

# How does that stretch of road look?

"AI, copy Billo?" "How does that stretch of road look?"

"Billo, copy AI?" "No good m'sieur, there's a SWER line running right beside it." "Nowhere near wide enough to put down."

This was getting past a joke. The sun was already beneath the horizon, and in the Ozzie tropical north, when the sun goes down it's like turning off a light switch. It was just inside civil twilight, except that there is no twilight. It was still light at 3,000' but the ground was very dark indeed. I needed a landing spot and I needed one now but the long straight uninterrupted road I'd been following all afternoon from Birdsville had suddenly turned into unlandable terrain. Where had that SWER line come from? We were miles from anywhere so it must service Bedourie or that big station we passed a few kilometers back.

It was too late to turn back and land at the station airstrip, although landing there by moonlight might be a better option.

I was flying the trike and AI was in one of the cars. He was my eyes for now, I had to trust him. He was the only other trike pilot. There were nine of us in four cars, but the other blokes either only flew hang gliders or they did not fly at all. I had to rely on AI.

"Billo, copy AI?" "We've found a stretch that looks OK". "It's a whoopdee hollow between two low hills, 500 metres long and no SWER or poles or trees". "We'll park the cars with their hazard flashers and headlights on, one on each hill." "Just land on the road between them."

"Copy that AI, have you in sight and can see the car lights OK." "Turn off the headlights on the far end vehicle or they'll ruin my night



vision." "And Al, you aren't parked in a cutting on the hill are you?"

"Negative, come in low over the car and you'll be right."

Shit! Haven't seen another car on this road all afternoon so where did this one come from?

Steady, I'm getting anxious to get down. It's all right; just do a go around till they've passed by. Ahh... It's OK, JOD has stopped them, told them there was an aeroplane making an 'emergency' landing. Not too far from the truth.

I wasn't sure about Al's call on the cutting, so I allowed myself a little leeway there, and just as well too. As the XT whistled over the cars I saw the cutting wall and low shrubs flash past beneath, then the road came up to meet me and we were down OK. A perfect landing with plenty of room to spare before pulling off in to a clearing and dropping the Cruze wing for the night. Time to eat, and then hit the swags. Only two more days till we got to Burketown, if nothing went wrong and the weather held. I'd be taking off again at sunup if we were going to make it to Cloncurry by tomorrow night. Better get used to the early rising anyway, we would have to be up at 05:00 every morning in Burketown.

Burketown! I had not been back since 1998. In fact, I thought that maybe I would never go back. I don't have the fever like some of them have it. But here we were, ten years after we first took the challenge, heading up to the Gulf to try and soar the majestic Morning Glory again. Ten years since Al and I and C'Mac and PK had first soared it in hang gliders. That created a lot of interest at the time and a few hardy souls set off to fly the wave as we had. But after bad seasons with few waves, and the logistic difficulties of getting to a place like Burketown, they faded away and only the die-hard motor glider pilots and powered harness hang gliders still came. C'Mac was gone too. Our great mate, succumbed to the 'Jimmy Dancer' five years ago. So the trip was a memorial to C'Mac and that pulled me there. Plus, I had a new Airborne XTC582 trike. I wanted to see how this would go on the trip, as a cruiser, as a tug plane and to soar it on the wave. Maybe I could get a 'record' myself. And it was ten years since I'd met Julie. I'd just got back from our '95 trip when I met her. I was keen for her to see the reality of the photo on our kitchen wall.

What IS this Morning Glory? For the scientists it is a soliton or undular bore. For the rest of us I can do no better than to quote scientist Doug

Christie on them;

The Morning Glory, a spectacular propagating roll cloud which frequents the sparsely populated southern margin of the Gulf of Carpentaria, is one of the world's most exotic and interesting meteorological phenomena. Morning Glories are frequently observed during the spring months near dawn over the southern Gulf area between Sweers Island and the remote community of Burketown in northern Queensland. They often appear in the form of one or more, rapidly advancing, rather formidable roll cloud formations which extend from horizon to horizon in a long arc as far as the eye can see. The cloud is usually about 3000 feet in depth with a base at about 1000 feet above the surface. On occasion, the base of the cloud may lie below 300 feet AGL and the depth may exceed 6000 feet.

The leading roll cloud in Morning Glory disturbances tends to be very smooth along the front and turbulent along the back. Subsequent cloud formations, if present, are nearly always turbulent and often appear only in the form of scattered lines of irregular cumulus.

Recent studies have shown that Morning Glory roll cloud formations often extend in length for over 1000 kilometres.

