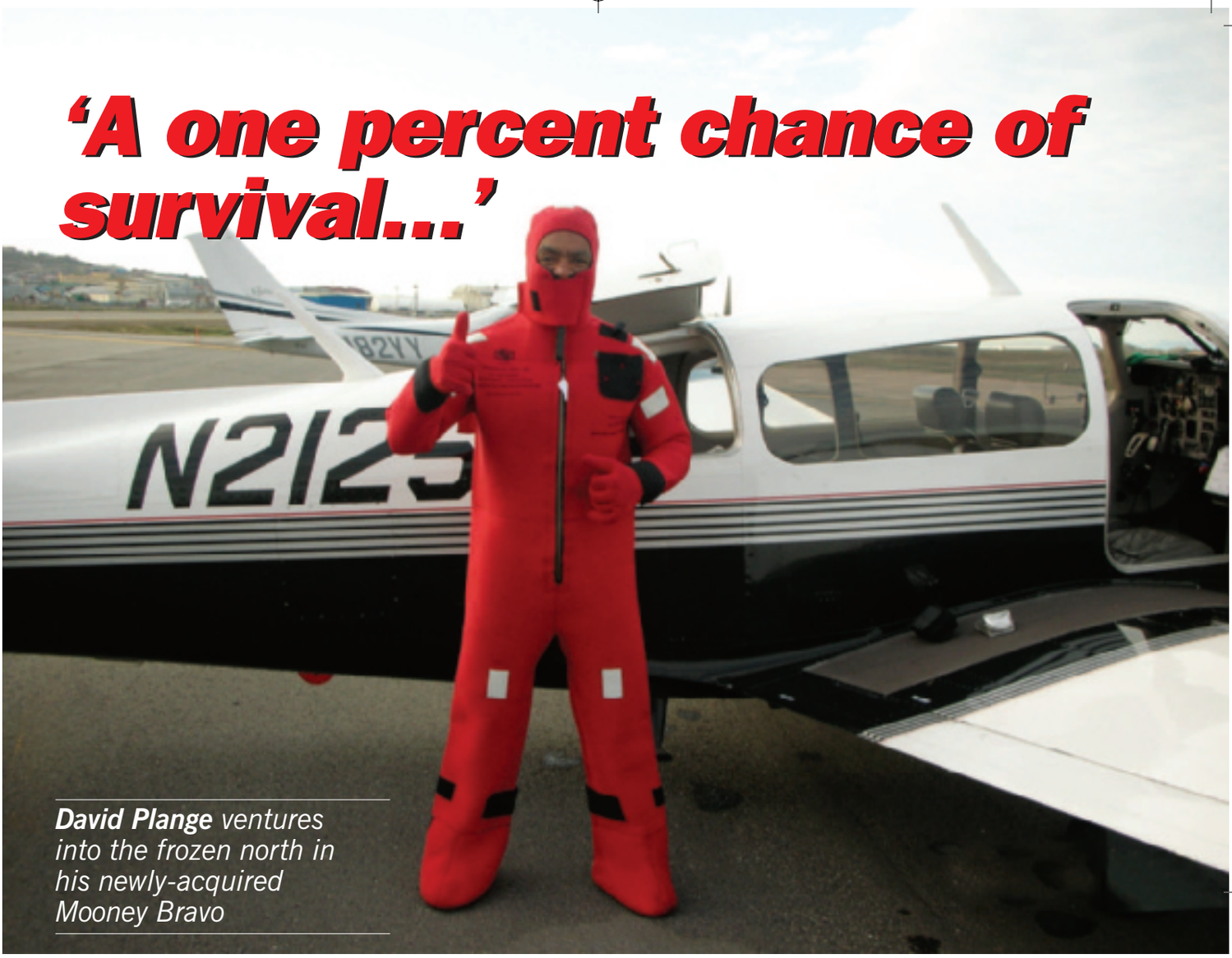
‘A one percent chance of survival...’



