



# Heritage Notes

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*"I stumble out of the plane and sink to my knees in muck and stand there foolishly staring, not at the lifeless land, but at my watch. Twenty-one hours and twenty-five minutes. Atlantic flight. Abingdon, England, to a nameless swamp -- non-stop. A Cape Breton Islander found me -- a fisherman trudging over the bog saw the Gull with her tail in the air and her nose buried, and then he saw me floundering in the embracing soil of his native land."*<sup>1</sup>

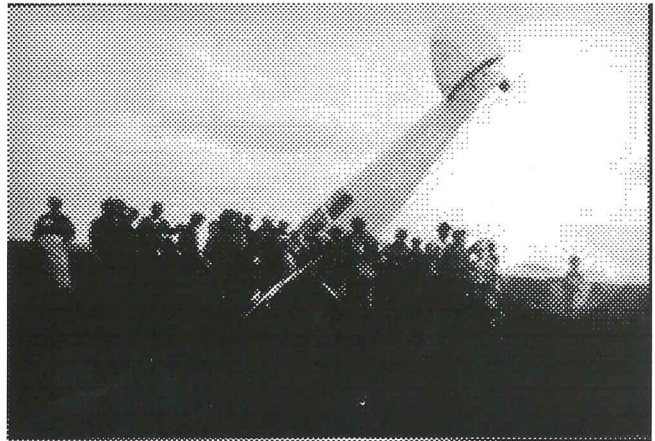
## **BERYL MARKHAM'S GREAT ADVENTURE: ABINGDON TO BALEINE, SEPTEMBER 5, 1936**

**Charles A. Burke**

In *West With The Night*, Beryl Markham described her Kenyan childhood and subsequent career as bush-pilot, big game spotter, horse breeder and successful transatlantic flyer. The book enjoyed immense popularity, but despite praise for one of the century's most remarkable persons, her deeds were forgotten. Except in Cape Breton where, for a brief period in 1936, this fearless pioneer aviator put Cape Breton in the news, and allowed the people of Baleine to witness her aerial conquest of the Atlantic Ocean.

Beryl Clutterbuck was born in England in 1902, emigrating with her father to Kenya in 1906. Her extraordinary early life was spent on a vast farm in the remote Kenyan Highlands where she learned African languages and acquired the skill to spear a lion. As a teenager, Beryl turned to training her father's horses and within a year captured a prestigious Derby. By twenty-four, she had won most of Kenya's racing prizes and was one of the Colony's most prominent young women.

In 1927, Beryl married Mansfield Markham and moved to London. When the marriage failed, Beryl returned to Nairobi where she met the renowned big game hunter Denys Finch Hatton. Finch Hatton soon introduced Beryl to flying and she mastered aviation with Tom Campbell Black, a respected pilot of the era. She obtained her licence in 1930 and, at twenty-eight, was the first woman to hold a commercial licence in Kenya. In 1931, she undertook a solo flight between Nairobi and London in a single-engine plane without a radio or directional device. The twenty-three-day flight over vast uncharted regions of the Sudan, the Sahara and over the Mediterranean to Europe and London was a formidable



**Beryl Markham's plane "The Messenger" after her landing in Baleine on September 5, 1936**

accomplishment. Within several years Beryl acquired an enviable record flying mail and passengers throughout East Africa. At twenty-nine she owned two planes, had pioneered aerial big-game spotting, and knew the great white hunters, from Ernest Hemingway to the Prince of Wales.

By 1936, Beryl had flown the Nairobi to London route six times and now turned to aviation's final prize. She resolved to fly solo from England to America the hard way, east to west against the prevailing winds. Many of the thirty-nine transatlantic attempts to 1936 had failed. Only Jim Mollison had made the eastern crossing and Beryl hoped to beat his shorter 1932 flight from Ireland to New Brunswick. To make "the waterjump" Beryl required a new plane which Lord Carberry, a Kenyan acquaintance



and pilot, agreed to provide.

Many aviation historians consider the Percival Vega Gull one of the prettiest planes ever built. Equipped with a 200hp de Havilland Gypsy six engine, the plane cruised at 163mph. Named "The Messenger," the turquoise and silver Gull was fitted with an additional fuel tank increasing its range to 3800 miles.

