

# A CRACKER OF A CHRISTMAS DAY

Bruce Cooper and John Williams were delighted with Santa's gifts – a world record triangle and 2,000km diploma flight



Great wave at Esquel (John Williams)

**A**BOUT a girl...well, that La Niña anyway. She's getting the blame for every undesired bit of weather on the planet, whether it's floods in Queensland, a perishing North European winter or a jet-stream-free Patagonia, *writes John Williams.*

So, depending on your perspective, it has been a great year to spend a few months in Argentina (to get away from weather miseries back home) or a lousy one (because the expected day after day of great Andean wave systems just didn't materialise).

Three UK pilots made the trip this year: Bruce Cooper to help Jean-Marie Clement (JMC) fly the Nimbus 4DM, Roy Wilson with his Ventus 2cxt and myself with the Antares. The whole experience of getting into the country and then spending time in it are lifetime experiences to start with, but what we were really there for was the big wave.

We've often said that Scottish wave can be great – but you may have a long wait for the big day – and that's just how Patagonia turned out this year. You just have to be ready

for the very few options that do come. And that's where Roy suffered from the inherent disadvantages of a turbo. Not the get-you-home thoughts that many pilots have when heading off to fly over hostile terrain, but having a pure glider or self-sustainer really hurts when you can't get a launch. You just had to have a self-launcher to fly on the two best days this year. The first was far too windy for the tug to manoeuvre safely and the second was Christmas Day, when understandable family commitments meant no available tuggie. Roy did, however, nail his 1,000km diploma by flying impeccably on what had been billed as nothing more than "a training day".

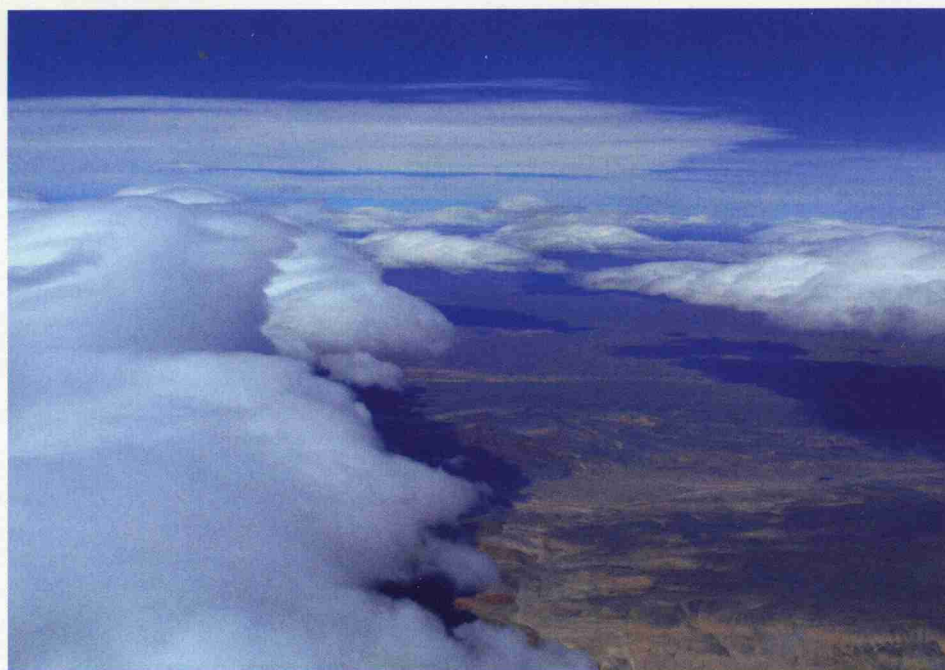
Bruce had a great flight with Sebastian Kawa, completing declared 2,000km, largely in the blue, to be the first Brit and first Pole to do so. And I had a few attempts at big declared flights, one taking me 800km from home on a 2,000km O/R before turning back and completing 2,205km for a National free 3TP distance record.

And then there was Christmas Day...

## **BRUCE COOPER, NIMBUS 4DM, 25 DECEMBER, 2010 1,650KM FROM BARILOCHE**

**O**VER a year ago, we planned a large triangle, so you can imagine my "delight" when Klaus Ohlmann flew almost the exact same planned track on 8 December, 2010. Our study of satpics from prior years clearly indicated that the task had potential. There is a gap in the Andes where Pacific wet air flows through and marks the wave oscillations downwind deep into the Pampa and a careful look at terrain triggers (not just flat high ground) helped select a good downwind turn point.

One problem we had was a NOTAM issued that could be misinterpreted and had the potential to give problems. It was fairly clear that this was a "Nav Warning" and not a hard boundary. Over the Christmas Eve dinner I suggested that we should file a flight plan by fax and, if ATC accepted it, we should set off on the big triangle in the morning if the weather still looked good.