***David Plange** ventures into the frozen north in his newly-acquired Mooney Bravo*

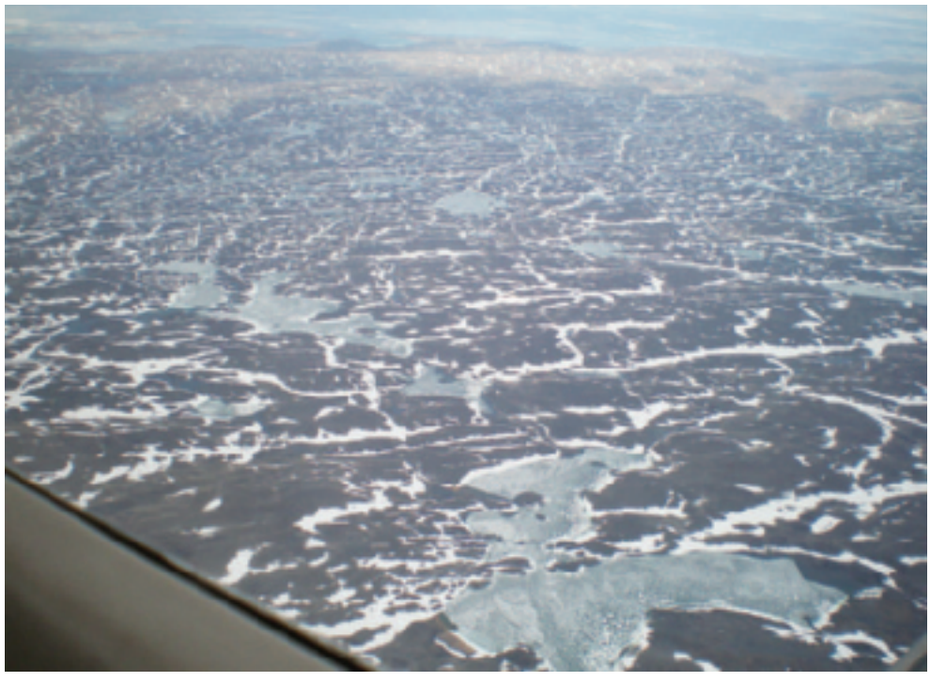
Well, the day had finally arrived for me to go and collect the new aircraft. There had been a few minor hiccups along the way but I was finally set to go. Andrew Knight and I had a few weeks earlier travelled to Portland, Oregon, to view the aircraft and we were originally planning to make the trip together, but unfortunately one of the hurdles had been an insurance issue and even though I had a current IR, the prerequisites for a one-off high risk insurance policy was a minimum of five Atlantic crossings. I managed to find a company in the States that would actually insure me to act as pilot-in-command as long as I had a ferry co-pilot, so that was the obvious choice – there was no way I was going to make the journey of a lifetime and not actually fly it. We had the aircraft repositioned to Willmar Air Services in Willmar, Minnesota to have a fresh annual carried out in lieu of a pre-purchase inspection. Of course, I wanted a fresh and comprehensive inspection from a recognised Mooney shop prior to trusting my life to the craft to carry us safely over some of the most hostile terrain known to man.

On the 5th July 2009 I boarded a Boeing 777 to Newark, New Jersey, then changed to a Continental city jet for the three-hour hop to Minneapolis St Paul, where I was collected by Signature Flight Support and taken to the GA terminal where Eddie, one of the pilot instructors at Willmar, was waiting to ferry me the 80 or so miles to Willmar. I checked in to a local Holiday Inn then went out to find a restaurant. Dana at Willmar had kindly arranged for me to have a courtesy car, which came in really handy. The next morning I was scheduled to do a familiarisation flight with Eddie and I met him bright and early at the

Top: ‘a one percent chance of survival is better than no chance’
Right: Mooney Bravo can get above the weather and still deliver 220 knots

