



NOW

SOLO

one woman's record-breaking flight around the world

JENNIFER MURRAY



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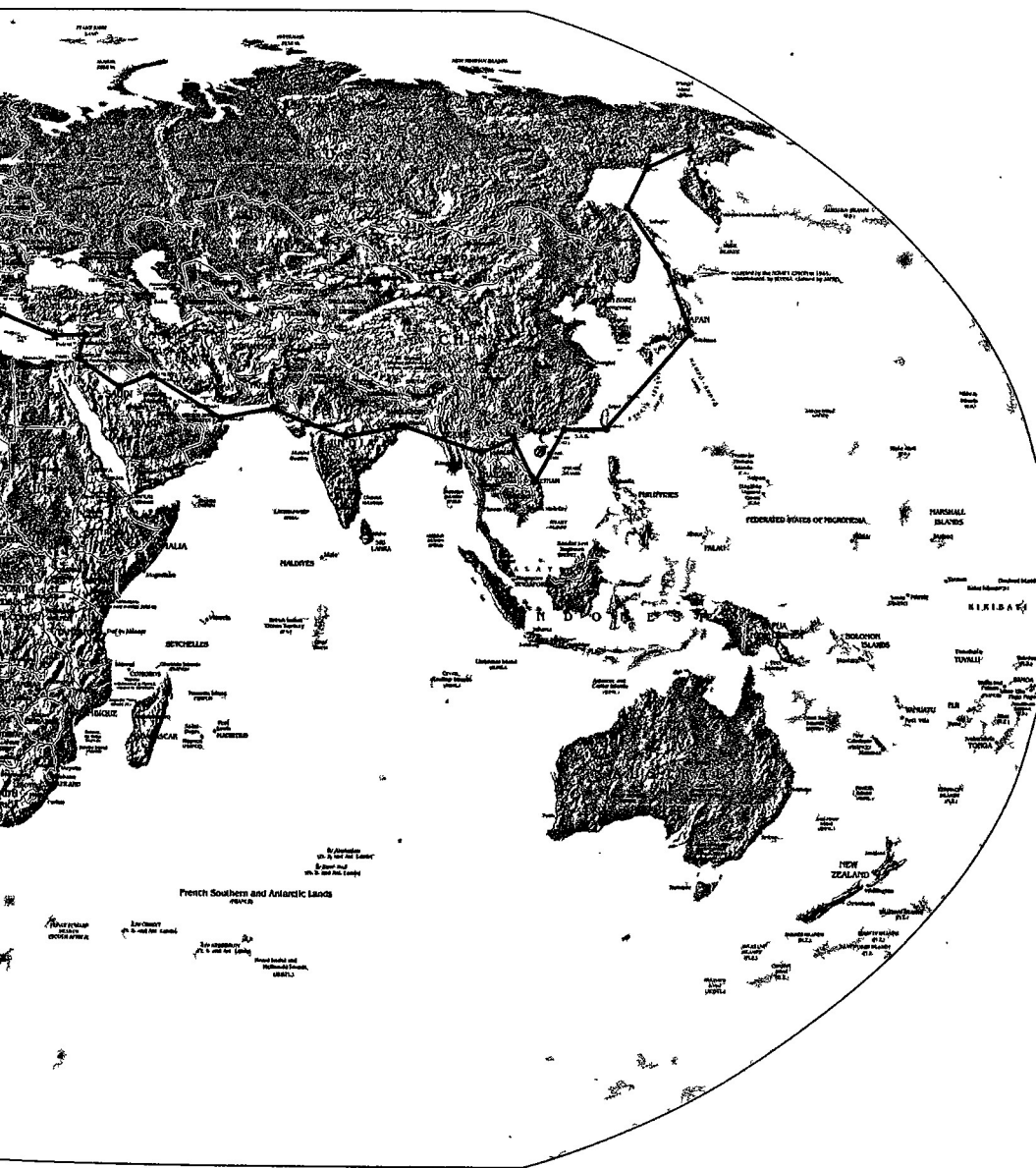
In 2000, Jennifer Murray – businesswoman, housewife artist, and mother of three – became the first woman to pilot a helicopter around the world in a record-breaking solo flight.

Escorted all the while by Colin Bodill, several times world microlight champion, she single-handedly chartered the helicopter across the globe. They faced 30, 000 miles – 8, 000 of which covered water – on a trip the aviation world believed could not be done. The helicopter designer gave them a one in five chance of making it.

Now Solo documents Jennifer and Colin's epic journey. Taken from the audio diaries which Jennifer kept at the end of each exhausting day, the book tells of the planning and endless bureaucracy, and of the tempers and tiredness. This extraordinary adventure took them from Brooklands, England to Saudi Arabia, China, Russia, the United States and Canada. En route they persevered through engine failure, emergency landings, problems with fuel supply, chronic tiredness, tropical storms and Chinese fighter jets. This remarkable journey from Paris to the Arabian deserts and from Vietnam to Iceland and back to Britain again is an inspiration to men and women everywhere.

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Ten per cent of the author's royalties will be donated to
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To Simon

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly . . . who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt



Acknowledgements

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Another special thank you goes to our principal sponsors: to Richard Li and Network of the World, and Tommy Hilfinger, who made our challenge possible and to all our other sponsors and technical sponsors: Hutchison Whampoa, Garmin, MP Bolshaw, Bose, Honeywell, Jeppesen, Mainair, HeliAir, Lynx, Typhoon, H.R. Smith Group of Companies, Submersible Systems, Multifabs, Airzone, Skydrive, Simon Carves, Breitling, Executive Aviation Services and International Jet Services.

