

World Gliding Championships, Benalla, Australia

HEAVY rain greeted our arrival in Benalla; very unseasonal and one of four such days during the competition. Sue and I had travelled out by train and coach from Melbourne on 29 December to be met by our pilots, Ed Johnston and Derren Francis, who had arrived earlier in the day. We drove round the corner from the station to our home for the next three weeks. A charming cabin in the back garden of Reg Gardner, ex-member of Cotswold Gliding Club at Aston Down and his Australian partner Marion Mallinder.

Reg and Marion were key members of the weighing team during the competition, but also became unofficial members of the British Team when hosting two BBQs and making a huge contribution to the International Evening. Our team captain, Max Kirschner, and his wife Sue had been in Benalla for a while. Sue worked in the competition office for the duration.

Max had been busy, amongst other things, arranging for our use of two hangars to accommodate the six team gliders. The container, which had been fitted out at Lasham by Max and Steve Jones, was here, but yet to be unpacked. We had a low sideways loading hangar for the two JS1c of our Open Class pilots, Andy Davis and Russell Cheetham, and the 18m ASG 29E of Mike Young. The other hangar was large, high and open at the front. But it did have attached an office space on either side, one of which became our team HQ. The hangar space easily accommodated Ed's 15m ASG 29E, Derren's 15m Ventus 2a and Steve's 18m Ventus 3T.

On our second day in Benalla there was a cracker of a thunderstorm over the clubhouse. There was heavy flooding on the airfield and I managed to bog our car near the hangar and needed towing out. Derren, having written a hundred letters to various organisations, was loaned a new Toyota HiLux Ute (Aussie Pickup) by Toyota Benalla and was able to tow me out.

Practice days

The remainder of the team arrived over the next few days, with Mike being the last to arrive the day before unofficial practice started. The practice days were spent shaking the team down. The pilots had some excellent flying with high cloudbases and speeds up to 160km/h. One priority was the begging and borrowing of trailers. Particularly for Derren as he had the only glider without an engine. For Ed we had offers of, and attempted to fettle, two other trailers before borrowing Kerrie Claffey's ASG 28 Cobra trailer, which required only slight modification to take Ed's ASG 29.

The competition was directed by Terry Cubley, with his light touch and dry sense of humour. On one practice day briefing he put up a picture on the big screen of a fuel cock and asked "Does anyone know what that is?" to general laughter.

Andy Davis had admitted that he landed out the day before because he forgot to turn on his fuel. Terry used that to make the safety point that most of us had travelled a long way, were not used to the heat and were possibly still jet lagged. In other words "take care out there". In fact, surprisingly, that was the only time we needed a trailer.

The last 15m crew to arrive was Paul 'Baldrick' Mason, who was then designated as Derren's crew. Baldrick, as he prefers, knew everyone and everyone knew Baldrick. I said to him: "I've been flying nationals since 1977, how come I've never met you?" "Oh, I only do Europeans and Worlds," said Baldrick.

Interestingly, four of the crew had military backgrounds. Baldrick was a truck driver in the RAF and has over a 1,000 hours gliding. Mike recruited Matt Heritage via social media. Matt, an Australian and, at 21, by far the youngest in the team, is ground support in the Army Aviation Corp. Based in Darwin, he glides at Kingaroy, 1,000 miles away!

Andres Tamme, crewing for Steve, was born in Cardiff, but lived in Adelaide from the age of 13. Retired from the RAAF, where he was aircrew on P3C Orions, he now spends the English summers at Bidford and Australian summers gliding at Gawler, near Adelaide.

Andy Smart, crewing for Russell, was born in Kenya, but is as English as they come. An ex-RAF technician, he used to glide at Keevil, but now flies paragliders all over the world.

Pami Davis met Andy on a Chicago nightstop. She hardly knew what a glider was, but has spent most of the years since crewing for Andy.

At 72, I was the oldest in the team with lots of gliding experience, but not much crewing. However, I was partnered by my wife, Sue, with her many years of crewing all round the world.