After five days on Google Earth looking for anything vaguely landable over untrodden Pampa, Bruce Cooper felt Google Mars might have been more appropriate (Jean-Marie Clement)



If it all went wrong we would be having Christmas dinner on the beach on the Atlantic coast. There was something about that triangle that left me feeling like a moth to a flame, I really wanted to fly it.

As they say in the old movies "sleep did not come easily that night".

It seems like we had to get up before we went to bed... declared the task and set off, very tired even before we launched, and it was the third early start in a row.

Now, not everything goes to plan on these epics. We delayed our launch to change the order that we would fly the turn points and lost valuable time in the process. You can imagine how much we laughed on crossing the start line southbound, only to find the Zander and Ipaqs demanding we went north. We'd declared it the original way after all! Sixteen hours later, we discovered that the task would have been impossible but for this "mistake". Was it Napoleon or JMC who said "Give me lucky generals!"?

After a correct start line, the flight to the 1st TP was straightforward and most of the 2nd leg followed the standard route south. Then came the pioneering bit I was really looking forward to... breaking away from the comfort and familiarity of the local routes and air strips and heading off over untrodden Pampa.

Despite rumours, I am not a random risk taker and spend very large amounts of time preparing to minimise the risks. I had spent around 10 days working on this one and almost five days on Google Earth looking for anything that looked even vaguely landable. I think Google Mars might have been more appropriate. The task area had only one road and almost no other sign of civilisation. The route to the second turn point was exactly how I had imagined it, strange, orange, rolling and uninhabited wilderness.

The approach to the final turn point was marred by my O<sub>2</sub> regulator failing – not funny above FL200 – and a struggle for O<sub>2</sub> which gave me a splitting headache that was to affect me for the remainder of the flight. I ended up putting the cannula in my mouth and just sucking.

The last leg was almost 8/8 for about 400km and slow going – we lost lots of time. John was just ahead and, as usual, a bit lower. The wind had been a headwind component for all but one leg so far and now it was swinging north. JMC was flying this part and I was doing the sums very carefully – we needed height more than speed so I persuaded him to back-off the MacCready. How much time ↗