And for advice and input with my book: my husband Simon, my daughter Christy, my niece Hannah Mather and my friends Christina Wesemann and Brian Milton; and to my agent Robert Kirby and my publishers Mainstream for believing in me.

Finally, an especially big thank you to my family and friends for all their support and understanding and for coping with anxious times as we travelled around the world. And to my fellow pilots, Colin Bodill and Heinz Rust, my steadfast friends.



Introduction

For 54 years I had been a happy passenger. That changed in 1994 when my husband Simon bought a half share in a helicopter. It was an impulsive buy. I thought he was nuts, but he had worked hard, he earned the money and if that was how he wanted to spend it, it was OK by me. Then he told me, 'I haven't got time to learn how to fly, so you'd better.'

I presented myself at Sloane Helicopters, Sywell Airfield, Northampton, 100 miles north of London and the home of our new half-owned helicopter. It was a rather intimidating place: the efficient-looking young instructors were all 20 years younger than me, dressed in navy blue with helicopters emblazoned on their chests; and most of the students didn't look old enough to have a driving licence.

My prospective instructor said, 'So you want to do the wives' course do you?'

Wives' course? That sounded so sexist. I found myself saying, 'What do you mean? I want to do the real thing. I want a full pilot's licence.'

I suppose the wives' course, which would have given me just the basics of how to land a helicopter if the pilot were to have a heart attack, was exactly what I was looking for, but it sounded so patronising and sexist. So instead, off I went for my first flying lesson, off to a new and wonderful world.

Not that my life up till then hadn't been wonderful, and full of excitement – being married to an ex-French Foreign Legionnaire is never dull. I have known Simon, a distant cousin, nearly all my life. We met at London Zoo, aged ten. Shortly after leaving school he was steered into the family engineering firm, Mather and Platt in Manchester, as a special apprentice working in the iron foundry for four pounds a week – he was



always broke. Simon was half in love with me and threatened to go off and join the French Foreign Legion if his feelings weren't reciprocated. I never took him seriously, but one Monday morning he failed to appear for work! I wasn't ready for his affections and had indicated that I needed space – but not that much space!

Five years later Simon returned from the Legion and we fell in love. Keen not to let him run away again, I happily accepted his proposal of marriage. As you can imagine, however, my parents weren't too thrilled, considering Simon was fresh from the war in Algeria, had no money and no normal qualifications – he didn't even have any A levels, having opted out of his final term at school in favour of a trip on a tramp steamer to South America, peeling potatoes. Three weeks before we got married he announced that he'd landed a job with Jardine Matheson, one of the oldest British trading companies in Hong Kong.

We spent the next 30 years in the Far East. Our son Justin was born in Thailand and our two daughters, Suzanna and Christy, were born in Hong Kong. When not busy with the children, I ran my own textile companies, first in Thailand, then in Hong Kong, designing, printing and wholesaling furnishing fabrics. Simon went from strength to strength and life was full, fun and busy. In between work we travelled, ran marathons and went trekking in Nepal and Bhutan. Then the children graduated from university, they were all grown up. I had a little time, we had a little money and the timing was perfect – I entered the world of helicopters.

I was hooked from the start, even though it was confusing and left me wondering whether I would ever get the hang of coordinating all the controls. However, like learning to drive a car, when you think you will never get the knack of letting the clutch in and out, the same applies to a helicopter, only you have one extra control. In your right hand you have the cyclic lever, which controls the angle of the main rotor head disc. So, the cyclic lever is your principal steering wheel, the tiniest movement rolls you left and right, or pitches you up and down. Your left hand is occupied with the collective lever, which controls the angle of attack of the actual rotor blades plus the throttle. There is a small switch on the end of the collective lever which engages the governor, when turned on it automatically controls engine power. Finally, you have the torque pedals. These alter the pitch of the tail rotor, which balances the main rotor torque, thus preventing the helicopter from spinning at slow forward speeds. Confused? And that was just the beginning! But when you lift off – or rather the instructor does, with you just touching the dual controls to get a feel for it – suddenly there you are, you're off the ground in a bubble

with 270-degree vision. The freedom, the beauty of it all, is stunning.

After that first lesson I opted to learn somewhere closer to London. Lothar Wesemann (owner of the other half of G-IVIV, our beautiful new helicopter) suggested I go to Denham Airfield where 'Q' (Quentin Smith) operated. Lothar had been taught to fly by Q's father, Mike Smith, in Hong Kong.

I liked Q from the start, with his enthusiasm to share his love of flying along with a laid-back approach to life. He ran a one-man operation, with his girlfriend looking after bookings when she was not at college. He shared an office and hangar with a bunch of fixed-wing pilots. Q gave lively ground demonstrations in aerodynamics – enthusiastically pacing around, waving his arms and saying, 'The helicopter is the most perfect flying machine, the next closest is a humming bird. The helicopter can hover, turn, go backwards and forwards.' It all sounded wonderful, especially when he said, 'Helicopters *don't* just fall out of the sky; people *think* they do, but they don't. If your engine fails, you go into autorotation and you float down. We practise it all the time.' Floating sounded good to me.

Three weeks, forty-seven flying hours (ten of which were solo) and six exams later I was the proud possessor of a Private Pilot's Licence for helicopters.

The training was exhausting both mentally and physically – and felt wonderful. I loved the demands, the challenge of the skies. The adrenalin rush of the first solo flight was incredible, being out there alone and wondering whether I would ever be able to get back to earth. I got lost on my first cross-country flight, panicked and made a 'Pan' call for help. This is one call down from a 'May Day', which is normally only used in more dire situations. Q had instructed me only the day before on Pan calls and I thought it was the perfect solution. I couldn't find Denham Airfield, from which I had only just taken off. I radioed 'Pan Pan Pan' and heard the calm voice of Heathrow ATC (Air Traffic Control) asking me questions about my position and what I could see. He then calmly told me that the reason I couldn't see the airfield was because it was directly underneath me. What a nice man.

