

Flight of the

**Two Texas adventurers
fly a homebuilt to
Europe and back.**

By Geoffrey P. Jones



Trans-Atlantic flight has always held an aura and mystique. From Alcock and Brown's 1914 crossing in a Vickers Vimy, through Charles Lindbergh and his Spirit of St. Louis solo crossing in 1927, to the first tentative airliner crossing with the DC-4. But since then trans-Atlantic flights have gotten fairly routine.

These days we make the trip in space-age, transoceanic jet airliners while munching peanuts, sipping soft drinks and watching the latest Hollywood films. That says a lot for safety and comfort, but where's the adventure? Well, it's still there for the intrepid pilots and crews of modern single-engine planes.

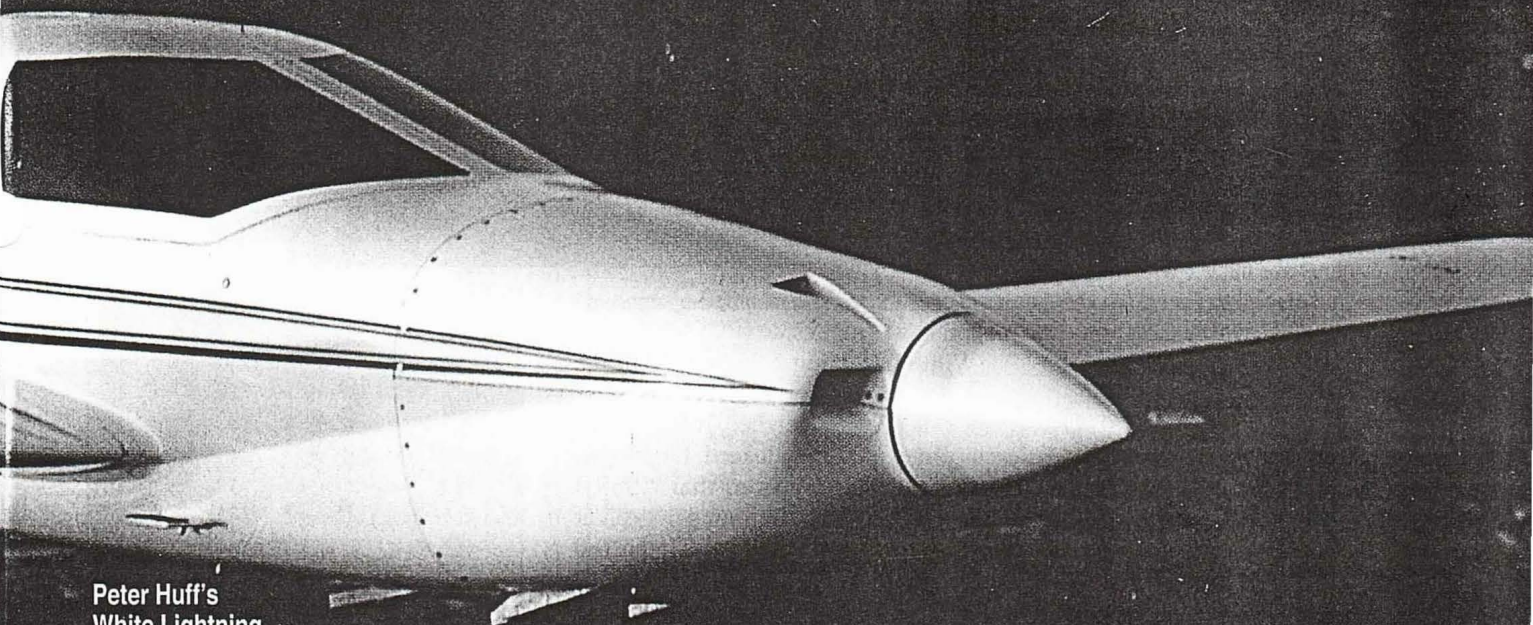
Crossing the Atlantic in a single-engine light air-

craft—even in the technologically advanced '90s—is still a challenge, and doing it in an aircraft you've built yourself is the ultimate accolade for aircraft design and workmanship not to mention the pilot's personal fortitude.