By 1936, female aviators were like Hollywood stars and the press stalked Beryl relentlessly. They regularly diminished her credentials with repeated depictions of her as the "willowy ash-blond" or simply as "Blondie." English papers called her a "society woman" or the "Fly-girl." The Cape Breton Record called Beryl "the stately blonde woman flyer," the Halifax Herald called her a "blond huntress," and the New York Times described her as a "tall, athletic-looking society matron." Forced to defend her ability, Beryl wrote, "*Two weeks from now I am going to set out to fly the Atlantic to New York. Not as a society girl. Not as a woman even. And certainly not as a stunt aviator. But as a ... graduate of one of the hardest schools known, with 2000 flying hours to my credit ... It is true that I am a society woman. But what of it? The only thing that really counts ... is whether one can fly ... I can take an engine apart and put it back ... given ordinary luck I am sure I can fly to New York. This is to be no stunt flight.*"<sup>2</sup>

Bad weather dashed her plan to leave on September 1. Then, on September 4, the sky cleared and Beryl ordered the plane from its hangar. Despite an air ministry advisory not to leave, the crew started the Messenger's engine at 6:30 P.M.. According to a report, Beryl "*Lit a last cigarette, with hands which visibly trembled. She turned to climb into the cabin and then over her shoulder she smiled at [Jim] Mollison, calling above the roar of the engine 'Good bye, Good Luck' He waved and she opened the throttle. The blocks were yanked from under the plane's wheels and the 'Messenger' moved forward with rapidly increasing speed down the mile long runway.*"<sup>3</sup> The small plane cleared Abingdon at 6:50 P.M. bound for the Atlantic Ocean.

Alone, high above the Atlantic in poor visibility, Beryl flew west with the night. Without a radio to coordinate her location, she remained truly alone. Beryl flew all night and most of the next day by instrument. She battled furious headwinds, sleet, rain, and drizzle. She fought weariness and fatigue. Throughout the flight she could not remove her hands from the controls and spilled coffee in buffeting winds when she tried. At one point, attempting to gain altitude and rise above the storm, she realized with horror she had been flying upside down, barely above the ocean crest. Night flying with its ceaseless, dark passage of mile after mile was notoriously demanding. Beryl wrote, "*Being alone in an airplane for even so short a*

*time as a night and a day, irrevocably alone, with nothing to observe but your instruments and your own hands in semi darkness, nothing to contemplate but the size of your small courage, nothing to wonder about but the beliefs, the faces, and the hopes rooted in your mind ~ such an experience can be as startling as the first awareness of a stranger walking by your side at night.*"<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the world waited. Wireless operators reported the Messenger over Ireland. The Cape Breton Record reported the SS Paarndam had sighted the plane 220 miles SW of St. John's, Newfoundland, and the Halifax Herald wrote, "*Somewhere in the drenching darkness of the high skies over the angry North Atlantic, Mrs. Beryl Markham, fought her lone way westward through the dread hours before the dawn today.*"<sup>5</sup>

By midmorning, the first sign of trouble occurred when the plane's gas line froze. Suddenly the engine sputtered, failed, started and failed again. Rapidly losing altitude, Beryl controlled the plane's descent, hoping to find land before the engine failed completely. With the world focused on her New York arrival, the plane descended toward the ocean. However, fate intervened that September 5. Gliding out of the cloud, Beryl spotted land and bringing the plane about made a forced, but perfect, landing in a Baleine bog, 300 feet from the ocean. After 1800 miles, most of it in storm and darkness, Beryl Markham brought her "Messenger" safely to ground only 25 miles off course.

At first, the twenty residents of Baleine thought it was "*just another plane.*" When it flew over Baleine that day, William Vincent Burke noted something was wrong. "*[The plane] dove straight down and zoomed up again, missing the telephone wires between my house and [another] by about eight feet. Then she circled in the direction of the swamp, climbing way up and ... over a hill and down into the swamp.*"<sup>6</sup>

William and Joe Burke ran quickly to the plane, overtaking Edward and John Perry and Charlie Burke, berry picking in the bog. They told reporters she was on the verge of collapse when they reached her. As Beryl climbed out of the plane, she said, "*I'm Mrs. Markham. I've just flown from England.*" Many years later, William Burke recalled her asking "*What part of Newfoundland am I in? I told her you're not in Newfoundland, you came from there far as I know - yes, she said, that's true, but I thought I was in Newfoundland still. No, I told her and she asked how far she was from a town or a city and I told her how far she was from Louisbourg and how far she was from Sydney.*"<sup>7</sup> Her rescuers first brought Beryl to Fred and Sadie Perry's home, and then to Alexander Burke's house.

From there, she telephoned Louisbourg operator, Edith MacInnis. Beryl said, "*I am Mrs. Markham. I have*



*just crash-landed my aeroplane. I would like the airport notified and could you also ask someone to send a taxi for me.*"<sup>8</sup> Louisbourg's Captain George Lewis drove immediately to Baleine returning Beryl to his home where she received assistance from Dr. Freeman O'Neil.