Mooney Bravo			
Horsepower:	270 hp		
Range:	1,050 nm	1,945 km	1,208 mi
Cruise:	220 kts	407 kmh	253 mph
Climb:	1,230 ft/min	6.2 m/sec	
Ceiling:	25,000 ft	7,620 m	
Gross Weight:	3,368 lbs	1,528 kg	
Empty Weight:	2,268 lbs	1,029 kg	
Useful Load:	1,100 lbs	499 kg	

airport to get airborne. Although this wasn't required, I thought it good practice to get some time in on the aircraft I was to fly across the Atlantic a few days from now. I had Mooney time as our last aircraft was a 252 but I hadn't flown one of the long bodies before. I much preferred the layout of the Bravo and the handling gave the illusion of being in a much larger aircraft. The biggest positive difference was the landing characteristics. The 252 was a floater, and smooth landings required full attention but the long-bodied Bravo was a completely different and more pleasant proposition - it just sits down gracefully onto the runway. After an hour, we had covered everything that I or the instructor felt needed attention. That evening I drove to Minneapolis to collect Dustin Rabe, who had responded to an advert I had put on pprune. I had quite a lot of interest and price variants for someone to sit along side me – these ranged from $2,000 to $15,000. Yes, fifteen thousand dollars. I had been impressed with the correspondence I had from Dustin and it was good to finally meet him. Next morning we travelled together to view the aircraft. He was used to ferrying 172s across the pond and told me a few interesting stories. One of his recent trips had involved flying a 172 with ferry tanks which



made the front seat a little uncomfortable; from Tampa non-stop to the Azores. The trip was a mammoth 17 hours, with an unserviceable autopilot.

Bright and early on Wednesday 8th July we checked the aircraft out carefully and filed IFR direct to Chippewa Sault Ste Marie. It amazed me how we could file a direct routing and have the flight plan accepted. Things are so much more complicated on our side of the pond. N2125K roared down the runway, rotated at 65 knots and climbed strongly all the way to 10,500ft where I leaned her back and then played about with a few different settings to work out what sort of power and economy we could expect for the trip. One of the main considerations I had had in preparation for this trip was whether to invest in some long range tanks, but I couldn't get it to make financial sense just to avoid stopping in Greenland, so I paid more attention to the routing and decided to go further north and cross via Iqaluit. This also saved the hassle of having HF wires attached temporarily to the aircraft; HF radio is required out of Goose Bay unless you fly at 5,000ft or below until leaving controlled airspace, and that sort of defeats the object of having a Mooney turbo. This was also my first experience with Nexrad and made me instantly jealous of all US GA pilots. The Mooney was equipped with a Garmin GNS480 WAAS IFR certified GPS interfaced to an MX20 MFD and the level of information instantly at hand at the push of a button was unbelievable. Wind speed and direction, echo tops, cloud base, cell movement, terrain traffic, the list went on

Top: David much preferred the layout of the Bravo over the 252
Above left: oxygen cannulas allowed David (right) and Dustin to exploit the Bravo's strengths
Above: in wilderness north of La Grande Riviere they ran into the first snow of the trip

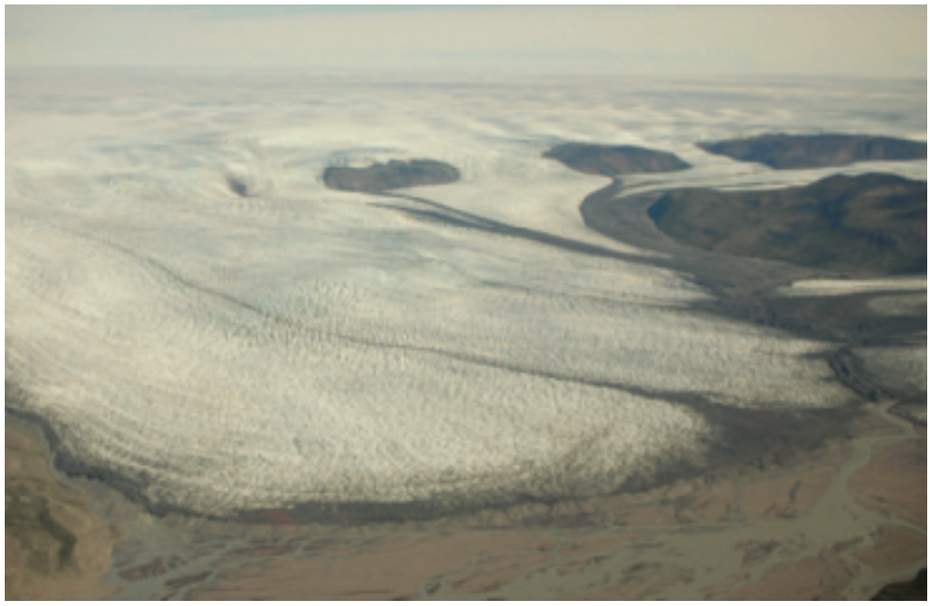
and on and Dustin was like a child in a sweet shop playing around with it all.