Fifty-nine-year-old Pete Huff of McKinney, Texas, CEO of a pneumatic micro-solenoid company called Dynamco, recently entered the ranks of these trans-Atlantic adventure fliers. Together with colleague Terry Godsey, Huff crossed the Atlantic both ways during the spring of '95 in his immaculate White Lightning homebuilt. The duo toured Europe and arrived back in McKinney within minutes of the schedule they'd set for themselves prior to their 10,000-mile, 64.5-flying-hour epic.

Lightning

Huff, left, and Terry Godsey had few problems and many good times on their across-the-pond flight.



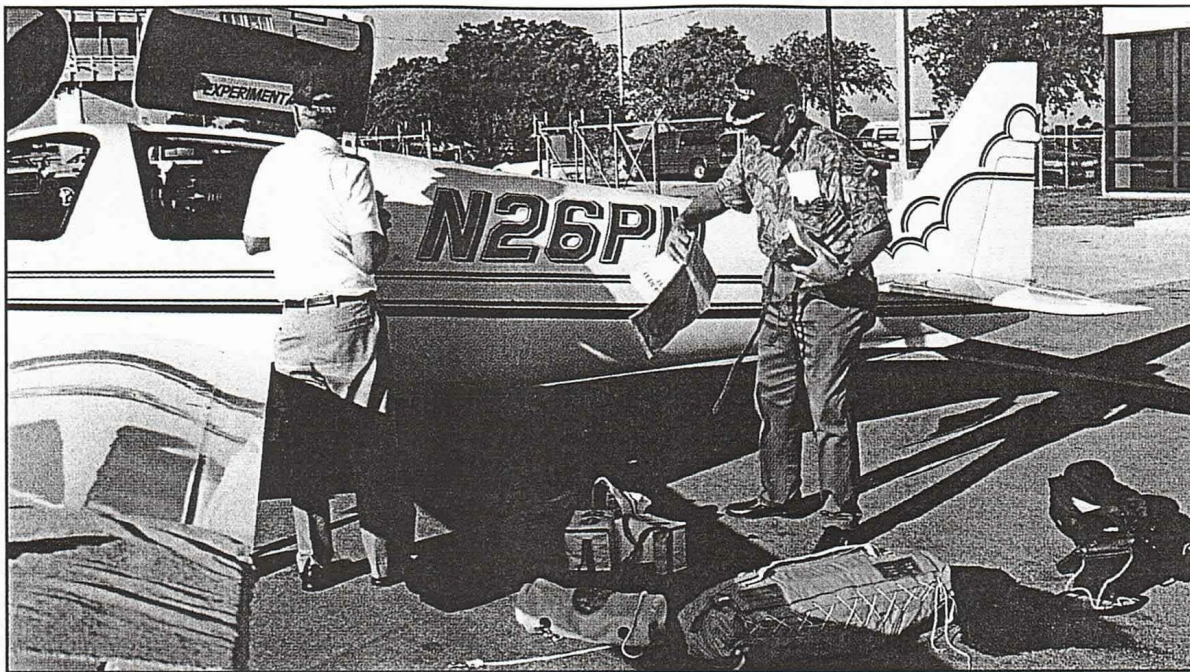
Peter Huff's White Lightning served its crew well on a round-trip, U.S.-to-Europe adventure.

Huff and Godsey land at Guernsey, Channel Islands, to cap their first leg after reaching Ireland.



PHOTOS: GEOFFREY P. JONES AND PETER HUFF

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Huff and Godsey load water-survival gear in the plane before its departure from McKinney, Texas.

Pete Huff stands near his White Lightning with the Shannon, Ireland, airport terminal in the background.