After lunch, Beryl phoned Jim Mollison in London, whose wristwatch she displayed to reporters noting it had now made three trips over the Atlantic. Outside the Lewis home hundreds gathered to meet her. She told one reporter, "*I'm feeling fine you know. After all it's nice to have landed right side up on my first visit to America.*"<sup>9</sup>

An interview that night was broadcast on the national CBC network and a local paper published a verbatim account. "*I was confident the flight would be successful despite the advance reports I received of bad weather over the ocean and I didn't lose a bit of that confidence until I looked at the gas gauge ... [and] I had visions of going down in the Atlantic.*

*However I was near land so I tried to make the airport at Sydney. Just a few hundred yards offshore the engine died, so I just picked a good landing spot, at least the best I could see, and headed for it.*

*Fortunately it was a soft spot. The plane nosed over and cracked up but luckily I wasn't seriously injured. I got a bump on the forehead and a cut over one eye and felt terribly tired, but I accomplished my objective of being the first woman to fly the Atlantic east to west.*"<sup>10</sup>

The next day Beryl told the press, "*It was a great adventure. But I'm so glad it's over. I really had a terrible time. That's the only word for it - terrible ... Fifteen seconds more and I believe my aeroplane and I would have gone down on the water and no one would have ever known what became of us.*"<sup>11</sup>

The demand for the story became so intense that even Sydney's Strand Theatre hired William V. Burke to relate his version of the event to a large audience.

The day after the landing, Beryl motored to Baleine with Captain Lewis to examine the Messenger. Disappointed at falling short of New York, her mood became buoyant as dozens of onlookers and crowds of reporters stood next to the Messenger, still nose-deep in the bog. Revelling in the good cheer, Beryl said, "*I thought I was in Lapland ... and when I trudged around that bog up to my knees for what seemed hours I thought I was going to perish for sure.*"<sup>12</sup> After several interviews she left for Sydney airport and a flight to Halifax.

From Halifax, Beryl flew to Floyd Bennet Field, New York where thousands cheered her arrival. Mayor Fiorello La Guardia welcomed her to the United States with a motorcade through Manhattan. After a rest in the Ritz - Carleton Hotel, she attended the Avon Theatre for a radio interview with Milton Berle. "*Did you have*

*anything to drink, Mrs. Markham?" "Yes I did ... I had a drink of brandy" "Just one?" he asked, "No", she replied, "Two swigs, I'm afraid".*<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, another story unfolded in Baleine where Lord Carberry had hired Ray Goodwin of the Sydney Flying Club to salvage his plane. Goodwin employed thirteen fishermen and two mechanics and brought in truckloads of timber, cable, and two rotary jacks. During the salvage, Mounties guarded the plane from large crowds of souvenir hunters. Two years earlier, when Jim and Amy Mollison crashed in Connecticut after their Atlantic crossing, 9000 spectators stripped the plane in two hours. In contrast, police reported very little was removed from Markham's plane.

After extracting the "Messenger" from the bog, workers towed it on railroad ties to the water's edge and hoisted the plane aboard Captain Dan Harris' small barge, the National 11. The seven-mile tow to Louisbourg proved tedious and dangerous, taking three hours in a rough sea. At one point they considered cutting the barge loose with the potential loss of the plane and four men. In 1936, Louisbourg was a sleepy fishing port most of the year but when the Messenger arrived that September 27, a crowd of 750 persons assembled to see the plane.

The following day, workers loaded the Messenger aboard Abe Cameron's truck for Halifax, but refused a permit for the wide load they shipped the plane instead on Interprovincial steamer "Ulva", arriving on October 2.

By now, Lord Carberry refused Beryl the use of the plane even though the agreement included an American lecture and flying tour. These events would have raised her profile and made a fortune as well. Instead, Carberry ordered the plane returned to England aboard the Oriole Line Freighter, SS Cold Harbour. When stevedores unloaded the "Messenger" from London's West India Dock on October 17, the Daily Express reported "*No One Raised a Cheer.*" Only seven people gathered to witness the Messenger's arrival, far less than the cheering crowd in Louisbourg three weeks before.

From England, Lord Carberry shipped the plane to Kenya and sold it the following year. The new owner abandoned the "Messenger" at the Dar Es Salaam Airport in East Tanganyika and when Beryl saw the plane years later, she wrote: "*I tried to climb into the cockpit and stepped onto the wing but it just collapsed under me and went a bit further toward Africa.*"<sup>14</sup>

Back in New York, Beryl's triumph was cut short by the news of Tom Campbell Black's tragic death. The news crushed Beryl and she returned to England on the Queen Mary. On the voyage, she signed a contract for the movie rights to her story with fellow passenger Jack Cohen of Columbia Pictures.