We arrived at KCIU some three hours after leaving Willmar on a glorious sunny day and taxied around to meet the customs agents. Dustin had already forwarded the paperwork before we departed so this was a mere formality which took less than 10 minutes. His knowledge of this stuff proved invaluable. After a quick toilet break we were back in the air for the short hop to Sudbury where we had to clear CANPASS. Another uneventful landing and we taxied around to the FBO to meet a very helpful Canadian customs lady. She gave us a friendly roasting for getting out of the aircraft without being authorised, but apart from that was very helpful. We walked across the terminal for some light lunch before once again rolling down the runway en route to La Grande Riviere. Ten minutes out of Sudbury and it was clear that we were leaving civilisation behind. We climbed to 15,000ft as our equipment told us we could reduce the wind on the nose by 5 knots down to 10 but we still had a ground speed in excess of 180kts. We arrived late in the afternoon at this little oasis in the middle of nowhere. CYGL is owned by a large hydro-electric company and I think they had informed the local mosquitoes that fresh meat was on the way as they were well informed and awaiting us on the apron along with some bigger bee-like creatures that seemed very interested in getting to know us a bit better. We had a few issues trying to arrange a taxi into town, some 30km away,

but eventually managed to get the controller to call one for us as neither of us had a signal on our cell phones and we couldn't get the payphones to work. The town was a strange place; we booked into the local motel for the same price I would pay for a four-star back home, but there was no choice. We ventured next door to the restaurant, which really was like a stray-off-the-path moment from American Werewolf in London. It was as though the music stopped and everyone looked at these two outsiders who had walked into the local hangout. I learned that there are two main sets of indigenous locals, the Inuit and the Cree, the Cree being larger; bearing this in mind, it was easy to distinguish between them. We were shortly joined by one of Cree, a big Alpha male that had come to test the water and within 10 minutes, we were answering questions to a group of six or seven. They were very friendly, as it turned out, and they were amazed at the fact we were pilots and en route to England. We learned that they had driven 220km just to have a drink at this place, and they would be driving back when the bar closed. No fears about drink-driving over there. They all seemed to have burgundy Dodge vehicles, too. Must me some kind of government subsidy. The following day we had scheduled to fly to Iqaluit in Frobisher Bay, Nunavut. We weren't really in any rush as we would be staying overnight there anyway so it didn't really warrant an early start, but with a very unexpected warm temperature and high humidity, it was uncomfortable trying to get to sleep covered in insect repellent with no air conditioning so I was knocking on Dustin's door at 0630. Dustin had made this same trip a couple of weeks earlier in a Diamond Star and he had left about 20 gallons of fuel in a container at Iqaluit, so we tried to calculate things so we landed there with around 20 gallons so we could buy one 50 gallon drum and use his remaining 20 gallons, thus giving us full tanks. Needless to say both our maths were out, as both the 480 and the Shadin fuel computer were telling us we didn't have enough fuel to make the leg. We decided we could divert to Kuujjuaq, but after checking the Notams I spied a "NO AVGAS" so it was back to La Grande to redo the sums. Hopefully this time we would get it right, but we erred on the side of caution. On this leg we really did get the feeling of being so far from civilisation, and it was a strange feeling indeed. We also started getting our first glimpses of the white stuff. Again we had filed IFR at FL130 – yes, we were in Canada now so the 18,000ft transition altitude was no longer in play. We started to pick up some ice and couldn't raise Montreal Centre, and we didn't want to use all our de-icing reserves as we thought we would