White Lightning

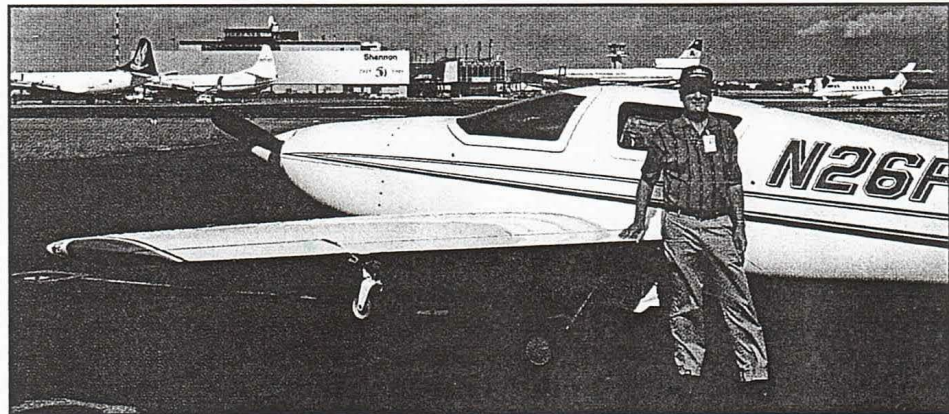
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The Man and the Kit

Huff first flew a J-3 Cub, then moved to a Luscombe. In 1983 he traded up to an A-36 Bonanza. But it was his 1986 visit to Oshkosh that interested him in homebuilt aircraft. The adventure started when he saw Nick Jones' sleek, composite, four-seater: the White Lightning. Huff's business commitments are nation-wide in the United States and extend to Europe, so he wanted a kit airplane with a 3500-mile non-stop range and a cruising speed of more than 200 mph. The White Lightning fit the billet. With 63-gallon auxiliary fuel tanks, the composite speedster would not exceed its design gross weight of 2600 pounds; it had an economy cruise of 215 mph, and it would facilitate most reasonable long-distance flights.

The kit was delivered in McKinney in 1987, and by 1988 Huff was starting to plan a trans-Atlantic flight from Texas to Europe and back. By 1993, when the White Lightning first flew, approximately 6000 hours had been devoted to building the airplane with about a quarter of this time contributed by three of his employees at Dynamco—at least 1000 of those hours were devoted to surface preparation prior to painting!

A normally aspirated, fuel-injected 210-hp Continental IO-360 was fitted to the White Lightning and the four critically important fuel tanks provided 127 gallons capacity: 68 in the wings and the remaining 59 in the auxiliary tanks, which are designed to replace the two



rear seats and can be installed or removed in about 30 minutes.

White Lightning N26PH met all the U.S. regulations for flight in the standard category: It weighed 1600 pounds empty and 3000 fully loaded. Flight tests at gross weight showed that N26PH cruised at 190 knots, burning 10 gph at 75% power, and at 65% cruise it did 180 knots using only 9.2 gph. That meant it had a 14-hour endurance or a 2500-n.m. range. For Huff, that meant "Europe, here we come!"

Trip Planning and Good Advice

Planning for the flight centered on information Huff was able to garner from others who had made the flight in light planes. Donn Kerby of Globe Aero in Florida was especially helpful. Kerby had made 299 Atlantic and Pacific Ocean crossings.

In the meantime Huff gained long-distance experience in the White Lightning with flights to the Cayman Islands, Alaska, Washington State, New England and Mexico. Long-time friend and flying partner Terry Godsey from Carrollton,



An official welcome by the president of Guernsey's tourist board was made in town.

Texas, and veteran of many long-distance flights in A-36s to Central and South America agreed to join Huff as copilot for the flight to Europe.

Equipment aboard N26PH included full IFR instrumentation with two glideslopes, three GPS receivers (one in the radio stack and two handheld battery-powered backups), autopilot, Stormscope, moving map with a European database, engine analyzer, ELT, high-frequency radio and trailing-wire antenna, life raft, survival pack and the latest in survival suits. Huff said just before leaving Texas, "If we have to ditch the plane, it would be dangerous, but at least we are as ready as could be expected."

