

FERRY FLIGHT TO CHINA



📍 Shanghai Hongqiao Airport

📍 Guam

📍 Pohnpei, Micronesia

TWO PILOTS ON THE ODYSSEY OF A LIFETIME

BY MARK PHELPS



Tracy, California



Hilo, Hawaii



American Samoa

ONE OF THE ITEMS on many a pilot's bucket list is an ocean crossing. Romantic images of Charles Lindbergh, Wiley Post, Douglas "Wrong Way" Corrigan—even Amelia Earhart—flicker through our imaginations like old newsreel footage. It's true that the very thought of 15 or more hours of immobility can be enough to cause cramps in our backsides. But the mental visions of endless miles of ocean in daytime, unlimited starlit sky at night, and stunning sunrises and sunsets in between are enough to spark the yearning to tackle one of aviation's most profound piloting challenges.

At the Asian Business Aviation Conference & Exhibition (ABACE) in Shanghai, China, last April a Beechcraft Baron twin and Bonanza single were on display, and were the first piston airplanes ever to grace the ramp at the show. And they didn't make the trip to the other side of the planet in a container ship. The two-pilot aerial odyssey started at the factory in Wichita, Kansas.

Ferry pilots Chelsea "Abingdon" Welch and Jerry Clark flew from Wichita to Tracy, California (KTCY)—a staging flight would itself be a daunting undertaking for most pilots. At Tracy oversized ferry fuel tanks were installed in the cabins and front passenger seats. The Bonanza held a total of 268 gallons, the Baron about 400. That meant that Abingdon and Jerry were taking off at approximately 30 percent above maximum gross weight, allowable under the FARs for a mission such as this. Naturally all runway length and takeoff calculations are critical. Jerry and Abingdon took off from Tracy and left the California coast on April 3.

"Ferry pilots are different," said Abingdon. "It's a unique type of flying, and the pilots don't fit the same mold as airline or corporate jobs." She politely stopped short of saying that ferry pilots are rogues or renegades, but left the distinct impression that even if a free spirit isn't required, it probably helps. But it takes free spirits with an amazing capacity for discipline, detailed planning, and skill. "It's the hardest flying you can imagine," she said. "The pilot is responsible for everything: flight planning, weather, communications, overseeing the installation of the tanks and HF [high-frequency] radio equipment, survival gear, and so forth."

Jerry Clark came by his expertise via a long professional piloting career. His life experience includes stints flying canceled checks, freight, and jet charters. With his partner Robin Leabman, he co-founded Windward Aviation in 2010, a ferry specialist that flies under contract with Beechcraft. At the time of the Shanghai trip the company had performed more than three dozen missions, covering Europe, Africa, the Atlantic, and several Pacific crossings. "I can stay at home and

teach people to fly, but this is more exciting," Jerry said. He explains that Windward is getting busier, and for anyone interested and qualified, he's looking for pilots.

Abingdon flies ferry flights for the adventure of it, really. At age 29, she displays wisdom and business acumen well beyond her years. And her craving for the unusual goes way back. Even as a young girl she had set a goal of spending time living in an underdeveloped country. So in her third year of undergraduate studies at the



Refueling at Pohnpei International Airport in the South Pacific. Pilot Abingdon Welch's wry smile reveals some skepticism about the "security course" she was supposed to have taken to qualify for her credentials.





On the ramp in Shanghai, Abingdon Welch shows off the Bonanza she flew, and one example of the watches she's designed and markets for female pilots.



University of California, San Diego—with what may seem like an odd double major in film and psychology—she applied for a coveted spot with the Peace Corps. She was successful and received an assignment as a business development volunteer in Mbalmayo, a small town of about 60,000 on the shores of the Nyong River in Cameroon, Africa. She spent her time there working with two brothers in developing and operating a general store.

After her stint in Africa, Abingdon returned to California to address another of her youthful ambitions. “Ever since I was 14 I had followed the aviation industry. At one point I wanted to start an airline—one of those ambitions you have as a teen,” she said. It’s not such a foregone conclusion that all 14-year-olds have visions of starting an airline, but Abingdon is probably well beyond average in many ways.

When she decided to learn to fly she visited several Southern California flying schools with three questions: “How long will it take?,” “Is there a way to cover the cost?” and “Can you offer me a job?” Her bold, up-front approach secured an

internship at one of the schools, and after getting the appropriate ratings she began performing flight instruction. Stints as a demonstration pilot for Cirrus and some work as a delivery pilot followed, which led to her interest in long-distance ferry flying.