Above: Iqaluit, formerly Frobisher Bay, is the capital of Canada's newest territory Nunavut
Top left: brightly painted control tower at Iqaluit assists pilots in whiteouts
Centre left: how long would you last down there, even in an immersion suit?
Left: a welcome landfall in Greenland almost three hours out of Iqaluit

need them later – refills this far north are very expensive – so we climbed to clear the clouds and descended again some 200 miles down the road. We picked up ATC again at our assigned level just before we reached the Hudson Strait. As we approached Iqaluit, we had to deploy the TKS for a short while as we were descended down to 6,000ft and vectored for the ILS approach to runway 17. It was easy to pick out the bright orange control tower, which I was told assists the delivery pilots during the frequent white-out periods. Again the mosquitoes were awaiting our arrival and the numbers made me open up my suitcase on the apron and cover myself head to toe in repellent. Unfortunately a few got me before I was doused. By tea-time I resembled John Merrick – I must have had some kind of allergic reaction to the bites. We filled one side and half-filled the other with a full avgas drum, then we started on the barrel Dustin had left over. It must have been more luck then mathematical brilliance, but we couldn't have worked it out any better. We had full tanks,



Top right: Garmin shows groundspeed of 203kt; average for the whole trip was 196kt
Right: Glaciers spill off the icecap in Greenland en route to Kulusuk
Bottom right: uninviting forced landing territory over the Greenland icecap

and reset the computers to read 89US. We ventured into town and checked into our hotel, the Navigator, which is a common haunt for ferry pilots. We had a walk to the extortionate supermarket for some provisions for the early start, as the plan was to reach the east coast of Iceland tomorrow, some 1400 miles away. We ate a nice Chinese banquet and settled in for an early night.

My alarm woke me at 0430 and I gave Dustin a quick call. At 0510 we made the short walk back to the airport, where we filed the plan on the radio, inputting the grid reference reporting points. The reporting system is a little different over the Atlantic, where you give your current position, time, altitude, next waypoint and estimate for the next waypoint, and then the following waypoint followed by 'operations normal' which hopefully they are. Anyway the plan was accepted, so it was time for a very stringent pre-flight check. Once we had checked and concurred that everything was A-ok it was time to don our immersion suits. Now comfortable these certainly were not, but at least it gave us a little peace of mind that if we did go swimming, we would at least stand a 1% chance of survival. I suppose 1% is a lot better than absolutely no chance at all. Realistically the best we could hope for is at least in the immersion suits, which combined as flotation devices, we would be found at some point. These are the harsh realities you have to take into consideration when making a trip like this. I double-checked the life raft, which had been serviced prior to me leaving the UK by SEMS Aerosafe. The weather was once again giving us a 10kt headwind at FL150, which changed to a quartering 15kt at FL190, so we got out the cannulas and climbed to 19,000ft on 1013mb. The Mooney was happy up here – this is where you start to see the benefits of the turbo and the clean airframe. The only things above you are turbines and jets, pretty much everything else is below you. The high teens and low twenties is Mooney territory and this is where they are at their best. We had a crossing time of just under three hours from Iqaluit to Sondre Stromfjord, or Kangerlusuaq as its also known – BGSF. The most surprising thing about the crossing was the fact that halfway across the Davis Straits, you can look back and see the coast of Canada, while out the front window, you see the coast of Greenland. I certainly didn't expect that falsely comforting feeling. We were cleared straight in for the localiser approach to runway 28 and we touched down on the big rubber marks ingrained in the tarmac from the Airbuses of today and the Stratocruisers of days gone by. A quick refill, weather check and coffee and we were once again taxiing down the runway, after being helped along by the Jeppesen electronic charts