Departure

Saturday July 8, 1995, was the day set for departure from McKinney Municipal Airport. Seventy-five friends and relatives gave Huff and Godsey a party-style send off as N26PH lifted off for Bangor, Maine. Initial IMC and thunder-storm avoidance over Tennessee changed to beautiful VFR; the White Lightning was performing perfectly apart from a small hydraulic system leak, and 8 hours later they touched down in Bangor. That was just an hour less than the Atlantic crossing time, the plane was very comfortable, and Terry declared that the Atlantic crossing would be "a piece of cake."

Sightseeing the coast of Maine was followed on Monday, July 10, by an investigation of the cause of the hydraulic leak. After much thought and several telephone calls, the problem was established: It was a badly fitting O-ring on top of the hydraulic pump. Once this was fixed, they were ready to leave for Moncton, New Brunswick, in Canada for inspection and authorization by the Canadian authorities for the Atlantic crossing.

Kerby had said that the Canadians would accept a lengthy telephone briefing, but when they called for it, they met resistance until they dropped Kerby's name. It pays to have connections. On Tuesday July 11 Huff and Godsey took off from Bangor en route to Gander, Newfoundland. "There's only one reason people fly in to Gander," Huff said, "and that's preparation for or arrival after a trans-Atlantic flight."

First Crossing

The adrenaline was really starting to pump at Gander as they checked the weather, fueled, preflighted the White



White Lightning

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Lightning, filed a flight plan, and then rechecked everything. The plan was to use the 50 North routing rather than a great circle route because of a large low-pressure system west of Ireland. This meant flying to 50° North latitude, 50° West longitude and then turning to fly the 50° North parallel before turning northeast direct to Shannon, in Ireland.

At 0730 local time on Wednesday, July 12, N26PH lifted off from Gander at its full gross weight. After 18 minutes they were at 11,000 feet, and tuning to Gander Radio they were advised to call on 8906 kHz if they lost VHF radio reception. It would be the first big test of the HF radio. At first they had a little trouble with a mismatch of the impedance of their headsets and the HF output. Troubleshooting, they set the HF to Speaker and, wham, they had Gander radio on HF. "We were in business," Huff said.

The Isle at Rainbow's End

Despite predictions of IFR they found themselves between layers in smooth air making 185 knots with a 5-knot tailwind. At 65% percent power in cruise, the IO-360 was burning 9 gph, so that meant 14 hours endurance for a 9-hour flight time estimate to Shannon. Over the ocean the engine sounded better than ever. According to Huff, there was no "instant rough" and spirits in the White Lightning cockpit were high.

Fuel management occupied much of Huff's time while Godsey concentrated on navigation. About two-thirds of the way across and in cloud, ice started to build on the leading edges of the wings. A quick descent remedied this as the

Huff and Godsey are surrounded in a foreign land. They won an award at the French RSA fly-in at Moulins.

clouds cleared. They again climbed to 11,000 and the counter-clockwise winds around the low pressure gave them a boosting tailwind as they reached the next waypoint and started northeast to Shannon.

Broken clouds and light rain were their welcome as they descended. Like a story-book ending to a fantasy adventure, a rainbow appeared as they made their approach to the Emerald Isle. Flying through a light mist at 9 hours and 14 minutes flying time saw the tired but ecstatic crew touch down safely in Europe. Everything had worked to perfection.

Meeting European Freinds

After a rest day in Ireland, the next leg was southeast to the Channel Island of Guernsey where they could purchase the cheapest avgas in Europe, check out the Guernsey Aero Club, and where I could meet these intrepid aviators.

A hectic schedule saw Huff and Godsey headline news on the front page of the local paper, interviewed for radio, receive a civic reception at the local Tourist Board, and as it was July 14, Bastille Day in France, they became honored guests at the Aero Club's Bastille Day Party.

Huff and Godsey were by now getting used to the European controller idiom and flight procedures. Huff declared later, "We were literally in a new aviation world. Although all the controllers we contacted spoke excellent English, they spoke their native language to the native pilots, so we knew what they were saying to us but not what they were saying to the locals!"



Huff and Godsey snuggle up in the cockpit of N26PH. Flight time for the journey was nearly 65 hours.