Along the way her business ambition kicked in when she took a fancy to the pilot watches worn by some of her male instructors and fellow students. “I thought they were really cool, and I wanted one of my own. But I found they weren’t available for women.” That was all she needed to hear. Starting in 2006 she launched The Abingdon Company, contacting watch designers and manufacturers to come up with a line of pilot watches for women.

It has become a half-million dollar business that she says is largely self-sufficient. She said, “Now, after the early years of building and sustaining the company, I’m able to focus on the part of the business I like best, which is coming up with new ideas for designs.”

On the China trip she and Jerry switched airplanes back and forth, flying the Bonanza and Baron in loose “SD, SD”

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formation (“same direction, same day”) from Tracy to Hilo, Hawaii (PHTO), a trip that took 12 hours, 54 minutes. This first overwater leg was the longest of the entire voyage without an alternate. Next, they took off from Hilo for American Samoa (NSTU), the longest leg of the trip in time at 15 hours, 32 minutes. The next stop was Pohnpei, Micronesia (PTPN), 15 hours, 12 minutes’ flying time; then Guam (PGUM), a “short” 5 hours, 48 minutes away.

What’s the greatest challenge on a 15-hour flight? No surprise here: “Boredom,” Abingdon said. But as with everything she does, from business practice to life planning, there’s a process. She said,

"The most important thing is to structure the day, just like a normal day. For example, I take great effort to make sure that the only thing I have to do in the morning before takeoff is perform my preflight inspection—and then go to the bathroom."

From there her daily routine is goal-oriented, largely based around meals. For example, after takeoff in the heavily loaded aircraft, it takes as much as an hour to get established in level flight at the cruising altitude of 6,000 feet. During that time, she is establishing communications with air traffic control and monitoring engine performance. After reaching cruise altitude there's checking fuel flow from all the fuel tanks (takeoff is performed on the regular fuel tanks, and only after reaching cruise altitude does she switch to ferry tanks), switching to the aft-most tank, testing high-frequency radios, and evaluating avionics performance. "All okay? Now it's time to get breakfast," Abingdon said.

One interesting trick Windward pilots use is to lay a towel over the throttle quadrant as a reminder whenever the airplane is drawing fuel from ferry tanks. It's just an easy way to help keep track of the complicated process of ensuring prudent fuel management.

Some other things about long-distance flying are still the same as when Lindbergh flew the Atlantic in his Ryan monoplane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*. Even though the flight instrument computers automatically stored all pertinent engine and performance data, Abingdon and Jerry still recorded hourly information on oil temperature, pressure, engine rpm, and more.

Abingdon said she subdivides her day into two- to three-hour segments. After breakfast the next segment leads into lunch, then the next to a snack before the last stretch to the day's destination airport. She and Jerry usually saved dinner for after their arrival.

And speaking of dinner plans, one piece of technology not dreamed of in Lindbergh's day has led to some creative and amusing ways to pass the time.

Abingdon carried a DeLorme satellite communications device, allowing her to stay in contact with not only mission coordinators, but also friends and family through Twitter and Facebook. That may



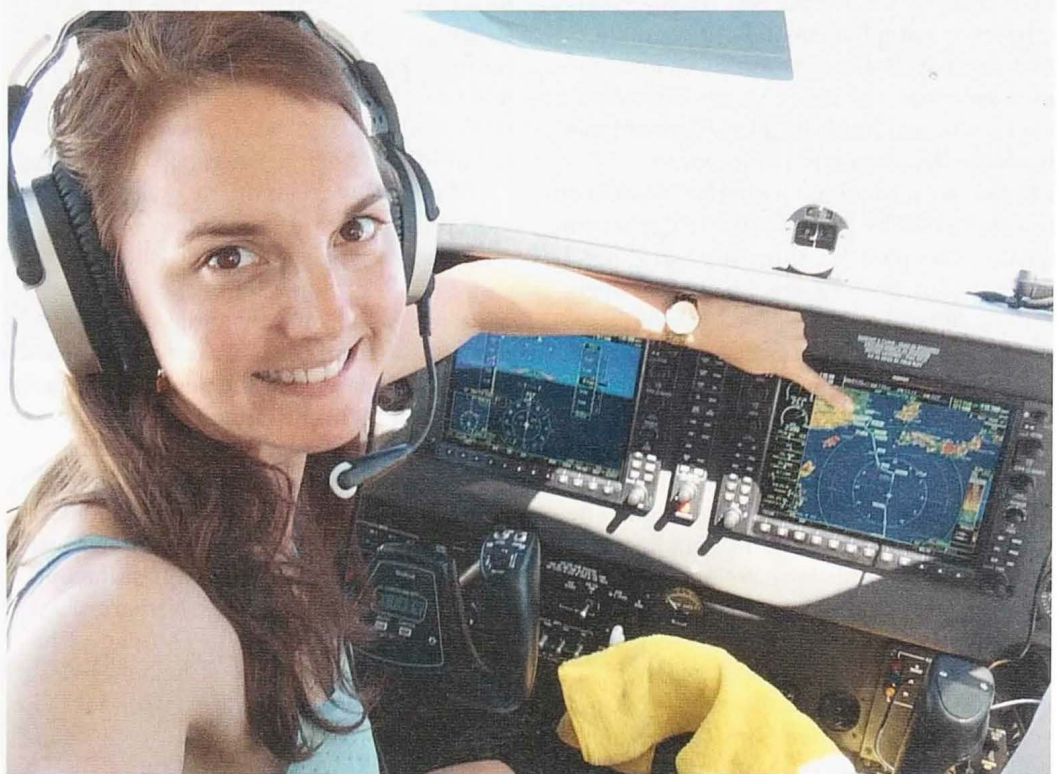
seem like the ultimate surrender to the current obsession with connectivity, but in fact it served a very practical purpose in combating what Abingdon identified as one of the most profound challenges to long-distance flying: boredom.