There was a welcome party and BBQ at the Clubhouse on 7 January, followed the next day by the Opening Ceremony. This took place at a Cricket Oval next to Lake Benalla. There was a good crowd to welcome the team captains and pilots as they paraded around the Oval with their country's flag and a child carrying a placard with their country's name. Terry Cubley announced everyone's name as they passed the grandstand. Last were the Australians, who received a huge cheer. "There must be some Australians here," mused Terry.

Official opening

The competition was officially opened with a short speech of welcome by local MP Steph Ryan. On the first official day of the competition we were greeted by an overcast sky and forecast winds of 30kts at flying heights. There was a briefing, but the day was cancelled by text to the team captains at eleven o'clock. Most of us went to Brown Brothers Winery for some wine tasting followed by a visit to a cheese factory. Unfortunately the poor weather, by Australian standards, continued for most of the competition with only one really good day with high cloudbases and oxygen required.

On the next day, 15m and 18m were scrubbed leaving the Open Class to fly a two-hour AAT (Assigned Area Task) to the north. It was a strong start for Andy and Russell, coming 3rd and 4th respectively: 1st, 2nd and 5th were taken by German pilots Michael Sommer, Tassilo Bode and Stephan Beck. They were flying the monster EB 29 gliders with a 28m wingspan and performance to match.

The days that followed were mainly hot and blue with climbs of 3-5kts and an inversion between 4-6,000ft. Of course, this resulted in enormous gaggles, sometimes including the whole task group. On 12 January, two gliders touched paint in the cruise. Both landed safely and were able to continue competing.

At briefing on the 14th, a safety presentation was given by pilot safety committee member Ronald Termaat, flying in the 15m Class for the Netherlands. He started by showing a humorous clip from Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* in which Brian proclaims: "Don't follow me, don't follow anyone". He then showed various traces of close encounters in thermals and one where two pilots followed each other in close proximity for 6.5km without being aware of the presence of the other. Rather prophetic, as later that day Steve O'Donnell of Australia and Michael Eisele of Germany - both in 15m Ventus 2s - collided in the cruise and baled out.

The first they knew of the other's presence was a loud bang. Other 15m pilots stayed overhead to relay information and pass the position. A helicopter picked up both pilots and took them to Canberra Hospital. The day was cancelled in the 15m Class, which was particularly disappointing for Derren, who was up with the leaders. Ed had witnessed the aftermath of the collision from a kilometre away and was very glad to see the second parachute appear.

A few days later, Steve O'Donnell came to briefing a chastened man, surprised and very grateful to be alive. Not in the first flush of youth, having flown in the 1987 Worlds at Benalla, it took him 3,000ft of the 4,500ft available to get out. Only when he got one leg over the side was he dragged out by the airflow. Steve weighs 95kg and when he looked up at the 24-foot canopy he said it looked like a beach parasol. He landed very heavily, crushing three vertebra and, despite having quick release buckles, received more injuries as he was dragged along the ground. Michael also landed heavily, breaking bones in the vicinity of his ankle. He spent rather longer in hospital.

Typical day

A typical day's crewing started for us at 07:15. Derren was up and away first. The rest of us enjoyed reasonably leisurely ablutions and breakfast before departing for the seven-minute drive to the airport at 08:30. Arriving at the hangar, Ed's glider would be on its own as the other two had watered the night before and were already in the queue for the weighing station. Good to be in a hangar as it was hot even at that time of day. We watered the glider via a hose and flow meter whilst Ed dealt with matters in the cockpit. Ed would then walk over to the clubhouse whilst we towed out to the grid via the weighing station. All competitors had completed technical registration, which included establishing a reference weight for the main wheel when loaded to the maximum permitted in one's class. The airport was available for commercial traffic before 09:00, which was when the two weighing stations were opened. It would take us up to an hour from hangar to grid position, especially if we gridded at the far side of the airport on the long, wide grass runway 26.