Passing all the written exams was perhaps my biggest achievement. Radio/telephony, air law, navigation, meteorology, technical and human performance – all involved numbers, figures and formulae, and I was certainly never a maths or science scholar. However, I found I actually enjoyed and understood the basics and even allowed Q to convince me that I was a natural engineer.

By 1995 we had our own R44 helicopter, G-MURY. I flew whenever I

could around England and then further afield. Simon got his licence and together we saw Europe from the skies. Somewhere along the line we started saying, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to just keep going?'

To begin with it was only a dream, then the dream began to firm up. A fellow helicopter pilot and friend, Michael Kadoorie, gave me Dick Smith's book, *Solo Around the World*, and that became my bible. I learnt how Dick had set off in 1982, in his Bell 206, hoping to be the first person to fly a helicopter around the world, but Ross Perot Junior beat him to it. He heard about Dick's intended flight and decided to go for an American 'first'. Dick, however, went solo, he showed the world that helicopters could 'go it alone'. He had no support aircraft, while Ross Perot Junior had a co-pilot, Jay Coburn, and a twin-engine Hercules with a bevy of technicians and, I believe, a spare engine. In 1994 Ron Bower flew solo around the world in a Bell 206B and the same year Dick Smith piloted his Sikorsky 576 accompanied by his wife Pip who took photographs. Ron went again in 1996 with John Williams, setting a world speed record in their Bell 430. The world had been circumnavigated five times – all done by men, in larger jet turbine helicopters with autopilot. G-MURY has a piston engine and no autopilot. Could it be done?

What a challenge: to be the first, a major first. I didn't think there were any 'firsts' left and I certainly never thought that I would have any involvement in one.

First of all we thought we would go in two helicopters, a pilot and co-pilot in each: Simon in one, myself in another. (We didn't want to leave our children parentless.) Q was to be the third and Lothar was keen to make us four. Then, when we came to see the amount of preparation time it would take, as well as execution time, Simon realised that he wouldn't be able to free himself up for long enough. Also, 'Someone has to work to pay for this little jolly,' he said with a grin. Lothar also pleaded work. 'Why don't you and Q go for it?' Simon said.

I went to see Frank Robinson in California, the manufacturer of the helicopter. I couldn't wait to see his excitement at the prospect of his helicopter going around the world, and I was mad keen for his approval and support. I got none. I felt crushed, Frank thought I was mad. He said, 'If you had more experience, if Q were a little older and you had done more preparatory trips you would have my full support and backing.' He gave me a one in five chance of making it and said we wouldn't get as far as Pakistan. Later I was to have the great pleasure of sending him a postcard from Pakistan.

Before that first trip I had 600 hours' experience. Q was 32 years old;

he had thousands of hours' experience. We had also done plenty of preparatory trips. I had done a lot of flying around Europe and Q had flown to and from Moscow for the World Helicopter Championships (where he'd won the solo freestyle event). Q and I had also done a two-week trip up the Norwegian coast to the most northerly point in Europe, North Cape – 300 miles inside the Arctic Circle – then turned south down through Finland and over to St Petersburg before returning to England. We had also been tested in an emergency. Two hundred miles inside the Arctic Circle on that Norwegian jaunt, and half an hour south of the small town of Tromsø, we had been forced to make an emergency landing as the fan shaft had fractured.

While in California visiting Frank Robinson in 1997, I took the opportunity to visit the big Helicopter Expo at Anaheim to meet fellow 'Whirly Girls' (members of the worldwide association of female helicopter pilots) and talk to avionics and survival equipment manufacturers, in the hope of getting some technical sponsorship. I also met the world speed record holder Ron Bower, a six-foot-something Texan, who was standing on a podium in his flight suit, signing autographs with his eight-seater, twin-engine, state-of-the-art helicopter behind him. Rather nervously I waited in the autograph line, introduced myself, and asked for any advice he could give me. There was a long pause, a very long pause, while he rocked back on his heels with his hands clasped behind his back. He finally said, 'Young lady, you won't be setting any female records as your co-pilot is a man.' It seemed to be all about records. 'Well,' I said bravely, 'I was more interested in the challenge and adventure than setting records.' It's strange, though, because once you've achieved your goal you *do* want the record. You certainly don't want someone else to get it.

I spent six months organising that first round-the-world trip, trying to convince everyone I was serious – not least Q, who never believed I'd pull it off. And I nearly didn't, BP, one of the major sponsors, nearly backed out on me a month before take-off. Someone in the company had found an article in an aviation magazine quoting Frank Robinson saying that he was not happy with the venture. 'What are we doing sponsoring this helicopter when the manufacturer doesn't even approve?' asked BP. The following days were a nightmare, but I talked to Frank Robinson and Frank talked to Ralph Alexander (my big supporter at BP) who finally persuaded his fellow directors to go with me.

How I ever thought I could put it all together in six months I don't know – where fools rush in . . . that was me. Sponsors, auxiliary fuel tanks, CAA (Civil Aviation Authority) certifications, clearances, fuel, routes,

raising money for Save the Children etc., but Q and I finally made it to the start line, and we made it around the world and into the *Guinness Book of Records* – the first and fastest woman to circumnavigate the globe in a helicopter. We also got the FAI (Federation Aviation International) record for ‘Fastest piston engine helicopter around the world’ for our trip: 10 May–8 August 1997. But no FAI female record. Ron Bower had been right, and I began to think seriously about going again, not just for the record, but also for me – to prove to myself that I could do it.

