

Great ESCAPE

TAKE a group of pilots, three Russian tanks, sub-zero conditions, heavy snow and you get an interesting adventure

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PHOTOS David and Zan Blundell www.lovethecamera.com

NAME: KP
MACHINE: Yak 52
'YKYK' two-seater
HOURS FLOWN:?????
THOUGHTS: There was no Plan B – I had no spare brain capacity to consider what else might happen, I just had to fly



RUSSIAN FAN



"After flying a Russian aeroplane, everything else just feels flimsy and lightweight," says Tim Jinks, pictured above. "There's not many aircraft you can walk to the tip of the wing on and feel safe."

Yaks certainly embody the 'no nonsense' attitude to life portrayed in films set in Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War, where vodka was an essential tool for keeping warm rather than the basis of an overpriced cocktail. In the same spirit, aeroplanes designed and built in this part of the world do exactly what they say on the tin.

HA-YAK is a beautiful example and Tim is understandably still mourning her departure. "There's no doubt that it was a wonderful aeroplane," he says with a twinge of nostalgia in his voice. "Despite what people say about the fuel consumption it was a really super aeroplane. We've flown so many people at the airfield and they've all been absolutely thrilled!"

A WELL-known adage among pilots says the two best days of owning an aeroplane are the day you buy it and the day you sell it. For Tim Jinks, that sentiment has greater significance than for most. Recently married, he decided to sell his beloved Yak 18T at the end of last year and cleverly timed the aeroplane's departure for while he was on his honeymoon in an attempt to ease the pain.

The day he picked up the four-seat aerobatic tourer was equally poignant, as it involved an 1800nm round

trip to Lithuania with three fellow Yak comrades in treacherous conditions. Tim recently met up with some of them to reminisce on the trip that tested them to their extremes.

READY FOR COLLECTION

Flying out to Lithuania's main airport at Kaunas on a commercial flight, Tim was joined by fellow 'Yakker' Kevin Pilling 'KP', newly qualified CPL Giles Caunter and Yak ferry pilot Mark Jefferies. Their mission: to locate the Termikas maintenance facility at Pociunai airfield and collect one 18T, two 52s and plenty of spares.

Oh, and there was the small issue of making it back in one piece from Eastern Europe through snowstorms of "biblical proportions".

Nestled between Poland and Latvia, the Baltic nation of Lithuania is over 900nm from the group's final destination of Little Gransden, where Mark's business, Yak UK, is based. Notoriously thirsty, Yaks are built for functionality, with little emphasis on style or elegance. Suffice to say, the cross-Europe flight was not going to be the most comfortable experience but the rugged, dependable Yak would be

in its element.

"You can tell how strong a Yak is straight away," says Tim. "Everything is solid – the bulkhead, the spars, even how the seats are batonned out. It's built like a tank."

With the help of Mark, Tim had located a suitable 18T months earlier and a plan had been hatched to collect it. Mark's company had overseen the whole process, including a complete overhaul to Tim's spec. "I'd never flown an 18T before the trip and it was a long jaunt," remembers Tim who previously owned a two-seat Yak 52.

NAME: Tim Jinks
MACHINE: Hungarian Yak 18T four-seater
HOURS FLOWN: ????
THOUGHTS: You don't expect to lose your instruments but if it happens, you hope it'll be a sunny day with fields all around

NAME: Mark Jefferies
MACHINE: Hungarian Yak 18T with Tim
HOURS FLOWN: flight
THOUGHTS: TO ADD COMMENT FROM MJ



Tim's Yak 18T was in its element in the harsh conditions



At the Termikas facility in Lithuania – the place where Yak dreams are made



LITHUANIA

A sawn-down Yak 50 fuselage is used as a test bed at the Termikas facility, highlighting the "brutally functional" approach of the Lithuanian team. The wings are clipped just outboard of the undercarriage mounts and it's in almost constant use.