Top: the Mooney's wing spoilers are useful for dumping height on approach
Above: Ice, bad weather, small plane, big world - the Mooney at Kulusuk
Below: the tricky Faeroes approach down this fjord avoids having to land in the UK

which would help us considerably more later. Shortly after departure, the ice cap came into view, and I couldn't believe the colour of the water in some of the small lakes. It must be the reflection of the sun's UV rays giving the water a double dosage. We had filed for Kulusuk, BGKK, with Reykjavik as our alternate. I fancied going for the long haul and was supported by both computers but Dustin wanted to play it safe and go for Kulusuk, even though the weather was marginal there. Just over two hours later we were making a tricky approach, descending through the clouds for the NDB procedure to runway 11. Talk about a difficult approach – I still couldn't see the runway at two miles. The runway simply blends in with the surrounding terrain, and with the degree of upslope it was like landing on a mountain. The land was bleak and the water was almost completely filled with chunks of floating ice. It was like being on the moon. Because we once again had full tanks, there was no longer any need to stop in Reykjavik or Keflavik, so we decided to head direct to Egilsstadir. We crossed at FL150 with bright sunshine all the way, so we were surprised when we got the weather for BIEG and were told the conditions were overcast at 600ft in light rain. We were assigned the VAD1 arrival for the ILS procedure into runway 04. We began our descent at around 2130 local time in bright sunshine and descended towards the valley. We were told to report established and descend with the ILS. Dustin got the video camera ready to film the approach. As we entered the cloud at about 3400ft he said, "This is going to be a good video." As I broke cloud at just under 700ft we got an amazing view of the runway lit up like a Christmas tree. "Have you got it?" I shouted, but he didn't look happy. The batteries died at about 1200ft, he said. Just my luck. ATC asked us if we required a hotel, to which we said yes, and they said a car would be waiting for us after we had finished with customs. Even though this was a 24 hour international airport, we were charged by customs €75 for arriving after 8pm. I suppose this was offset the following morning as we filled up at the equivalent of $1.25 per litre, which was as cheap as I have ever paid in 12 years of flying, as far as I can remember. The car that collected us was owned by a nice gentleman who actually owned the local hotel. He reported there was nowhere open for food as it was after 10pm, but he managed to pull a few strings and got us in at the best hotel in town for an evening meal from the a la carte menu. This was by far the best meal of the trip and it was indeed nice to be back to the comforts of civilisation although I hadn't yet seen our hotel room. I was actually a bit taken aback when I first laid eyes on the green-doored tin hut that was to be our respective bedrooms for the night but in fairness, once the green doors were opened, what was beyond the doors was something of a pleasant surprise. The room was clean and tidy and quite a refreshing change from what we had been used to over the last couple of days. Once again I didn't manage a good night's sleep as I am not used to it being light throughout the night and also possibly my time clock was a little screwy. The next morning we had planned to go to Faroe to avoid having to land in the UK en route to Denmark as this requires a T1 customs form to be filled out and Far North Aviation in Wick I am told charge in the region of £100.00 for this. Although Faro's Vagar Lufthavn is renowned for its difficult instrument approach, I had been told that if the conditions were

Above: the Mooney's 1600 departure for Aarhus is carried on the airport board
Above right: David and Dustin arrive at Aarhus to do the VAT thing with Opmas

right, it can be a very rewarding sightseeing experience. This is where the electronic charts with the aircraft overlay really did come into its own. I loaded the approach on the 480 LOC DME Runway 13 and the chart confirmed it had loaded on the MFD. As we got closer to the initial approach fix, the screen changed and displayed the chart in full colour along with the symbol of the aircraft and its relative position to the approach. We were on instruments from 8000ft all the way down to about 500ft then I knew exactly what people meant regarding the view as we broke out. It was breathtaking and worth a certain amount of anxiety knowing you have high terrain at either side of you allowing very little room for error.