In '97 I had Q with me, a vastly more experienced pilot than I and in whom I'd always had sublime faith that he would be able to get me out of any predicament – and there had been many. I was the one who got the recognition, being the official captain and a woman, but I didn't feel that I could fully justify that acclaim having had Q beside me. Amelia Earhart received huge attention for being the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, but on that first crossing she was a passenger, she didn't even touch the controls. As the world knows, however, Amelia more than justified that acclaim. A couple of years later she captained her own aircraft across the Atlantic and made many more long distance, pioneering flights before disappearing so tragically off Howland Island in the Pacific on the final leg of her world record attempt to circumnavigate the globe. I needed to prove I could do it alone, not for anybody else, but for myself.

The first step towards realising my own solo dream came when I bumped into Colin Bodill at the Woodford Air Show for record breakers. I had first met Colin in 1998 at the Royal Aero Club. He was there receiving an award for his record-breaking flight to Australia in a flexiwing microlight and I for being the first woman to circumnavigate the globe by helicopter. On that first occasion there was little time to talk with Colin but we were destined to meet again later that year at Woodford. At that time Colin was preparing for his solo flight around the world and asked me if I had anything else planned. ‘Why don't you come with me?’ he said.

I thought it was a great idea but going with a microlight? My helicopter was much faster than his little flexiwing microlight. ‘But I'm way faster than you,’ I said. ‘Do you want to bet?’ came the laughing reply. We shook hands and took some photos, just in case we actually should end up going together.

I liked and trusted Colin from the word go – and still do. An ‘honest Jo’, straight as a die, he was of stocky build with longish fair hair and a lovely dry sense of humour. And, as I was to find out, he was also very determined and incredibly brave. A week later I phoned him and said let's talk some more. That was in July 1998. Eighteen months of intensive

planning followed. Eighteen months of hope and despair.

I budgeted for £800,000 to cover four aircraft. This would include the cost of hiring a fixed-wing plane for technicians and equipment, avionics for a camera helicopter, a refit for G-MURY and Colin's microlight. We needed sponsors, but to get sponsors we needed to have guaranteed publicity in place. Sponsors are looking for PR as companies have to justify such expenditure to their shareholders. We had to be able to present a professional package to any would-be TV/Documentary/Internet company and then to other potential sponsors.

I also wanted a charity to benefit from our venture and Colin and I chose Operation Smile. This is a small charity whose headquarters are in Norfolk, Virginia. They send missions to 18 countries each year to correct cleft palates and other facial deformities suffered by children and young adults – all free of charge. I had seen Operation Smile in action in Kenya where I had run a marathon to raise money and awareness on their behalf. I had been hugely impressed with their work and was not surprised to hear that they had won the Conrad Hilton Award for the best-run charity in North America. One of the reasons we chose Operation Smile was that we knew any money we raised would get directly to those in need. Dr Bill Magee and his wife, Kathy – the founding directors of Operation Smile – were delighted about our proposal, but from a logistical point of view this meant that there were brochures and fund-raising plans to organise.

The route had to be checked meticulously: distances, fuel availability and clearances were of utmost importance. We had to decide where, in the London area, should be our starting point.

We first thought that the grounds of the Royal Maritime College and Observatory at Greenwich would be perfect – it was zero meridian. The director of the Observatory, Kristen Lippincott, liked the idea, so Colin and I visited the site and paced out a landing strip for the microlight. But then the College director decided that we didn't have a strong enough connection to the sea and refused permission. We tried to argue that helicopters play a large role in air/sea rescue, but to no avail. We then thought of Brooklands and the curator, Julian Temple, was delighted. Brooklands was the birthplace of British aviation. In 1908, A.V. Roe made the first-ever flight in a British-built aeroplane from there and since then Brooklands has been the take-off point of many pioneer aviators. It was ideal. Colin and I visited Brooklands with our excitement building, imagining the great 'Take-off' day.

Fuel had to be sorted, the helicopters run on Avgas 100LL – similar to the fuel that cars run on – one grade higher than 4Star. Jet fuel is more

readily available than Avgas so we knew that we would have to arrange for fuel to be shipped in to various places around the world (like Russia), or carried on board our support plane, if we got one.

The calculation of distances over water was also critical. The maximum range for both the helicopters and the microlight was approximately 830 statute miles. The crossing of the Pacific would have to be from Eastern Russia, across the Bering Strait to Alaska; and the Atlantic crossing would have to be from northern Canada to Iceland.

Many of our clearances could be organised by Dave Gannon and Mike Gray at Overflight on the Isle of Man who had done a great job for Q and me on our '97 trip. However, I knew that east of Thailand it would be up to me, namely clearances for Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Russia. All British Embassies en route would have to be notified and many of the clearances would have to go through diplomatic channels.

The actual plotting of the route could be done on our computers using Jeppesen's excellent Flite Star programme – an essential for anyone planning any kind of trip. With the Flite Star programme you can put in routes and get airport information, programme times, fuel consumption and fuel availability (though the latter should always be checked). For a world record we would have to cover at least 23,502.80 statute miles (20,437.22 nautical miles, 36,787.559 kilometres).

We needed charts giving topographical detail and charts plotting airways – all the countries heading east (as we would be doing) between Europe and Alaska would require us to fly airways just like any commercial airliner, although not at their altitudes. Chart plotting was fun, your imagination runs free – mine more than Colin's. He was looking for direct routes all the time, while I was happy to make minor detours for ultimate scenery.