Despite their ominous appearance, they seldom produce measurable precipitation, but are almost always accompanied by a short-lived, but often intense, wind squall near the surface



which may be a potentially serious wind shear hazard for aircraft. Morning Glories propagate on average with speeds of about 40 kilometres per hour, but occasionally are observed to travel at speeds of over 60 kilometres per hour. Morning Glories tend to occur on a daily basis at Burketown over periods ranging from three to seven days in succession. 1

Apart from their amazing beauty, which no picture can do justice, what is interesting about the Morning Glory to pilots is the lift and potential for long distance soaring flights that the primary wave of the set offers. It is possible to soar the secondary waves sometimes, but best not to count on it.

Al and I started planning for this trip a year ago. Al has flown on and through the Morning Glory with a hang glider and soared on it with a trike. In fact, he was the first to soar it with a hang glider and a trike. I had flown it in a hang glider and flown through one in a trike. Neither of us was too keen to repeat the flying through part, but the fever to soar on them again was starting to creep up upon us. Our enthusiasm must have been slightly infectious (although Al is a doctor and should be able to treat that).

Since 1995 only one other free flying hang glider pilot had managed to soar a Morning Glory wave. It's just not that easy. Well, flying on them is easy enough usually; it's the *catching* one that is the difficult trick. Five extra HG pilots had come along with us on this road trip and another

one was flying up on an airline flight to meet us there. We were bringing both my trikes, so if we were successful then we would more than double the number of hang gliders and trikes that have flown on it.

We got to Burketown caravan park after dark on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September. Donny had flown in on the regular twice-weekly MacAir Metroliner flying bus service the day before. He was pleased to see us; we had brought his glider and harness. He had enjoyed the flight over from Cairns too, since it stopped off at Normanton and Mornington Island before Burketown. I was flying the trike up from the Gregory river crossing and, once again, I was caught out at sundown. I landed on the Gregory road and left the trike under the Brookdale station homestead verandah, 70 kms back towards Gregory Downs, with the promise that I would return for it in the early morning. I wasn't worried for the trike's safety. The huge homestead dog looked like it would eat any intruder, and had a vile temperament to boot. We set up permanent camp quickly and slept, dreaming of monster waves.

Let me tell you a little about the township of Burketown, Qld. It's got no traffic lights, no stop signs and two policemen. It's about 500Km from the nearest town of Mount Isa and 30Km inland from the mouth of the Albert River on southern coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Those 30 Km are tidal salt mudflats and they look like what I imagine the Martian surface looks like. The town population is about 250 and hasn't changed much in the ten years I've been going there. The Albert River winds past the town, and is free of sharks. The salt water crocodiles ate all the sharks, and they will eat you too. The locals have a saying; "you can put any part of you into the river that you can live without". The river is also full of barramundi, which is apparently a real delicacy, as well as bream and perch. At least, if you can't go swimming, you can go fishing. The weather that we want for good Morning Glory waves means that a Northeaster seabreeze will howl through the town all day from about 09:00 until sundown, filling the sky with Cu clouds and moisture. At least the seabreeze will bring the temp down from stove like to merely hot. Put up with the humidity, for it is a necessity for visible Morning Glories. The waves still come, but without sufficient moisture in the air to form the cloud you cannot see them. I can tell you, clear air waves can be dangerous.

There were no monster waves next morning, in



fact no waves at all, which was fine by me since I still had to fetch the XT. I gave the lads a cook's tour then headed for Brookdale with Greg. With Burketown airstrip finally in sight I reflected on the XT's cross country abilities. It ate up the kilometers in fine style and is a very comfy seat for the pilot and passenger. I had no shortage of willing bums to put in the passenger's seat on every leg of the trip up. I finally landed at BKT and taxied up to a couple of trees, the only ones on the airstrip. There are no hangars here, so it's tie me aeroplane down, sport, in whatever shade I can find. Shame about the tree sap and bird poo, but most of it washed out of the wing fabric later.

Next evening our beer bottles were wet with condensation. This is a good sign that there is enough moisture in the air for a wave cloud to form, and the following morning I stuck my hand outside the tent to the welcome feeling of wet dew on the grass. Not so welcome was the realisation that it was 4 AM. Al and I sat around camp until the others left to set up their hang gliders. We only had to go to the airstrip just before sunup to get the trikes so we really only need to rise at about 05:00. Geoff Pratt came over and said good morning. Geoff, the doyen of Morning Glory flying, now flies a PIK20E, a very slippery looking motor glider. A shadow crossed the moon and a wind squall blew 10 knots from the south. "Feel that Geoff, feels like a southerly wave to me?" Southerly waves are rarities compared to the common northeast waves, and I

didn't think this was a good sign. Still, we were in the trikes just before sunup and took off for the mudflats where the hang gliders were waiting for us. As soon as I was heading towards the coast I saw that old familiar shape on the horizon, backlit by the dawn glow. It was a wave all right and a good size one too. The others had seen it, and "buck fever" had hit. These normally competent pilots were making all sorts of mistakes. Costly mistakes.