"After breakfast, I'd send messages to my family. Then I would set up 'competitions' on my Facebook page. On one trip I asked everyone to send me what they thought was their funniest joke, and at the end of the flight I would announce the

winner," she said. Abingdon would also ask for recommendations on what and where to eat at the next destination. "I was getting random messages and recommendations on restaurant choices from all over the world," she said.

Other ways to pass the time included monitoring 121.5 for emergencies and chatting with airliners on designated air-to-air frequencies.

The final leg was Guam to Shanghai Hongqiao International Airport (ZSSS)—



Abingdon Welch points out the final destination of her odyssey—Shanghai, China. Note the towel over the throttle quadrant. It's a way for ferry pilots remind themselves when they are operating on auxiliary fuel tanks.

14.5 hours on the wing. That included a hold of an hour and a half for the clearance to enter Chinese airspace to be sorted out. But once inside the country's airspace, Abingdon explained that the handling from ATC was excellent. "It was just like flying in the U.S.," she said, "except that altitude is given in meters, but that wasn't too hard to figure out." She received vectors for the ILS approach to Runway 18L, entered a right crosswind leg, and flew an easy right pattern. "It was one of my best landings of the trip," she said. The arrival of the Baron and Bonanza marked the first time piston aircraft had appeared at the mainland China airport in recent memory.

After the ABACE show the pair continued on to Japan and then to Taiwan, where the Bonanza and Baron are based for owner Pacific-China Aero Technology (PCAT), an aircraft management and service company based in Beijing. Jessica Wang, executive of GA marketing and sales for PCAT, said the aircraft are available for sale, and PCAT has another Bonanza and Baron coming from Wichita.

Those two will likely be based in mainland China, perhaps in Beijing where there is growing pressure to expand the role of light aircraft. She said PCAT believes there is a clear future for piston aircraft in the region, and the appearance of the Bonanza and Baron is one step in the journey to further stretch the airspace restrictions.

"People will see these airplanes here at ABACE and recognize their potential," she said at the show. "Possible customers may go back to other regions and ask officials about the possibilities of further expanding airspace." Jessica explained that the recent move to open up airspace up to 1,000 meters (about 3,280 feet) is a step in the right direction, and the appearance of the two Beechcraft at ABACE was another wedge in the move to further expand the utility of light aircraft. PCAT envisions medical flights as a first step, hopefully followed by additional roles as light aircraft become more visible in the region.

Jerry Clark said he hopes Abingdon, he, and other Windward pilots will find themselves retracing these routes on a more regular basis as time goes on.

"I CAN STAY AT HOME AND TEACH PEOPLE TO FLY, BUT THIS IS MORE EXCITING," JERRY SAID.

And if boredom is one of the most profound challenges in this type of flying, its ravages are more than offset by the stunning experiences of cloud, sky, sunsets, and sunrises. Abingdon said, "They say you have to fly through a storm to earn the view of the rainbow. And if the long hours of boredom are the 'storm,' then some of the other experiences make up for it, and then some."

And yes, she has a favorite: "For some reason I think sunrise is even more beautiful than the sunsets. There's an unbelievable sense of calm in the way it unfolds. It was like watching a movie, but one of the most beautiful movies I've ever seen in my life. It makes the whole flight worth it." *EAA*

Mark Phelps, EAA 139610, is an aviation writer living in New Jersey. He is the former editor of EAA's *Vintage Airplane* magazine.



Jerry Clark, left, and Abingdon Welch, right, pose with two of the line technicians at one of their fuel stops.