Technical sponsors were also needed. G-MURY was equipped with everything required for long-distance travel from my '97 trip. The most important item required was an auxiliary fuel tank which held a further 60 US gallons (240 litres) of fuel. I needed another one for G-JEFA, the brand-new R44 that was delivered in January 2000, which I was going to use as the camera helicopter. At least this time I knew who to go to as finding the auxiliary tank from our previous trip had been a nightmare. Premiere Fuels, the only British company I could find who had the capability and the CAA certification, was running at full production making fuel tanks for 60 per cent of the world's racing cars and had said they could not help. I found a company in the USA who could make one, but it meant that G-MURY had to be American-owned and registered. I

was going to sell it to a friend for a dollar (with a signed proviso that I could buy it back for the same amount!) Then Premiere said they could do it after all, but the CAA said it would have to be tested and that the tank would have to be able to withstand a 40-foot drop. I argued that the tank would be the only thing to survive such an impact and to carry out the test would require making a second tank – I could afford neither the time nor the money. The CAA were finally persuaded to forgo the test but insisted on frequent inspections. I ended up with a state-of-the-art, double-skinned, foam-filled tank with two electrically operated pumps. That was '97, this time I knew the route to go.

Besides the fuel tank I needed GPSs (Global Positioning Systems), radios, fuel low meters and survival equipment consisting of life rafts, survival suits, life jackets, EPIRBs (Emergency Radio Beacons) and three-minute air supply units (small canisters of air that we would strap onto our flight suits for water crossings – a life-saver if you are trapped inside a fast-sinking helicopter).

The support plane needed to run on jet fuel, be cheap, economical to run, have a good payload and have a minimum airspeed as close to ours as possible. Islanders and Cessna Caravans fell into that category so Colin and I started to search for either of those. There was just so much to organise.

I was pretty much on my own in the planning for the first few months, although Colin and I were in constant communication by fax, e-mail and phone – oh the joy of modern communications. Colin lived in Nottingham, some 200 miles north of London, making a living as a microlight instructor with a young family to support. When not working he was helping his partner Michelle with their children, Sarah aged nine and Peter aged six. They are lovely children, but Peter suffers from brain damage and is a diabetic requiring round-the-clock care. Colin had promised Michelle that he wouldn't go on another venture unless he could raise enough money for a down payment on a larger house. On his last trip to Australia, much to Michelle's dismay, he ended up selling his car to meet the costs. I had also assured Simon that, if I took on another challenge, it wouldn't cost him a penny, that I would have it all covered by sponsors. In '97 he ended up being the principal cash sponsor but I hoped it would be easier the second time round. I felt confident that, with Colin and I both having a track record, sponsorship wouldn't be too much of a problem . . . I was horribly mistaken.

Getting round safely the first time was not a bad advert for the helicopter. I had high hopes that Frank Robinson would support me on

the second round-the-world flight, this time solo. I wrote to him, telling him of my plans and how I thought I had met all his previous requirements. I was now much more experienced and had done a major preparatory trip. I got a four-line letter back: 'Jennifer, you are absolutely mad, or else you take a sadistic pleasure in putting me through three months of not knowing whether you are going to make it or not. Anyway, good luck' – not exactly the response I was hoping for!

In January 1999, Simon's godson, Jamie McCallum, came on board to help me with fund-raising. He had recently formed his own sports marketing consultancy firm after four years with Damon Hill and two years with IMG. Jamie designed a very sexy brochure and we sent out hundreds of them, but we got virtually nothing back.

Our first priority was to find a TV/Documentary/Internet company who would be interested in getting involved, as that would cover both PR and sponsorship. Jamie suggested we get in touch with Quokka Sports, an Internet company making extreme sports websites. It was a young and vibrant set-up with headquarters in San Francisco. We had many meetings with them and at one point it looked as though they might come on board. We even got to the stage of working out details such as the cameramen who would be required. Disappointingly, though, they then got a new head of programming who was more interested in sport than extreme sport and Quokka fell by the wayside.

British Aerospace, for whom we did presentations at Farnborough and Woodford, looked good for a while, as did Iridium whom we visited in Washington DC. They were a white-hot hope, until they went bankrupt.

Whilst in Washington, Colin and I had a meeting with Russell Lee, curator of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington. They had already expressed an interest in having my helicopter G-MURY for permanent display after my first trip. We suggested they might like to have Colin's microlight as well, if, of course, we both made it round. Russell was enthusiastic and thought it would make a very interesting display in their new museum, due to open at Dulles Airport in 2003. This was good news – potential sponsors would fully appreciate the PR value of their logo being viewed year after year by millions of visitors.

HSBC looked like a possibility at one stage. We attended several meetings and made presentations, but were then told 'Sorry, but no.' Morale was proving difficult to sustain.

On the more positive side, however, while we had been in America visiting Quokka, I had suggested that we also travel to New York to see Tommy Hilfiger who had generously sponsored me in '97. This time they

were even more generous, giving us £250,000, meaning that we just needed another £550,000 to reach our target. Thank God for designer sportswear.

Then I met Michael Johnson, when he and his wife Susan came to lunch at our house in Somerset. Michael worked for Pacific Century Cyber Works (PCCW) in Hong Kong, of which Simon was a director. They were setting up a huge Internet 'content' production centre in London called NOW (Network of the World), which was a joint effort between Mark McCormack's IMG (who own TWI, Trans World International, the world's biggest distributors of sporting TV programmes) and PCCW, controlled by Richard Li (son of Kah Shing Li) in Hong Kong. Michael was telling us all about this new venture, how it would be the first fully convergent TV and Internet company. They planned to launch a terrestrial TV channel – initially for the Middle and Far East, then hopefully worldwide – on which they would give their Internet website programmes time. They hoped that for every minute of TV time they would generate ten minutes of on-line website time. The website would be worldwide from the start. What interested me was that they were looking for extreme sports programmes.