The flight from Guernsey to Duxford, in the heart of the rolling English countryside close to Cambridge, was the next leg. They were headed for the Saturday Fighter Collections Flying Legends Airshow, the biggest warbird event in Europe. Domesticity was the order of the day on Sunday with laundry chores interspersed with sight-seeing around the dreaming spires of Cambridge University and the River Cambridge. On Monday it was time to leave England for the short flight at Rotterdam in The Netherlands for some business with Huff's European Sales manager.

Wednesday morning and a 1-hour flight brought the White Lightning to Paderborn in Germany for a meeting with Huff's German distributor Franz-Josef Wittoch and one of his customers, Helge Pietch who's building an Aero Designs Pulsar. The trip plan called for changing the IO-360's oil at Paderborn. Helge had arranged a hangar as well, and using the White Lightning's quick-drain system, the task was completed in 20 minutes. Thursday was mostly a business day, but there can't be all work and no play so Huff and Godsey were driven to the small airfield at Detmold for some flying in a motorglider and a winch-launched high-performance sailplane.

On to France

The next day after Helge had been given a short flight in the White Lightning, it was time for Huff and Godsey to prepare for the sixth country on their European tour: France. The realities of European flying were starting to manifest themselves: landing fees, parking fees,

navigation fees, noise fees and worst of all at the fuel pump: Avgas was \$6.50 per gallon!

Even as they taxied for takeoff at Paderborn, the hassles weren't over as an airport authority car sped out in front of them and a man jumped out waving a red flag and led them back to flight operations. Because of the language barrier, Huff is still unsure what the problem was but thinks it might have been their request for an irregular routing. A 45-minute delay saw them finally to a hot-start and they were off, flying over the River Rhine and on toward Moulins in central France for the big Réseau du Sport de l'Air (RSA) international home-built fly-in. (See Geoff Jones' article on the RSA event in the January issue.)

Moulins on Friday was hot—up to 106°F. Purchasing Perrier at \$5 for a small bottle, they were starting to understand a bit more about the costs of living in Europe. But in these temperatures and with no air conditioning, what's an American flier to do but pay?

Despite the higher prices, Huff said that Moulins was another high point of the trip: There were 700 unusual and fascinating aircraft, many of them home-builts and kit airplanes, despite the language barrier (helped considerably by the English-speaking Frenchman Jean Barritault). Huff told me as I fought my way through the crowds surrounding the White Lightning at Moulins, "Aviation people are the greatest in the world. It doesn't matter what language you speak or who you are, they're always friendly and helpful."



Huff and Godsey fill the auxiliary tanks at Santa Maria in the Azore Islands before their second trans-Atlantic flight to St. John's, Newfoundland.

White Lightning

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Nice Demo! However...

The Saturday afternoon flying demonstrations at Moulins had to be curtailed due to the onset of cool, wet weather—but not before Huff had time to show off his White Lightning as it streaked along the flight line at 261 mph. After landing the flight director called Huff on his handheld radio: "Nice demo Mr. Huff. Trouble was, you were supposed to be at 100 meters, not 100 feet!"

With an award for "RSA '95 Best Non-European Homebuilt" stowed in the baggage, Sunday July 23 saw Huff and Godsey heading southeast at 10,000 feet overflying the foothills of the Alps before making a rapid descent into Geneva, Switzerland. Although light aircraft using this busy international airport are supposed to use the short parallel grass runway, Huff and Godsey's IFR charts didn't show this. Still it's not everyday that two 747s and a 727 are put into holding for such a sleek and pretty homebuilt!

Albert Altheer, who's built a White Lightning in Switzerland, met them at Geneva. An interesting sidenote to Altheer's project was that the Swiss Authorities would not issue a Swiss Permit to Fly for his aircraft. In great frustration he had the plane shipped to the United States, where it is certified as an experimental. Altheer now takes most of his holidays in the United States where—you've guessed it—he flies the pants off his expatriot White Lightning!