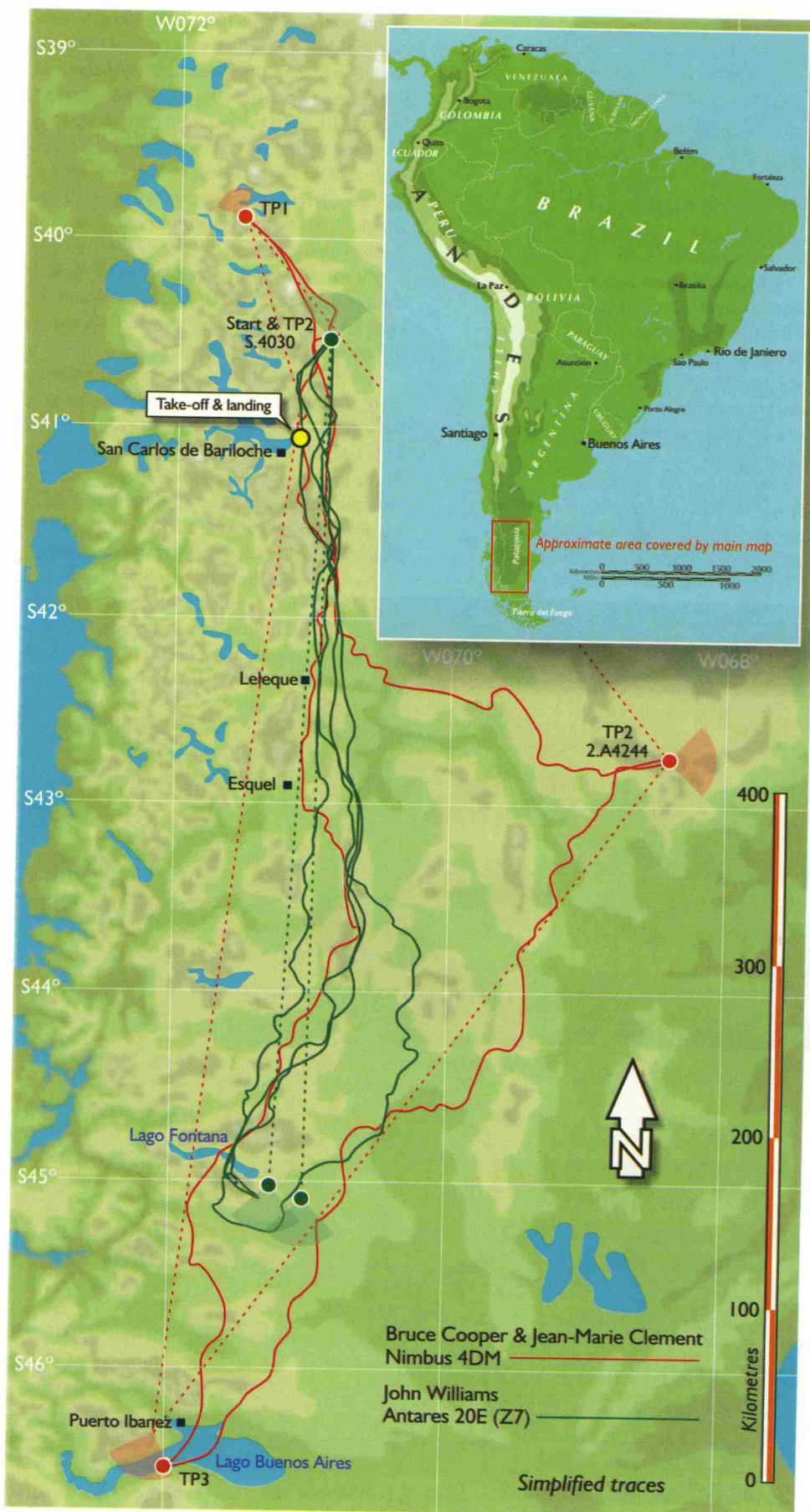


Illustration by Steve Longland





Bruce Cooper took up gliding at 14 on a Scripture Union sponsored gliding course at Portmoak. He currently flies at Edensoaring and Lasham. Bruce loves teaching soaring and his main passion is "adventure soaring" - using ridges, waves and convergences for distance flying. He has an ASW 27, three Oly 463s, 5,500+hrs, a Full Cat rating and a 1,000km diploma

☞ did we have spare he asked - about 10 minutes, but we really needed more height to comply with the 1,000m rule. The final 60km were torture - we were desperate to gain more height, but did not have time to deviate. The wind was dying, what wind we did have was against us and there was no lift. We crossed the line with me encouraging JMC to stall the glider in the finish sector to minimise the distance penalty.

We saw the sun rise after we launched and the sun set before we landed 15hrs 38min later for what might be a new world triangle distance record of 1,650km.

It felt strange the next morning. I woke early and sat by the lake in bright sunshine, with not a breath of wind. It was an unbelievable contrast to the dark, overcast finish to the previous day's flight after a long struggle home and, of course, the build-up for a whole week before. I felt a calmness that I have never experienced before, like a huge

weight had been lifted from me, and felt that if that was to have been my last glider flight, I would have been satisfied.

For me, life is about memories not dreams. My Argentine adventures are memories I will savour for many years, both from the aspects of flying and friendships.

**JOHN WILLIAMS, ANTARES  
25 DECEMBER, 2010  
2,000KM FROM BARILOCHE**

AT THE dinner table on Christmas Eve, we all thought that the next day would be good, but not great, and guaranteed to be long. So it

made sense to try for the 2,000km diploma in four legs, hopefully avoiding the weaker conditions evident south of 45°S on the previous day's satpics. And, just in case things turned out better, I chose a task that included two shots at a 1,000km out-and-return speed record.

For the third morning in a row, sleep was shallow and short. Up at 04:00, on the airfield at 05:00, covers off, turn points added, declaration made and in the air at 05:47. A head torch gives enough light to read an ASI, but lacks something as a landing light. Just two minutes of electric motor use to start ridge-soaring on Cerro Villegas and slide gently into wave while watching the grey undersides of cloud turn pink in the chill dawn light.

I'd set the start point 60km north to minimise the distance south; that would help later, but right now it felt like an unnecessary extension to a long task. Climbing en route left me in start sector at 13,000ft in a far from classic sky and a few delicate runs in cloudless gaps were needed before "proper" conditions were reached - just in time to file a distant flight plan with Bariloche Tower, which opened for business at 07:30.

Passing Esquel things felt better, cross-country speed started to increase and, despite a hefty headwind component, reached 175km/h with only 100km to go to the turn. Maybe the speed records were within sight? Minutes later, that thought was replaced with survival thoughts as the system just disappeared. Big gaps surrounded by uniform stratus and the occasional KH (Kelvin-Helmholz, not Kevin Hook) rotor cloud 45 degrees off-track to the west were all I could see. Upwinditis took over until a climb at a blow hole near Lago Fontana gave just enough height to creep into sector for a first 500km in 3hr 44min, far too slow for comfort. An escape by the same route and a tailwind helped get back north through the awkward bit and knowing that better lay ahead encouraged more aggression. And so the second leg turned out to be a whole lot quicker in 2hr 33m.