For several years Beryl lived alone and directionless. She talked of flying and hoped to enter another race but lacked spirit. Living in London, and cut off from her Royal friends, Beryl was unable to resume her former lifestyle but as an acquaintance remarked, “*she was always beautifully dressed and always in the middle of anything that was going on.*”<sup>15</sup> By 1937, impoverished, bankrupt, and unable to finance a plane, Beryl sailed for New York and a Columbia Pictures screen test.

Her arrival in Hollywood coincided with Amelia Earhart’s disappearance. As an expert commentator, the press rediscovered Beryl’s presence. After failing the screen test, her personality still opened doors in the elite clubs and homes of Hollywood. But, after five months, she returned to Africa. While there, she attempted to purchase a new plane but, by 1938, the British Air Ministry’s control of civilian flying made it an impossible quest. After three months, she returned to London. In the year leading up to WW2, Beryl drifted through the city. Citing a member of the Royal Family as a co-respondent, Markham divorced her. Beryl was thirty-seven and destitute in 1939 when Hollywood offered to film her life story. Abandoning wartime London for the lights of Hollywood, Beryl left England for the last time.

Although the film didn’t materialize, the studio employed Beryl as a technical advisor on safari and aviation films. Rejoining her Hollywood friends, she married writer Raoul Shumacher and began her African Memoir, “*West With the Night*”. By 1940, separated and penniless again, she moved to the Bahamas, joining her old friend, the former King Edward VIII, now Governor, and his wife Wallace Simpson. Settled into the Mansion, she continued writing and when the book was published in 1942, it received instant acclaim. The success however was obscured by WW2 and, in 1950, Beryl returned to Africa.

Beryl was forty-eight years old when she arrived in Kenya - broke, sick, homeless, and with few supporters. Half a century of notoriety, high living, and risk had devastated her mental and physical health and over the next eight years she concentrated on regaining both. Once restored, she returned to horse breeding and training. Despite a thirty year absence, horsemen recalled her earlier success and provided horses to train. Between 1958 and 1972, Beryl dominated the Kenyan and South African racing circuit winning six Kenyan Derbies and five Top Trainer Awards.

Beryl lived her later years in near poverty, alone in a cottage at the Nairobi Race Course. Although the 1983 republication of her book and its appearance on best seller lists for forty-two weeks provided a short respite, the success was too late. In deteriorating health, she tripped

and shattered her hip. Pneumonia developed and she died on August 4, 1986, one month short of the 50th anniversary of her famous flight. She was eighty-four.

Years earlier, Beryl wrote, “*I have learned that if you must leave a place that you have lived in and loved and where all your yesterdays are buried deep; leave it any way except a slow way, leave it the fastest way you can. Never turn back and never believe that an hour you remember is a better hour because it is dead. Passed years seem safe ones ... while the future lives in a cloud, formidable from a distance. The cloud clears as you enter it. I have learned this but, like everyone, I learned it late.*”<sup>16</sup>

Beryl Markham lived an extraordinary life. In a letter to be published after her departure from Abingdon, Beryl wrote, “*In describing my as yet unaccomplished but no doubt amazing exploit -- please give me credit for being an ordinary human being without too many of the conventional virtues ... I am neither an innocent girl from the country nor a city slicker, but an ocean flyer in embryo. If I can dispense with the last two words I will be more than satisfied.*”<sup>17</sup>

#### Endnotes

1. Beryl Markham. West With The Night. North Point Press, San Francisco, 1983, p.290. Hereafter cited as WWTN.
2. Daily Express, 19/8/36.
3. Halifax Herald, 5/9/36, p.4.
4. WWTN, p. 283.
5. Halifax Herald, 5/9/36, p.1.
6. Cape Breton Record, 7/9/36, p.7.
7. Taped Interview with William V. Burke. CBC Radio. Sydney. 1971
8. Mary Lovell, Straight on Till Morning, St. Martin’s Press, New York., 1987. p.175. Hereafter cited as SOTM.
9. Cape Breton Record, Special Edition, 5/9/36, p.1
10. Cape Breton Record, 7/9/36.
11. Daily Express, 7/9/36.
12. Cape Breton Record, 7/9/36, p.1.
13. SOTM, p.184.
14. SOTM, p. 198.
15. SOTM, p. 202.
16. WWTN, p.131.
17. Halifax Herald, 5/9/36, p.1.

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