Flying the Alps

All the thrills and spectacles of the Alps: chalets, Alpine meadows, glaciers, craggy rock faces, hidden lakes and ravines and the snow-covered Mont Blanc, at 15,771 feet (the highest mountain in Europe) all in crystal clear air were the rewards on Monday July 24. Huff foresook the White Lightning for a Cessna 182 owned by Altheer's friend Rene Rothen on a never-to-be-forgotten

day trip through the Alps to Ascona in Northern Italy. "Rothen knew the Alps like the back of his hand," Huff said. "Often it seemed like our wingtips were only a few feet from the rock faces of the mountains. That day alone made all the work of building, testing and flying the White Lightning worthwhile. It was beauty beyond belief."

Portugal and Beyond

After Geneva, it was time to start heading west and at 10,000 feet, first over France and then in some rough air over the 8000-foot high Pyrenees toward Porto in Portugal. Refuelled and wearing their survival suits again—the first time since Guernsey—they were in the air the next day, Wednesday July 26 and making for the volcanic island of Santa Maria in the Azores, which although 5 hours flying time away across the Atlantic, is still a domestic flight as the island is Portuguese. The deserted acres of concrete at Santa Maria Airport are a remnant from WW-II, and the White Lightning looked lonely on the ramp. Fastidious checks were carried out here to ready the crew for the 9-hour-plus westerly Atlantic crossing, battling almost certain headwinds. The tanks were filled to capacity before Huff and Godsey retired to town to replenish their own tanks with some locally caught fish and a good night's rest ready for Thursday morning's flying.

Drizzle and fog greeted them as they arrived at Santa Maria Airport. Thirty-five-knot headwinds at 24,000 feet were forecast, so they calculated about 17 knots at 10,000 feet. Even at 110 knots groundspeed over the Atlantic, they calculated they'd still have an hour's fuel reserve on arrival at St. John's, Newfoundland.

Newfoundland Bound

After takeoff the White Lightning climbed to 10,000 feet and met headwinds of 30 knots. But a quick calculation showed that even in these conditions they'd have a 3.5-hour reserve. The

next problem was the HF trailing wire antenna: They later discovered it had snapped off! VHF contact was maintained during the crossing aided by trans-Atlantic airliners using 131.8 MHz or the emergency frequency of 121.5.

The elation of approaching the North American continent again subsided to frustration as the St. John's weather came through as awful: a 200-foot overcast and two other aircraft in front of them making missed approaches. With more than 3 hours fuel left it was an easy decision to divert to their alternate, Stephenville in western Newfoundland. Breaking out at 600 feet on an ILS approach to Stephenville, the elation was back as they touched down 10 hours and 30 minutes after takeoff from Santa Maria. They had nearly done it! They'd certainly done the worst parts, a two-way crossing of the North Atlantic in a kit airplane!

Homeward!

On Friday July 28 they flew from Stephenville, overhead Moncton at 10,000 feet leaving Canadian airspace behind, and they were on to Bangor, Maine, to keep U.S. Customs happy. Bureaucrats satisfied, they kept on trucking, stopping for the night in Nashville, Tennessee. With perfect weather, the last hop on Saturday July 29 back to McKinney was a breeze. At 10:55 a.m. local time, they touched down and came to a stop in front of a reception party of 40 family and friends at exactly 11:00.

It was a triumphant and emotional welcome with hundreds of photos, newspaper reporters, and videos running wildly. "It was really great to be home, the end of a dream," Huff and Godsey said. In three weeks they'd visited 10 countries, spent \$2186 on fuel and \$500 on landing, parking and navigation fees. They had made friends all over Europe. Six years of building, four years of planning and two years of test flying had seen the White Lightning perform flawlessly. Pete Huff and Terry Godsey had completed a never-to-be-forgotten adventure of a lifetime in a homebuilt airplane. **KP**

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the White Lightning, contact Nick Jones at White Lightning Aircraft Corp., 179 Aviation Ave., P.O. Box 497, Waltherboro, SC 29488; call 803/549-1800.

The author would like to thank Huff and Godsey for their help with this article. —Ed