We were actually quite fortunate that although our approach was in IMC all the way down, there was actually broken cloud either side of the approach path as they are quick to close this airport due to its difficult approach. We refuelled and went across to the tower to pay the landing fees and file for the last leg of the Atlantic part of the crossing to Aarhus in Denmark where we would carry out the import through Opmas. We then went across to the terminal for some lunch. We had filed for a 4.pm departure and this was the first time I have ever seen my aircraft call sign on the departures board among the airliners going mainly to Scandinavia. We departed on time and this was the first time we had anything like a favourable wind condition which was reported as a quartering tailwind at 15kts at FL190 so that's where we headed and saw our best cruise speeds of the trip. 75% gave us a TAS of 215kts and a ground speed of 223 with a fuel burn of around 19GPH. This remained pretty constant and we covered the 689 miles in just over 3.5 hours which really was impressive. This gave us an average of about 196 for the whole trip. What a machine. We flew the ILS for runway 28L at Aarhus and were taxied around and told to park next to the CJ3 which we duly did. We emptied the cases and stripped out of the suits and then were collected by Frank from Opmas. He drove us the 40km into the town and got us checked in to the best hotel in town as usual and gave us the food vouchers for a range of eateries that they are affiliated to. They really do offer a first class service. It's actually the second time I have used them as our last 252 was from Switzerland so needed to be imported into the EU. There was a music festival on and whilst we were out having tea in a quiet bar, we heard another US accent so Dustin initiated contact and it turned out to be the pilot of the Citation we had parked next to. We had actually heard a pilot on the radio for quite some time when we departed EKVG who was up at FL45 so we assumed it must have been a US military aircraft but it turned out it was him. Andy, who had missed out on the trip, was also scheduled to arrive to fly the last leg across the North Sea, so with the four of us and music playing into the night, it made for a good beer-drinking session. We knew we had a relaxing non-flying day the following day as it was Sunday and the earliest the VAT papers would be ready would be Monday afternoon so a good time was enjoyed by all.

The last section of the journey across to Humberside was a stark reminder of the flight planning differences at this side of the Atlantic. I couldn't get the routing accepted by the IFPS so did it manually through the controller. It took us three attempts to get the route accepted. Andy and I travelled to the airport with Frank and Dustin and booked Dustin on the 15:50 flight to Copenhagen where he would get a flight the next morning back to San Francisco. I was sad to see him go as the journey had created a friendship bond that probably few people outside of this fraternity would understand. The trip back to Humberside was largely uneventful and we were given a more or less direct routing shortly after takeoff. We cleared customs pretty quickly and paid our landing and ILS fee and checked the weather. It was only a 10-minute hop to base at Sturgate EGCS and thunderstorms were forecast so we thought we better get a move on. Just as the wheels went up we saw the first flash and the storm scope lit up like a Christmas tree. ATC advised that if we routed to the north for a few miles we would clear the worst of it and could probably just win the race back to Sturgate. We went for it and there was no one on the radio at Sturgate. We had just taken off from Humberside with winds of 220 at 15 so it looked like a 27 arrival at Sturgate, wrong, Just as I was downwind for 27; Andy observed the windsock was straight out pointing west. A quick 180 and I thought great, a short wet runway! I was certainly glad I wasn't making this approach in the 252. At least I knew the Bravo would sit down nicely and behave and that exactly what it did. The worst weather for the whole trip was in the 10 minute flight from Humberside to Sturgate.

This was an absolutely fantastic experience that I would love to do again. I am actually now doing my commercial with a view to get a bit of subsidised flying as there is a chance to possibly fly with Dustin again which would be great. For anyone thinking of doing a similar trip, there will be a glut of crossings between now and next June as the loophole of importing through Denmark at 0% VAT is closing at the end of this year but any deals completed this year can be imported up until the end of June 2010. Other things to consider is that flying across the Atlantic really needs to be done IFR and it was actually the first time I have ever been asked over the radio if I had a current IR so I think this is maybe one area where they do actually police it. It is actually possible to do the trip VFR but not above 5500ft and the chances of remaining in VMC at that level at any time of year is pretty slim. Even if you want to go IFR out of Goose Bay which is the most common crossing point, then it is mandatory to have HF radio as VHF won't keep you in touch with ATC. It also means stopping in Bangor, Maine, to have wires routed for the reception. The alternative to this is to route further north where HF is not a pre-requisite and also the crossing over the water is shorter. Combine this with the fact that Narsarsuaq regularly goes down to minimums and is a very difficult airport to get into at the best of times compared to Sondre Stromfjord, going down to minimums possibly once a year. A lot of people think the Northern route is a bit prettier also but I wouldn't know for sure. Either way its definitely the trip of a lifetime and I cant wait to sample it again. ■

Below: Journey's end - David Plange with his new Mooney Bravo at Sturgate