Termikas fitted out both 52s with 'wet wings' before the group's departure to allow for greater endurance. The main tanks are run down to 30 litres each side then auxiliary pumps are turned on to trickle-feed both main tanks until they reach 50 litres – ten litres short of being full. The system continues to refill the tanks, maintaining this

being sat next to Mark so it wasn't too bad for me."

Giles describes the situation, "In seconds, visibility had dropped to single figure metres, possibly centimetres. I radioed to report I'd lost visual contact with them and opted to climb rather than risk a mid-air collision or controlled flight into terrain."

With his attention focused on maintaining heading and attitude in dense cloud, Giles met snow pellets at 3500ft. He explains, "They coated the screen with 1.5 inches of ice in seconds – not that looking outside provided any clues. It was really rather scary."

Giles finally broke through the cloud near the

// IN SECONDS VISIBILITY HAD DROPPED TO CENTIMETRES //

level. Giving an extra 160 litres of fuel, the 52s could fly for a further three hours – essential for the flight across Poland.

Mark had already pre-warned the troops that under no circumstances would they stop in Poland. "He said to us that whatever the weather we were not to put down anywhere – apparently the Polish don't really understand GA and we wouldn't get the best welcome," explains Tim.

EXTREME CONDITIONS

With the weather forecast suggesting it was flyable, the trio of Yaks continued on their journey. Moving into Germany, however, the convoy began to experience treacherous flying conditions. A snowstorm arrived with a vengeance, rapidly turning from fluffy white flakes to seriously heavy snow. "At one point we lost Giles and he had to climb to a safety altitude," recounts Tim. "We were in radio contact but there was no way of seeing each other. I had the advantage of

destination airfield at Stadtlohn but still couldn't see out of the windscreen due to the ice build-up.

"I opened the canopy and tried to scrape it off but sub-zero 220+kph slipstream made it impossible."

While this was going on, KP was dealing with a nightmare of his own. His Artificial Horizon had developed progressively worse false indications, which suggested a 15-20 degree climbing right turn. Should an emergency have occurred, KP would have had to rely on his secondary instruments. "Then, in a commendably calm manner KP reported that he had also lost the use of his DI," adds Giles.

Also wrestling with high oil temperatures and frozen engine gills, KP battled to stay safe. "I was trying to stay in formation – luckily I've had plenty of training – but there was no Plan B. I didn't have any spare brain capacity to think 'what if'. The oil temp was going up and up and I couldn't do anything about it."

NOBLE HERITAGE

WITH a strong military pedigree, Yaks have been used historically for training Russian air force pilots. Earlier models, such as the single-seat Yak 9, were key players in the Second World War – some even saying this more attractive tailwheel version was as significant as the Spitfire.

The larger side-by-side four-seat 18T model however was used to train Aeroflot commercial pilots. Because of this heritage, the CAA had insisted that this model operate on the register of the country of importation. This is currently under review.

We have a healthy love for the Yak in this country – there are now over 100 on the UK register – and there is an almost cult following for the Russian type. With variants ranging from the single-seat Yak 55 tailwheel aerobatic competitor to the spacious 18T four-seat tourer, these big lumps of metal have captured the hearts of UK pilots.

TIME TO REFLECT

The reality of the situation really hit home once they was back on the ground. "It was a thought-provoking image – solid ice all over the gills, oil coolers, leading edge and spinners," Giles says.

The final leg, just 300nm the following day, passed without too much drama. After such a challenging flight the day before, Tim and admits it was a relief to spot the White Cliffs of Dover. Flying for that length of time across the barren snow was quite daunting but still a great learning experience.

"You can't plan for these things, if your instruments fail you hope it'll be on a sunny day with flat fields all around," Tim adds.

Reaching familiar terrain was certainly a comfort for the pilots. KP even admits once they were flying in more hospitable conditions, things didn't seem that bad after all...

Flying over snow-covered land made navigation tough



A team effort



Spare props – check!



An overnight stay was needed



The green fields of... Essex



Yak 52 prepares to leave



Tim introduces HA-YAK to its warmer new home in the UK