We were split into three teams, two aerotow teams of two HG pilots and a car tow team of one pilot and one driver. I had Jason and Donny on my team. They were flying Airborne Climaxes and easily handled towing behind the slightly faster XTC. Splint and JOD were on Al's team. They were flying Airborne Stings and found it a bit easier towing behind the slower Buzzard. Jason was ready to go. "This'll be a long tow Jase, that wave is still 30Km away." "Do you want to go now?"

"Go Go Go" said Jase and we were off. After a couple of Km we were at 1,000' and Jase had a weaklink break. I could not understand why, the air and the tow were as smooth as silk, but he was descending to land at the car tow area. I headed back to get the next pilot. Al was having all sorts of problems with the second trike, and tempers were fraying. The tow release system had come out of adjustment and failed every time he tried to tow. Worse, the wet sandy salt mud had flicked up from the Tundra tyres and had delaminated the prop. Nothing for it, that trike had to go back to the airstrip until I could repair the prop blades. JOD was ready to tow behind Al, so he quickly jumped in front of Donny to clip on behind me. We towed out towards the wave for about 5 minutes, but it looked to me as though the wave had stalled on the coast, as they sometimes do, so I turned back. I waved JOD off tow and glided back to land. For some reason, he too landed with the car tow group who were set up a few kms further north than us.

"Splint, grab my movie camera and jump in the back seat. We'll fly out and get some footage at least." It seemed like it took us 20 minutes to get to the wave, by which time I realised it had not stalled. It was just bigger and further out than I had thought. Also, it was traveling a bit quicker than usual at about 35 knots. I could see the shadow eating up the Albert River. Splint captured some of the best footage of the waves that I have yet seen. "It was worth the price of admission just to see this" he said as we turned



back to start towing gliders again. I raced the wave back towards town, it's truly awesome to see a 3,000 foot high cloud stretching from horizon to horizon chasing you down, and the lower you go the bigger it looms. I landed to pick up Donny, the last remaining HG pilot on my tow team. Splint would have to get ready in his glider while I towed Donny.

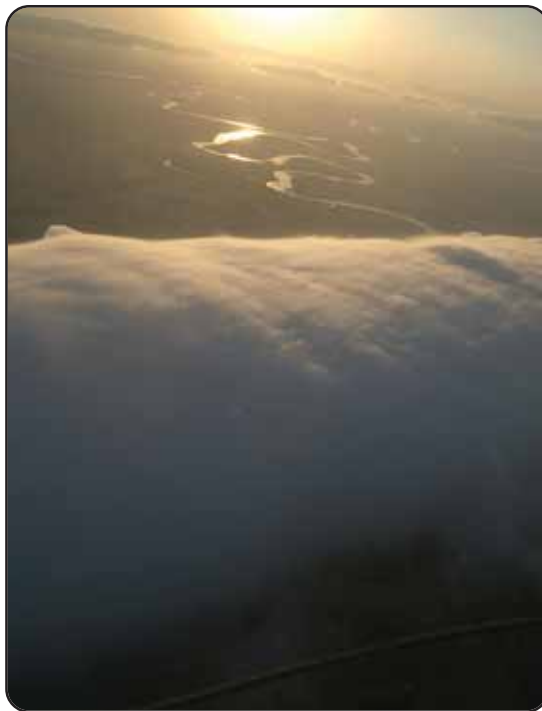
Donny and I were at 1,000', the wave towered over us blocking out the sun. This is heart in the mouth stuff, even though I knew the lift would be there. And there it was, the VSI started rising strongly and moments later I felt the trike bound forwards as Donny pinned off from the tow. I could see that it was too late to land again to tow Splint, the cloud had already passed over him, so I shut off the engine to soar the wave. Seems that only Donny and I would share this wave. Five minutes later the wave rolled over Burketown and the airstrip. I heard Al on the UHF. I thought he was calling from the ground. It took a little while for me to realise he was in the air, and, yes, there he is in the Buzzard. "Al, you know if you shut off in the Buzzard, you cannot restart in the air?"

"Yes I know..." and a few minutes later he shut off to soar as well. So, three of us on the first wave. Not nearly as good as it might have been, or *should* have been, but it was a start. And I was going to see how the XTC582 would fare as a soaring trike. This is no lightweight converted hang glider, but a heavy fully optioned aircraft. It was soaring like a thoroughbred, only a little lower than Donny in his topless HG and a fair bit above the lighter Buzzard with its much less efficient Wizard wing.

As we headed inland, sort of following the Doomadgee road to the west, it was apparent that the wave wasn't as big as it first appeared. Rather, it was an average size wave of about 2,500' and still traveling fairly fast at about 35 knts. There isn't any real problem to keep up with it though, just like surfing a wave in the ocean, it pushes you along with it to some extent.