'Michael, I think I am exactly what you are looking for,' I said and went on to explain what I was planning. He was excited and said, 'As luck would have it I am having dinner tonight with the head of programming for TWI, Bill Sinrich. I will pass it by him and see what he has to say.' Bill Sinrich liked the idea. The following week Michael saw Mark McCormack in Hong Kong who also liked it. Richard Li immediately agreed. Michael confirmed: 'We're on'. I immediately phoned Colin with the news – celebrations all round.

That was in June 1999, and it all seemed too good to be true. I asked Michael about acquiring other sponsors and was told, 'We have hundreds of people whose job it is to raise millions of dollars, the best thing you can do is do nothing.' Wonderful? It certainly appeared to be. I finally got a full-time secretary, the lovely Jo Jo (Joanna Peyton-Jones) who provided some much-needed help in the office. Jo Jo is a friend of my daughter Suze, and one of life's great enthusiasts.

One month, two months, three months passed; time was ticking away. We had nothing in writing from NOW and Michael never answered my phone calls. I appreciated that he was working flat out trying to get his new company launched by the end of the year. In the meantime, however, I was eating into Simon's bank account and saving the Tommy Hilfiger funding for the journey. We heard from NOW that there were delays and still more delays. I couldn't afford to do nothing but sit and wait, so we

went ahead with looking for technical sponsors. There was so much that we needed: all the avionics, survival equipment, charts and a fuel sponsor. We couldn't wait for those hundreds of people to raise millions of pounds. We had felt so confident that NOW would come up with the sponsors, but now panic started to set in as it began to look as though things weren't running as smoothly as we had thought.

Jamie took on a partner, James Barker, and Jamie's friend, Nick Harris, who ran his own small PR company, took on our account together with Jason Brake who worked for him. Jo Jo's friend, James Fletcher, pitched in with invaluable computer and technical support. The pace was fraught and we just prayed every day that NOW would come through. We were haemorrhaging cash and I was desperately trying to keep calm.

The fuel situation was critical. If NOW didn't come through we desperately needed a fuel sponsor. I contacted Tommy Thompson, a good friend of Simon's who lives in Texas and is, or was, in oil. On the fuel front he couldn't help, but when I mentioned my concerns about Russian clearances he said that I must meet Maestro Mstislav Rostropovitch, the world's greatest living cellist and one of the greatest conductors on earth. The Maestro was passionate about a charity called Medicalogic, of which he is chairman. Medicalogic organise and raise funds to vaccinate Russian children against childhood diseases – polio, measles etc. – vaccinations that we take for granted in the West. Tommy thought we might be able to do something together for our respective charities. Operation Smile, the charity that Colin and I were supporting, is very active in Russia and has operated on over 1,500 children there and would be operating on a further 350 in Tomsk later in the year. That all sounded good on the charity front, therefore, but didn't help the fuel situation.

Another problem area was the route, which had to be changed so many times. Originally we had planned to go east, straight through Russia from St Petersburg to Provideniya, across the Bering Strait, then loop down through North America, into Central and South America, going about 300 miles up the Amazon before turning north and enjoying a slow passage through the Caribbean. I had hoped to get a large fuel sponsor on board who would treat the whole route through Russia as a major challenge and PR event, but this didn't happen and the quote I got from the Russians for fuel was US\$250,000. A route change was called for.

To qualify for a world record you have to do the mileage, but you also have to cross 'x' number of meridians within the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. This latter criteria was introduced by the FAI (Federation Aviation International) after Mike Smith (Q's father) and Steve Goode's

record attempt in 1997. Mike and Steve were attempting a speed record in Steve's Hughes 500. They were hoping to beat Ron Bower and John Williams' record of the previous year. What Mike and Steve did was fly around the North Pole (a very, very brave venture), which dealt with all the meridians, and then they flew up and down in the States until they had achieved the mileage. The FAI said it wasn't in the spirit of the game and argued that they were short of the pole by several hundred yards. The judgement was very tough, their instruments weren't reading accurately due to magnetic interference and they were unable to prove that they had made it. They planned to make another attempt but Steve tragically died the following year whilst flying his Hughes 500 with a friend in Germany.

Having decided on a new route we had to get clearances, and at this stage we didn't know for sure how many aircraft were going and who would be on board. This also caused a problem with the umpteen visas that were required. Jo Jo was working hard on these with visa agents, Visa Express, while Dave Gannon was working flat out on clearances as far as Thailand. I was getting on with the rest of the clearances and coordinating the whole show. Jim Cunliffe at Mainair, the manufacturers of Colin's Blade 912S flexiwing microlight, generously came through with full sponsorship of the aircraft. Colin would be installing all the avionics.

All this planning was going on but we still had no confirmation of sponsorship from NOW. Then, just seven weeks before our intended departure, disaster struck – heart-stopping news. This is my diary entry from that terrible day:

To think that Michael Johnson gave us a verbal contract last September and then I have a phone conversation with Rob Banagan from NOW – eight months later. I asked him why the continued delay over approval of the budget and he said – 'Well, your dates don't fit with ours and we're not sure that we are prepared to finance it.' Went cold all over, just felt numb. [I was in France, all on my own, Simon was in Hong Kong.] Glorious day outside, all our plans in tatters, feel like giving up, no more strength. After all the sweat and effort and MJ having told us not to look for any more sponsors, and then this, it's sickening. Got to get a grip of myself. Took the dogs for a walk – think, plan, this is why other people haven't done it before etc. – be positive.

I put all the facts in an urgent fax to Simon. I spoke to him on the phone and told him that we could delay our departure by three weeks in the hope

of being more compatible with the delayed launch of the NOW website, now scheduled for the last week of June, but that was the very latest we could go. It left us with little margin for the Greenland crossing, but if NOW backed out we'd be going nowhere.

