

Chalkie Stobbart acknowledging the cheers of the crowd after his successful arrival back in Cape Town.



Dead Man's Challenge

"I would challenge any pilot to fly any aircraft in the world with no more than 200 hp to the Cape and back in less time than I did in 1939." – Alex Henshaw

Text: Teri Glass | **Images:** © Chalkie Stobbart

There is nothing quite like the satisfaction that comes from completing something successfully; doing something better than someone else. It makes us do things we do not think we can, as we strive to achieve the (im)possible.

A Bit of Background

In 1939, a very brave Alex Henshaw was determined to set a record – for flying from London to Cape Town and back, solo, in as little time as possible, in a homebuilt aircraft. And that he did – in just four days, 10 hours and 16 minutes. His bravery and aviation brilliance led him to write a book, called *Flight of the Mew Gull*, in which he challenged anyone anywhere in the

world to attempt to break his record.

After purchasing a copy of the book, Charles "Chalkie" Stobbart, an SAA Captain and aviation enthusiast, decided to rise to the challenge.

"The seed was planted in 1992, but I didn't have an aircraft capable of breaking the record, so planning really only started in 2003. The record attempt was supposed to be done in my RV-6 in 2005, but by April 2004 the engine I had ordered still hadn't been delivered." It was then that friend Tony van den Heuvel's homebuilt Osprey GP 4 came in handy, and planning began in earnest.

Time Travel

On 7th May 2009, Chalkie buckled up and set off for London. So, how exactly →

The route was as close as possible to a Great Circle Track – a 'straight' line across the earth's surface – between Cape Town and London



Chalkie with his support team.



Chalkie celebrating his record-breaking achievement with a glass of bubbly.

was he going to get from Cape Town to London and back, in as little time as possible?

“The route was as close as possible to a Great Circle Track – a ‘straight’ line across the earth’s surface – between Cape Town and London,” says Chalkie. “The initial plan was to have two fuel stops: one in Brazzaville (Congo) and one in Tamanrasset (Algeria); but all attempts to have fuel delivered to Tamanrasset came to naught, so a third fuel stop had to be planned. In the end, I settled on Brazzaville, then Kano (Nigeria), then Algiers (Algeria) with a turn-around at Southend (London). Fourteen hours off would allow me

a good ten hours’ sleep and time for the media.”

The daring feat did not come without challenges, of course. “The plan was to knock 24 hours off the original record as this would put it out of the reach of most homebuilt high-performance aircraft,” he says. “But dealing with African bureaucracy made this difficult. Since I had not raised sufficient funds, I could not position ground crew at all the fuel stops to smooth out any problems,” he explains. It wasn’t smooth sailing (or flying, for that matter) thereafter – other obstacles included a broken stormscope (which shows

weather patterns), and his satellite phone, which he accidentally sat on.

Nevertheless, on Monday 11th May, Chalkie landed back in Cape Town after a strenuous flight, shattering the old record by 18 hours and 59 minutes. “I was absolutely blown away,” he says. “The exercise had been well planned, well executed and had bureaucracy not slowed things down at the refuel stops, I could have knocked the planned 24 hours off the record.”

So, 70 long years and a lot of preparation later, Sir Alex Henshaw’s record is finally broken. Will it now be recognised as a Guinness World Record? Watch this space... ✈️

Comparison between Osprey GP 4 and Percival Mew Gull planes

Aircraft	Osprey GP 4	Percival Mew Gull
Construction	Wood / plywood, fibreglass covered.	Wood / plywood, fabric covered.
Engine	195 hp 4 cylinder 375 cubic inch engine (Horizontally opposed)	205 hp (nominal) 6 cylinder (Inverted) Gipsy Six Series 2
Propeller	Hartzell constant speed	Ratier constant speed
Max speed	250 mph	247 mph
Fuel capacity	Approx. 420 litres	Approx. 410 litres
Endurance	3,600 km	3,200 km
Maximum take-off weight	1,000 kg (FAI class)	1,068 kg