A double out-and-return has one big disadvantage; you can see the home airfield as you set out on the third leg. With limited daylight left, a wind forecast to die and a huge raft of top cover shutting out the sun, that familiar gravel strip looked indecently tempting.

But you can't just quit after such a good second leg, so I told myself I'd push on, watching conditions and the clock, and turn back later if needed. That was enough to trick myself into getting on with it, and the reward was another good run on a single wave bar of 300km - just a wonderful way to buck that headwind. The time calculations felt better, 670km to go and six hours' daylight - ought to be OK.

It wasn't.

It was horrible. The only choice was to turn back or take a significant risk of dropping through a cloud layer into something a long, long way from home on Christmas evening. The inner voices got busy; the one that speaks reason was loud, but it was bullied into submission by the one that said "when will you ever be this close to a declared 2,000km again? Maybe never?".

So off I went from one seething turbulent blow-hole to another. At 40km out, the

Sunrise makes pink lenticulars  
(John Williams)

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distance to run stopped counting down – I could only go upwind and couldn't see any gaps downwind. The cross-country speed dropped to 25km/h and the likelihood of getting home went with it. The retreat route looked awful too – so, while doing involuntary pelvic floor exercises, I set off downwind in the hope of finding something to maintain height at about 12,500ft, unpleasantly close to cloud. A tiny fracture line in the overcast appeared and provided 1kt up, enough to learn that it continued NE, 45 degrees off track for home and might just clip the turn sector that I'd mentally given up on. It did, and a third 500km leg of 4hr 8m was the result. There was now 550km left and 4hr 20m until darkness. (Don't waste energy thinking about that – use your remaining mental capacity to stay up and minimise the problem.)

Bit by bit, the cracks in the cumulus led onwards, with an occasional climb at a cloud edge 90 degrees off the expected, and then gaps bending around to the north with runs above cloudbase towards those lovely red blobs on the Oudie's snail trail. I almost reached them when they started to disappear – loud expletive – I'd slowed so much that the trail was timing out before I could reach it.

But the clouds were now readable and Esquel airspace was in reach. Speed increased, but the ground speed didn't. Checked the Lx – the wind that had been a problem at 60kts 236 degrees when southbound was now 50kts at 285 – a very unwelcome burden when a bonus was expected and needed. So the tension started to mount again – speed needed, but the clouds ahead were weak and evaporating. More calculations and I decided to run at 90kts – a really flat bit of the Antares polar – and concentrate as hard as I could on finding the very best line north.

After an hour of that, there was good news and bad news – I could reach Bariloche, but without the height needed to reach my finish point 60km north in the mountains and certainly not at the intended 10,000ft. The 1,750km was in the bag, but I really did want the 2,000km and they don't do diplomas for nineteen hundred and something. No choice but to push on.

Just north of Bariloche at 7,500ft, there was a tiny hot spot and 1kt up in the blue. There was now 1hr 11min until darkness, 100km to run and about 7,000ft needed at 100ft/min. It didn't compute. Decisions were helped by the climb just petering out at 11,000ft – the only chance was to track north and hope for more lift. No luck, but out of

obstinacy I carried on to cut the finish sector low and immediately poured the remaining battery power into the electric motor – I was still 70km from the strip and needed all the height and speed I could get to land in acceptable (and legal) gloom.

I had to cross a high col to get on the right side of a ridge – last rays of sunlight direct into the eyes – don't hit the granite! Race down the ridge at a speed that wouldn't get me home without its help – and follow the Nimbus (it has a handy tail light) to land after 15hrs 54m flying, with a whole seven minutes to spare.

It was good to be back on the ground, but among the blend of exhaustion and adrenaline was a feeling of sadness and resignation that I'd given all, but not done quite enough.

The following morning after a physical sleep, but still mentally exhausted, I took a look at the trace. The best I could find was 1,993km. Hmmm. Then Jean-Marie had a look and found seven more kilometres – I'd been counting back from the finish rather than forward from the last turn – it was that tight.

What a way to spend Christmas – and the best of all presents.



John Williams was a keen sailor until "forced" to take up gliding in 1993 when his job moved him to London. After early years at Dunstable he moved to Scotland and became intrigued by wave opportunities from Portmoak. He is one of a small group of Scottish-based pilots who continue to explore the boundaries of "what might still be possible but hasn't been done yet". He has an Antares, 2,000+hrs, a BI rating and a 1,500km diploma



Satpic shows very nasty cloud cover at the third turn point of John Williams' flight