Something that I had only seen before in pictures was happening here. A small southerly wave was traveling slowly perpendicular to the much larger main wave face and being pushed up over it. As I expected, the lift improved in front of the wave junction and it was slightly bumpy behind.

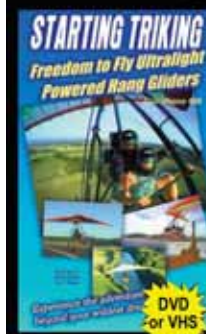
What was a slight problem was that the wave was moving more to the West, and pushing us towards Lawn Hill. It would be decision time at



Beames brook road junction, abort the wave and land on the road or continue into the trackless area towards Lawn Hill station. Well, I knew what I would do. I was going for a record and I had a motor to get me home. Best for Donny and Al to land though. It might be a long walk out from the scrub. We headed south west, towards Brookdale and Gregory downs. I had flown here two days ago, and was familiar with the country. I thought that would get the best distance for Donny. Once we got to the Gregory River he would have to land. If he got pushed west of the Gregory it might be a tough retrieve. There are no roads in that country, and no bridges over the river either. Al could land to the west of the river then restart the motor and fly back to the main road.

Brookdale passed beneath us. Decision time for Donny, and anyway, the cloud was thinning out in spots. We were over the Gregory River now, and every passing minute put another kilometre behind us. "Donny, copy Billo?" "Head back for Brookdale." "Go now, you will get a headwind, sink and turbulence behind the cloud so you don't have much time." I was greatly relieved to here Donny call that he had landed beside the main road with not a foot to spare getting there. Al called up, he was finding it harder to stay with the wave so he pulled out ahead and landed on a property track. Later on he told me, he waited for the wave train to pass then restarted and flew back over to land with

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Donny. The prop was so badly damaged he did not dare to risk flying it all the way back to Burketown.

I stayed with it for a while longer but the cloud was thinning out to patches of wisp and becoming difficult to follow. The cloud dissipates, but the waves move on towards the inland for vast distances. Their progress has been measured by microbarographs and it is known that they can travel hundreds of kilometres down into the interior of the continent. That was of no use to me though, so I flicked the magneto switches, hit the starter, and turned back to Burketown.

Morning Glories almost always consist of a train of waves, the primary is usually the largest, followed by a secondary, tertiary etc. As I flew back I slowly climbed to 7,000' but even at that height I was getting smooth lift as I approached each wave and turbulence and sink as I went over the top. Morning Glory waves perturb the atmosphere to over 10,000'. The wave train was still passing by long after I had tied the aircraft down under the tree on the airstrip, and the waves were followed by the usual howling seabreeze.

We had done it. We'd got HG pilot number 6 on to a wave. I had soared my XTC582 for 64 Km engine off, which has to be a 'record' of sorts. I hoped to better that but subsequent days saw me doing more HG towing and passenger carrying on the waves. My soaring flights were much shorter as I dashed back to pick up the next passenger. I tried flying back to Burketown *beneath* the waves at about 100' but that was probably worse than flying over the top. But some of those subsequent flights also brought me the high points of my trip, I got to soar a good wave with Julie in the passengers seat. She was understandably petrified as we flew on over

the Albert towards the coast at 1,000' with Jason on tow behind us, and the sun reddening the sky behind the looming cloud. She kept it together and used the camera to get some great shots. Then at sunup the next morning we flew to Gregory Downs, overtaking a set of clear air waves. As we overtook the waves, looking east towards the sun we could see their shapes formed in the haze, like serried ranks of soldiers marching. There are but a handful of people on the earth who have had the chance to share such things with their spouse, let alone see them for themselves.

Donny came in for a good deal of ribbing. There was an undercurrent of feeling that he had had things a bit easy and had not 'paid his dues' like the rest of us. He had flown up on airlines while the rest of us did it tough and drove and flew for eight days. He got the nickname 'orders last, served first' for this. But after the next two days I had towed all the aerotow crew except JOD onto a wave. The ground tow crew had each caught a wave and the general mood was ecstatic. JOD hurt his shoulder on that first tow and did not fly again this trip. That means that there are now ten free flying hang glider pilots and two trike pilots who have soared a Morning Glory. The HG record still belongs to C'Mac at 160km and the trike record is mine at 64km.

I'd like to get that trike record up a bit. I do believe at least 200km is easily possible on the right wave, and maybe much more than that. But I don't have the fever now, maybe in a couple of years. Or maybe you'd like to give it a try. Give me a call. I could be talked into helping you.

#### (Footnotes)

1 AOPA article from website <http://www.dropbears.com/brough/Aopa.htm> by Russell White and Doug Christie.

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