Simon was seeing Richard Li the next day and would talk to him. I couldn't sleep that night so I watched a harrowing movie in French, cried and phoned Simon again at 2 a.m. my time. At 8 a.m. he phoned, he was 'yet again my hero', all was sorted and Richard Li had said 'consider it done, I will phone Michael Johnson right away.' Sure enough, suddenly, thankfully, it was all action in the NOW camp.

Then I got a call from Tommy Thompson, 'Can you come to lunch next week in Paris with Slava Rostropovitch and myself?' I agreed, although it felt a little extravagant going all the way to Paris for a lunch. (Tommy, I later found out, came all the way from Texas, a 24-hour turnaround, just for the lunch.)

I was thrilled at the prospect of meeting the Maestro in person and I was not disappointed, what a gentleman. He had a lovely twinkle in his eye as he said, 'but Jeffokha, I am already a little in love with you and now I am going to worry about you for three months!' He also said, 'Jeffokha [his Russian interpretation of Jennifer], I think you should come to Moscow to meet the people who have made your journey possible.' So off I went and I asked Q to come too, as Colin was up to his ears doing all the electrics on his microlight.

We never underestimated the importance of our Russian clearances or the work involved. There is so much you must put in place, so many people you must talk to, a route to be agreed upon and a final application to be made through both the civil aviation and diplomatic channels. We had done it all before, but that time it was only for one aircraft. Moscow was a priority.

Slava was a star – he opened every door. We met Gennady Velikovskiy, Head of Air Traffic Control for all of Russia, a man who had only been a voice to me for many years, and through whom I had got our '97 clearances. We also met his boss (I had previously assumed Velikovskiy was the top man), Andrei Andreev. They couldn't do enough for us, all because of Slava. Slava has near God-like status in Russia, and here he was giving me the time of day; me whom he'd only met once before in a restaurant in Paris.

Meanwhile NOW continued in high gear – at last. We would be called 'The NOW Challenge' and yes, they did want the Cessna Caravan as a support plane, and yes, they did want a camera helicopter. The excitement was building, 'D-Day' was fast approaching – and we had the money!

The engineers at HeliAir were servicing my helicopter, G-MURY. They had to reinstall my auxiliary fuel tank, fuel flow meter, new Bose headsets,

new Sky Force GPS and a Garmin GNS430, but they went into overdrive in order to fit out the new camera helicopter G-JEFA for which all the same avionics had to be installed, plus a radar altimeter and a turn and bank indicator. (G-MURY only has a seven-hole instrument panel, G-JEFA has a nine-hole with room for the extra avionics.)

Our technical sponsors (who had all come on board during the agonising wait for NOW) – Steve Gubbins at Garmin, Dick Merriott at Bose, John Prior at Bendix King (Honeywell), Alan Lathan at Jeppesen's and Andrew Dawson at H.R. Smith – all came up trumps with yet more sponsorship on their products.

Then NOW said they absolutely had to have satellite communication tracker systems in my helicopter and Colin's microlight so that people could follow our every move on the website. This required a major modification certificate from the CAA – a process that normally takes around six months. The CAA were also extremely helpful, pushing it through in a matter of days. But it landed Colin, beavering away in his garage in Nottingham, with a mammoth increase in electrical installation on his microlight, and, of course, increased the workload for the engineers working on G-MURY.

Jo Jo was rushing around in ever-tighter circles; together we were fielding the increasing barrage of phone calls, faxes and e-mails and she now had to get visas for five more people: the cameramen and pilots of the support aircraft. The take-off from Brooklands required yet more of her time in organising tents, catering, press conference facilities etc. James Fletcher was talking with our technical sponsors and getting supplementary charts for the other aircraft from Jeppesen's, and Jamie McCallum and James Barker had the task of sorting out our contract with NOW and making sure all our sponsors were happy. I agreed to everything that NOW requested as I was so desperate to ensure their sponsorship and to avoid further delays. I even signed away all editorial rights and royalties on video footage.

Colin and I went for a meeting with Rob Banagan at NOW, who asked whether we had any special criteria for cameramen. 'Yes, they need to be lightweight and have the spirit of adventure, prepared to rough it and be team players.' Rob thought we should have fresh cameramen every couple of weeks, or at least every month. He thought they would get burnt out if they had to stay the course. I argued for keeping the same team all the way for continuity and added that I thought any cameraman would be reluctant to be taken off such an amazing challenge. Colin was less certain, saying that cameramen probably weren't as crazy as us. He was right! God,

I wished that I'd listened to Rob's advice but at the time I didn't appreciate just how exhausting their workload would be.

Al Edgington (director, cameraman), Pat Davey (cameraman, technician) and Dave Ullman (technician) joined the team (although Dave would be 'on and off'). They all seemed very pleasant and enthusiastic. Al, aged 28, failed dismally on the lightweight proviso as he was 6 ft 2 in. and weighed in at 15 stone. Easygoing Al looked apologetically down at himself and said 'Will I do?' His credentials were good; he had been on many overseas assignments in tough places and, it turned out, was at prep school with my son Justin. Pat, gum-chewing Pat, whose conversation was constantly punctuated with 'cool', met the weight spec and seemed well-suited to the task. Dave, also slight of build, was friendly with everyone.

There was no time to get to know each other before the expedition, to see whether we worked well as a team. I accepted them, weight, chewing gum, cool and all.