We usually made it back in time for a 10 o'clock briefing in the Benalla Performing Arts Centre, just 100m from the clubhouse. A fine theatre with a 344-seat tiered auditorium. Terry Cubley conducted proceedings, introducing Jenny Thompson for the weather briefing and Tobi Geiger for the task briefing. The theatre was also the venue for the Ostiv Conference, which took place during the first week of the competition. It provided an insight into the development of gliding and the latest meteorological and technical advances. We attended a couple of evening sessions with talks on the Perlan Project and the development of the FES electric engine for sustainer and self launching gliders.

A Diana 2 FES in 15m and a Ventus 2 FES in 18m were flying here. Other new gliders apart from the £300,000 EB29s, were six 18m Ventus 3s and two 15m JS 3s. On one day Ventus 3s took 1st, 2nd and 3rd places, and on another the JS 3s took 1st and 2nd place. This was a remarkable feat for the Jonker brothers as the glider had its first flight only four weeks previously. Their two gliders were flown to Australia courtesy of Qantas in special containers to allow them to fit into the aircraft's hold.

The competition was a much larger event than any I had been to before. There were 37, now 35 gliders in 15m Class, 43 gliders in 18m Class and 35 gliders in Open Class. One feature new to me was the team briefing immediately after the main briefing. This was held in our base at the hangar chaired by Max, who first gave a report of the team captain's meeting held earlier. Then would follow a discussion on the tasks, significant geographical features and an estimate of best start time.

Graham Garlick, ex-Yorkshire Gliding Club, who moved to Benalla in 1963, gave more detailed weather briefings on some days. Codes had to be decided for estimated start time and for various points around the courses so that any eavesdroppers on our frequency wouldn't gain any useful insight.

After the team briefing, pilots usually returned to the grid, programmed the tasks into their navigation devices then returned to cool off in the air-conditioned clubhouse and, in the case of the 15m team, eat packed lunches prepared by Sue earlier. First possible launch was usually 12:30, never earlier and often later.

On the grid, Max would visit each pilot to check that all was well and pass on any task changes. After launch, crews would return to our base to find Max sitting at his desk in 'Mission Control', with an array of three laptops and two radios: one tuned to the airport frequency and the other to the team frequency. Each pilot had a satellite Spot device attached to their parachute. This relayed their position to Max every 10 minutes. There were four buttons on the device, with a prearranged message allocated to each button. For example: 'Send trailer and extra help'. This was a particularly useful device in some of the remote desert areas flown over with no mobile phone signal.

There were also a number of trackers supplied by the competition organisers to provide online tracking. Two of our trackers were sponsored by Specsavers in Benalla. Several of the shops in town had window displays and sponsored one of the teams.

Trackers

One pilot in each pair was given a tracker and asked to keep it charged and fitted in a place where its signal could be picked up. The glider's position could then be seen continuously, albeit with a 15-minute time delay. The display on Max's laptop showed the task and all gliders with a serviceable tracker in that task group. There were three large screens in the clubhouse, one for each task group. And, of course, this could also be followed by anyone in the world with internet access, thus making the competition more real for enthusiasts everywhere. In the latter stages of the competition, the trackers were reallocated to the top 15 to 20 pilots in each class. All our pilots had one; possibly a mixed blessing from their point of view. Anyway some trackers inexplicably failed around start time, not our pilots of course. Start times had to be submitted online within 30 minutes of starting.

When our pilot was about 60km out from the 4km radius finish line, we would drive around the dusty peritrack to wait for him at 'Ben Bog'. This was a shed next to the 08 threshold complete with latrine, canopy to provide shade and a speaker broadcasting on the airport frequency. Pilots called 20km and 10km from the airport. We only saw them landing, not finishing; one piece of excitement removed for us mere mortals. On return to the hangar we would wash off the bugs, often plentiful, and put the glider to bed whilst Ed removed batteries and Camelbaks and handed his SD card to Max for transmission of his trace to the scorers.

