through adaption to powered variants which would ultimately become the prototypes of the weight-shift microlights of today.

When not busy creating records Colin works as a CAA examiner, BMAA instructor, test pilot and inspector. He is a completely self-taught pilot and nurtured the sport through its infancy by designing and testing his own equipment.

Colin gained his microlight instructor's licence in 1980 when the sport became regulated and has gone on to claim countless awards and achievements, including winning the coveted Gold Medal in the World Olympic Air Games staged in Turkey in 1997; the following year he set a new weight-shift microlight World Speed Record from London to

Sydney, also in a Mainair Blade 912.

With completion of this latest globe trotting adventure, Colin adds the accolade of becoming the first person to solo circumnavigate the world in a microlight aircraft, to his many achievements.

As Colin had landed close to a military airfield, where his microlight was eventually taken, the air force won the honour of hosting their celebrity.

Such was the occasion that Colin's unexpected visit gen-

engine began to misfire in the choking air. On another day of high drama Jennifer had to cut her engine and make an emergency landing as magneto failure caused low rpm; fortunately this happened over land.

With entries in the log books showing each pilot had amassed more than 600 airborne hours in their single-engine aircraft.

Needless to say the journey was not as straight forward as planned. Administrative bureaucracy was prevalent in many countries, despite having obtained the necessary clearances before departure. The NOW Challenge Team's worst case example saw 18 days lost sitting in Japan, awaiting onward clearance from Russia.

Colin's longest sector flight was 13hrs 40min. Occasionally having to fly as high as 15,000 feet and on one occasion it was necessary to continue to 18,000 feet to clear turbulent mountain ranges.

The longest single water crossing was 677 miles, though it should not be forgotten that ten other major crossings over treacherous seas were also accomplished. Likewise impenetrable jungles, featureless deserts with blinding sandstorms and high arctic mountain ranges, all had to be crossed. Temperatures experienced ranged from -34deg C to +48deg C.

Occasionally mechanical problems cropped up to keep everyone on their toes. A 640 mile leg over raging forest fires caused anxious moments as the microlight's

And if it wasn't Nature's element having a go, the Team were given an ultimatum to leave Pakistani air space within four hours, or be shot down, which meant they had to fly into 40 knot sandstorms.

On June 16 Colin was held at gun-point after a violent storm, more powerful than a monsoon, hit his microlight as he flew from Vietnam to Hong Kong and blew him into Southern China, where he was intercepted by two fighter jets. His impromptu landing in the tight confines of a rice paddy was a credit to his skills as a reigning world champion. A wrangle as to who should claim the honour of arrest saw the Chinese secret service, the army, navy and the air force all involved.



erated more interest in the Chinese press, than a visit by the British Prime Minister. Thousands of Chinese came out to wave farewell to their new-found hero as he departed.

Above: Colin airborne out of Barton en-route to London and the completion of his epic around the world flight



Above: Colin Bodill greets Jennifer Murray as she arrives at Barton aerodrome

## Remarkable achievements recall early days of flying

Jennifer's and Colin's record breaking journeys are reminiscent of the pioneering achievements of the 1930s, when both private and commercial aviation was gathering an unstoppable momen-

tum. In those halcyon days every flight seemed to herald a new record, helped in no small measure by a freedom of the skies, where national boundaries were invisible. Aviation legends such as Amelia Earhart, Amy Johnson and Jean Batten came to mind, along with Lindbergh and Manchester's own Trans-Atlantic heroes, Alcock and Brown. Each in their individual way embarked on their own chal-

lenge of the time. The activities we now see on a daily basis at Manchester Airport find their roots in the pioneering spirit of aviation's great explorers. Though 21st Century technology has assisted our present day flyers, it still required a great deal of skill, bravery and raw human determination to achieve the ultimate goal.

When asked at the huge press reception if she was going to avoid visiting air shows from now on, Jennifer's immediate response was, "No. You meet such wonderful people there!" The spirit of adventure lives on!

Below: Colin flies over the green fields of Cheshire. A pleasant contrast to the arctic mountain ranges and treacherous waters he had flown across the previous week



## Round-the-world aircraft

Colin used a Mainair Blade 912S weight-shift microlight manufactured and owned by Mainair Sports of Rochdale. The microlight aircraft is powered by a four-stroke, 100hp Rotax 912 engine, which gives an average cruising speed of 70 knots.

Mainair Sports have been at the forefront of microlight design and are a recognised world authority specialising in weight-shift aircraft. The company is the longest established manufacturer of microlight aircraft in Great Britain and has been producing top quality flexwinged aircraft since 1982, when microlighting first began as a sport in the UK and offers microlight tuition through its training school based at Manchester's Barton Aerodrome.

The Robinson R44 is an American-built, four-

seat light piston-engine helicopter, with an average cruising speed of 90 knots.

Both aircraft were modified with range extender fuel tanks.

Colin's longest flight was 13 hours 40 minutes and Jennifer's was 11 hours 10 minutes.

As might be expected, having entered the 21st Century, avionics also played an important part in The NOW Challenge. The products used by the team members were selected from the top of the line Bendix/King Silver Crown series. The most striking of which was the "5" KMD150 GPS crystal clear multifunction colour display, which was fitted in both the R44's and the Blade 912S. Also on board the helicopters was the Garmin GNS430, with a Garmin 295 colour map equipping both helicopter and microlight.



Plane Talk would like to thank Paul Tomlin for supplying the words and photographs for this feature.