The camera helicopter was to be flown by Q, who was now looking the part, sporting wavy blond locks down to his shoulders, a ginger moustache and goatee beard, which he was constantly stroking. Q is a superb pilot, intelligent, entertaining and full of charm. His flip side is that he's lazy, has chronic time-keeping and is prone to erratic bursts of energy that surface at inopportune times. All in all, he's good news in small doses. He had caused me a fair amount of stress on our first flight around the world and many people advised me against having him along on the second trip. Colin and my family were among those with reservations, saying that there were thousands of ace pilots who would give anything to go on a trip like this. I argued that we had already worked together as a team, I liked him, I thought I could count on his loyalty and support – and I guess there was an element of better the devil you know. There were lots of reasons for choosing Q. The helicopters were serviced and maintained by his family company and, besides, he was virtually 'family'. His sister Sasha is married to my sister's son John, I had introduced them and Sasha was about to have a baby. I reckoned that he would be a great support, that the rest of the team wouldn't tolerate prima donna behaviour and lateness. I was wrong, however, and my mistake was to make for difficult times ahead.

The Cessna Caravan was a single-engine turbo prop aeroplane piloted by Heinz Rust, 62 years old, and co-pilot James Davey who was in his early thirties. The cameramen, Al Edgington and Pat Davey, would alternate between the two aircraft. I have known Heinz and his wife Barbara for many, many years, they are good friends from Hong Kong. Heinz is very experienced: a good fixed-wing pilot and more recently a helicopter pilot.

He's flown the world and sailed the seven seas and looks a bit like a pirate. In fact he's Swiss, a successful architect, very methodical and imbued with plenty of the spirit of adventure. On this adventure, Heinz and Colin turned out to be the best teammates you could possibly ask for. Without them I wouldn't have made it.

James Davey, a nice, dark-haired, good-looking young man came with the Cessna Caravan, G-EELS, which was owned by Peter Wood. We had finally found G-EELS at Gloucester Airport where it was available for hire. Peter Wood runs a small business out of Gloucester Airport ferrying glass eels around Europe. Happily for us, the timing of our challenge was 'off season' for glass eels, so James and G-EELS were available. Peter was anxious to keep James happy and asked if James's girlfriend, Pascal Lejeune, might join us in Vancouver and travel in the Cessna as far as Boston. I told him that, much as I would like to be accommodating, the Cessna was for NOW's use and I was anxious to keep the numbers to a minimum. But, if there was space available, we might perhaps be able to take her along for a couple of hops.

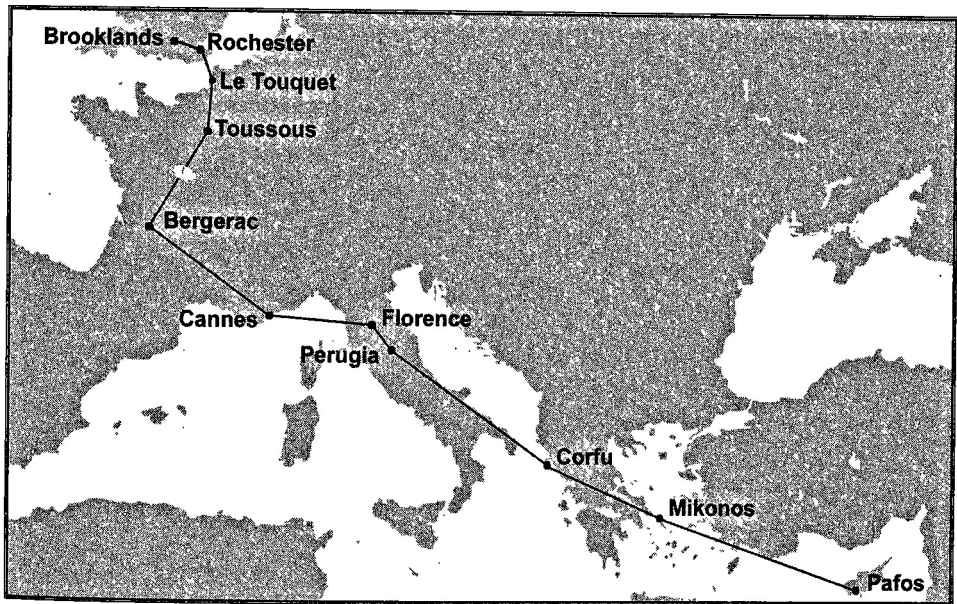
Eighteen months of planning were behind us. We had our sponsors, we were The Now Challenge and Colin and I were as ready as we could hope to be – ready to fly solo around the world. And the world was going to be able to share our great adventure over the Internet. But we were short on time. With every delay the pressure would increase. It was already the monsoon season in India and Burma. It would be the typhoon season by the time we got to Hong Kong and Japan and we could anticipate hurricanes in America. Already we were asking the question, could we make Greenland before the end of the short Arctic summer?

We had our aircraft, we had our team of pilots and cameramen – we were a team of seven (eight when Dave Ullman was with us). There were great times ahead, but from the start I should have established my authority and laid down some rules: who should do what; who was answerable to who. I failed to do so. Wrongly, I had believed that everyone was imbued with my own spirit of adventure and I never appreciated how much greater the stress levels and workload would be with a team of seven versus the two we had been in '97. The long hours, the risks, the bureaucracy, the danger, the tiredness and being confined to each other's company for so many days – all would take their toll.

ONE

Brooklands to Cyprus

31 May - 7 June



DAY 1

I woke at 5 a.m. Gone were the fears and doubts of the night before when I had lain in bed trying to sleep and the full force, the enormity of what I was about to attempt had hit me. I was about to embark on a journey that no woman had ever done before – to fly solo around the world in a helicopter. What was I doing? What had I taken on? How dared I think that I, a woman fast approaching her 60th birthday, could take on such a challenge? It would be a daunting enough prospect for anyone in the prime of life, for a young person with lightning-quick reactions



Biography

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Photograph: On an iceberg in Greenland