The best day of the competition occurred on 17 January. Open Class were set a 747km racing task to the north; 18m had a five-hour AAT also to the north; and 15m a 484km racing task into the weaker conditions to the west. Someone was heard to say: "Pass me the telescope, I want to see what planet the task setter's on." In fact, Tobi Geiger, as well as being task setter, was also the sniffer in his unballasted LS4. On one of the practice days after sniffing he went on to fly his own 887km task in approximately 8 hours 20 minutes.

In Open Class that day, all but two got round. Michael Sommer started at 14:08 with Russell and Andy starting at 14:09. Pilots were heard at 13,000ft. Michael won at 161km/h. Not such a good day for Russell and Andy, but still 800+ points each. In 18m Class, Steve and Mike came 5th and 6th within 22 points of winner Wolfgang Janowitsch flying for Austria. In 15m Class the winner was Uys Jonker in his JS3 Rapture at 137km/h. Derren was 7th for 917 points at 131km/h.

The last day of the competition was a particularly tense affair with medal positions up for grabs in all three classes. In Open Class Russell was still in the lead as he had been since day 4. But Andy, seeking his third world title, was only 22 points behind and Michael Sommer 8 points behind Andy. In 18m Class, Mike was in Bronze Medal position 73 points behind Gold, and Steve was 5th just 34 points behind Mike. In 15m Class, Makoto Ichikawa was in the lead with 10-times world champion Sebastian Kawa breathing down his neck. Derren was in a creditable 8th position in his first World Championships, but with no chance of a medal. Ed was down the field. Having had previous very good results in both Europeans and Worlds he was disappointed with his performance this time. However, as with all of us he persevered to the end.

Solid performance

At the team briefing Andy, professional as always, said that what was needed was a solid performance from everyone. We were in the lead in the team cup, which Andy considered was as important, if not more important, than any individual medal. In particular, it was pointed out that they had nothing to gain and everything to lose by taking any risky gambles. The points from all pilots would be crucial if we were to retain the team cup.

The grid was formed at the 26 end with 15m first. To that point 15m had had five days, with six for 18m and seven in Open Class. An hour before first launch, the director ordered a change of ends to the dismay of the marshals and consternation of the pilots. It appeared that there was only a 10kt crosswind, but apparently the wind was due to back. Terry didn't want to launch 115 gliders over the town with a tailwind.

In fact the change of ends went better than we expected and first launch took place at 13:10. Thereafter 15m gliders could be seen circling overhead, well below 3,000ft, many dumping water. There was a 10-minute pause before launching the 18m Class and we waited by Ben Bog for a possible relight. In the event, relights were not needed and I spent the day at 'mission control' watching developments.

15m Class had a 3.30-hour AAT to the north. Due to the fairly late start and possible early cut off, Derren made the decision to turn for home early in the last area knowing that he would be back about 20 minutes before time, but calculated that he would considerably reduce the risk of landing out. He did get back and the tactics paid off as he jumped to a final position of 6th overall. Sebastian Kawa overtook Makoto Ichikawa for his remarkable 11th Gold Medal.

18m Class had a 281km racing task. Unfortunately, Steve dropped two places to 7th, but was only 200 points behind winner, Killian Walbrou of France. Mike maintained his 3rd position despite having got low enough on the last leg to lower his undercarriage on base leg to a paddock. But he felt a bubble just before firing his turbo and climbed away.

Open Class had a 302km racing task. This was the most nail-biting to watch. Michael Sommer in his EB 29R started three minutes behind Russell and Andy. All he had to do in his 28m glider was finish with them to take the title. It felt as if there was certain inevitability about the outcome. Russell and Andy maintained the gap for the first half of the task, but were then caught as the gaggles compressed in the weakening condition approaching the 2nd TP.

