

Flying to the Morning Glory and flying it

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There is a cloud up in Queensland. It appears very early in the morning, on some mornings, for a few weeks every year, and it rolls across the Gulf of Carpentaria. It has a magic appeal for glider pilots and most of us have seen the videos or heard stories about it. It's called the Morning Glory and the lucky pilots who catch it can sometimes soar in front of it for several hours. I was a very lucky pilot and got to soar it twice, although only for less than one hour each time. However, I would not have minded if I had caught it only once, just getting up to Burketown had been a real adventure. I was very fortunate that Sandra Mitchell asked me to be her co-pilot on her flight to Burketown in her Super Ximango, VH-ZBN. The fact that I had a PPL and some navigation experience in addition to gliding was the main reason and it was a challenge I couldn't refuse. And then, I got to fly back to Lake Keepit as pilot in command of another motorglider, VH-XQX, a Grob 109 – another adventure. I enjoyed the whole trip enormously, and I also loved being up in Burketown, getting to the airfield before dawn and trying to catch a Glory with the few other pilots who had come up there in their various aircraft.

Sandra and I left Lake Keepit on Monday 22/09/03 in VH-ZBN. We were supposed to fly in tandem with the Grob 109, but they had to go to the coast first and we only joined them in Charleville on Tuesday.



Sandra Mitchell and her Super Ximango VH-ZBN at Charleville

On Wednesday, on our way from Charleville to Longreach, we had to land at Isisford (as a glider) with a dead battery and we spent several hours there to get it recharged. People at the Post Office and at the pub are very friendly in Isisford and we got all the help we needed, although they were not sure about letting us go with a dodgy battery and we had to convince them you don't need it in flight. However, the heat in the cockpit was too much for my flight computer, it melted and got so warped it could have passed for a work of modern art.



Dominique Estival at Isisford

We then rejoined the Grob in Longreach and had to wait there for a new regulator and a new compass while the Grob continued on to Burketown the next day. This stop-over gave me the opportunity to visit the Qantas Founders Museum and also to watch the process of swinging the new compass (very interesting). Sandra and I stayed with the very friendly local LAME in exchange for baby-sitting.



Longreach, QLD



Sandra, Dominique and VH-ZBN at Longreach Aircraft Maintenance

On Friday, we were late leaving Longreach and didn't make to Burketown that evening, but had to land and spend the night at Lorraine Station, where the owners were also extremely friendly and invited us to stay for the night. There was talk of a possible Glory the next morning so we went to bed early.



Stopping at Lorraine Station on the way to Burketown

This new delay turned out to be very lucky for us because, taking off from Lorraine at 6:00 Saturday morning, we did catch a Morning Glory about 25NM inland before we even got to Burketown. Meanwhile the Grob and another motor glider were looking for it further out to the NE and not finding anything.



Our first Morning Glory, front of rolling cloud, looking to the North



Our first Morning Glory, second rolling cloud, looking to the North

We stopped the engine and feathered the propeller and soared along that cloud for almost 40 mins and when it stopped working found ourselves 40 NM West of where we had started. The Morning Glory is actually a roll cloud, caused by some sort of wave effect (there are a number of theories about its formation) which rolls from the East early in the morning. On its front side the air is rising and allows you to soar as you would in front of a ridge. Just like in ridge soaring, you must take care not to get behind the crest, or you'll get caught in downdrafts which can be extremely strong and will send you quickly back towards the ground. The cloud base is quite low, only a few hundred feet, but the cloud can extend up to 10,000 ft. The ones I soared were lower, between 3,500 and 5,000 ft. The lift in front was only up to 3 or 4 on the vario, but we got a taste of the downdrafts and they were a lot stronger!

I then spent 3 days in Burketown, where I got endorsed on the Grob 109 for the trip back by Jim Stanley who had flown it from Lake Keepit – circuits in the afternoon were hard work in the heat!

Sandra and I were lucky enough to catch another Morning Glory on the morning I had to leave. We didn't take off early enough in the Ximango and we had to wait until the dark cloud rolled over the airfield a few hundred feet above us, an amazing sight.



The Super Ximango and Grob 109 waiting for the Morning Glory to pass overhead

Finally we were able to take off and went after it. We flew over the rolling cloud at 5,000ft and lost 1,000ft in a few seconds when we crossed it – thanks to those downdrafts.



Our second Morning Glory



Our second Morning Glory

This time, we soared for almost one hour before it disintegrated and we ended up even further West of Burketown. Back on the ground, we swapped pilots, my co-pilot on the way back was Graham Holland, the glider pilot who had flown the Grob up from Lake Keepit with Jim. Although we had very strong tailwinds all the way, it took us 3 1/2 days to get back to Lake Keepit. We had to wait out in Winton on Wednesday for the wind to abate a little: the Grob 109 can't take off in strong crosswind and 30kt gusting to 40kt was a bit much for it. So we visited the Waltzing Matilda Centre and played at the "world's only musical fence". On Thursday, we made it to St George before last light, but just... the sun was getting very low. Then it was only a 3 hour flight back to Lake Keepit, in the only patch of bad weather we had for the whole trip, dodging showers and thunderstorms.

This was a wonderful trip for me. Getting two Morning Glories out of four days in Burketown was very lucky and the whole experience of flying up there was amazing. The Ximango is a beautiful aircraft and the Grob is also quite pleasant to fly. Flying all the way back as pilot in command gave me a lot more confidence in what I could do and inspired me to do more long cross-country flights – but that's another story.

Some stats about that trip:

Distance flown: Lake Keepit – Burketown: ~1020 NM (roundtrip = 2040 NM)

Hours flown: Lake Keepit – Burketown, 15hrs; Burketown – Lake Keepit, 13.5hrs; plus 2 hours of soaring the Glory.

To know more about the Morning Glory: <http://www.dropbears.com/brough/index.html>