Having reached the top of the gaggle first, Russell pressed on in the blue and shortly later we heard him report "I've blown it" on the team frequency, shortly followed by Andy saying "Well Done". Maybe he hadn't blown it after all? At the northern end of the Warbys, a line of low hills to the NE of Benalla, which usually work well on the way home in the evening, Russell, Andy, Michael Sommer and Tassilo Bode were all climbing together in a dying thermal. Andy pushed on the west-facing slopes and called Russell (closely followed by the EB 29Rs) into a fresh thermal, which built to steadily to a peak of 4kts before fading out just short of final glide, the EBs a little below.

Leaving a swarm of 15m Class gliders climbing below, Russ and Andy pushed on along the Warbys, looking for the hoped for killer climb. On and on until approaching the final control point and, still a couple of hundred feet below final glide, there was a choice of continuing with the hills looking for the climb or cutting straight across the valley to the control point. Andy, followed by Michael Sommer, continued along the ridge with no success. Russell and Tassilo Bode went direct to the control point, Tassilo attempting the marginal final glide home without turning again and Russell finding the all important one-knot climb at the control point just as the situation looked hopeless. By the time Andy and Michael Sommer doubled back to the climb, Russell was 500ft above and about to set off for the finish ring some 20km away. We went out to Ben Bog in time to see Russell land first of those in contention. About 30 seconds later Michael Sommer rolled to a stop next to him. A very close call, but in the end triumph for Russell. A just reward for 30 years' dedication to his objective. Andy finished a couple of minutes later to hold on to third overall and add a WGC Bronze medal to his collection. Tassilo was forced to start his engine short of the finish ring.

Prize-giving

On the next morning we all gathered at our container at 07:00 to begin packing the gliders away before the closing ceremony and prize-giving at 11:00. A quick change into team uniforms and we joined the throng at the clubhouse in front of the various countries' flags to witness an aerobatic display by a singleton from the RAAF Roulettes Display Team. The pilot was also a new glider pilot and wanted to pick up some tips after landing.

Various speeches followed from Terry Cubley and others before presentation of the prizes. First came a line-up of the top 10 in 15m Class, with the first three mounting the podium to receive their medals, a bunch of flowers and other goodies from the various sponsors. Then the 18m Class, with Mike leaping joyously onto the bottom step of the podium for his Bronze Medal. Next was Open Class with Russell, Michael and Andy receiving medals and prizes.

Finally Max dominated the top step of the podium to receive a very well deserved Gold Medal for the team cup. He was flanked by the French and German captains, whose teams were very close behind in Silver and Bronze positions. Flags were raised and National Anthems played.

There were several social events during the competition. A Hawaiian New Year's Eve party, BBQ and band at the clubhouse enjoyed by all. The welcome party already mentioned. An international evening, was again something new to me. The large tug hangar was cleared and tables placed around the walls and down the middle. Teams adorned their table with food items typical to their country, not to mention their alcoholic beverages.

Our table was particularly impressive, decorated with Union Jacks and a manekin (loaned by Target, Benalla) in a Union Jack outfit on guard. Special thanks to Pami for doing most of the organising, and to Sue, Reg and Marion, who spent two afternoons producing 200 individual steak and kidney pies and nearly as many jam tarts. Sue donated the Pimms for Baldrick and Andy Smart to mix into delicious potions.

It all went well and Andy said it was the best display he had seen at any of his many World Championships. At this event we were also pleased to have a visit from George Lee, down from his home in Queensland. He stayed for the rest of the competition and told us it was his first visit to a WGC since he won the last of his three World Championships at Paderborn in 1981. We also had visits from Jill Burry, Paul and Caroline Fritche and Dave and Dilly Watt. Dave spent several days with us to help and mentor fellow Bicester Gliding Club member, Derren.

The whole British team had a farewell dinner at the North Eastern Hotel to celebrate our success. Russell, our new world champion, gave a short speech thanking the crews, but in particular thanking Max for all the effort he had put in before the competition and throughout.

For Sue and me it was a privilege to be part of a happy and well organised team. In no small part thanks to the leadership of Max Kirschner, but also thanks to the team spirit of all involved.

by Peter Sheard