

Flying Back In Time

Returning to the ageless Rétroplane event held in Hautes-Vosges, France in 2007.

[Chris Williams](#)



Author's one last flight with the Skylark before the long journey home.

In a world increasingly dominated by short attention spans and instant gratification, it's good to know that there are still some people around who aren't immune to some of the traditional values:

'You are old, father William' the young man said, 'And your hair has become

very white; And yet you incessantly stand on your head, do you think, at your age, it is right?'

OK, perhaps my outlook is being increasingly tempered by the advancing years, but I'll have you know I'm not the only one, and thus it was that three pilotes anciens Anglais went to France at the beginning of July to mingle with a polyglot bunch of blokes of a like-minded disposition at the 2007 *Rétroplane* event. This is a slope-based gathering strictly for vintage scale gliders, with a cut-off date around 1960, the idea being that the models entered should be of built-up construction: foam and glass kits, for instance, being frowned upon and likely to attract a De Gaulle style 'non'. As I understand it, this is the third *Rétroplane* meeting, the venue being changed annually to allow people to minimise the travelling, France after all, being a pretty large country. This year it was to be held in the Hautes-Vosges in the Alsace region on the slopes at Schweisel, not a stone's throw from Basle over the border in Switzerland.



Barrington Smallpiece and Captain Dave marvel at the ingenuity of the French Highway Code.

This year, Caen travelling companion Sideways Sid was unable to accompany Barrington Smallpiece and myself, so it was a chance for Captain Dave to get up off the substitute's bench for a bit of action. As an ex-BEA captain, Dave Stokes has a fund of aviation-related stories that can make a long

trip in a smelly van seem even longer, indeed, it would seem that in those days jets were powered by alcohol rather than kerosene!

Our arrival in Kruth, the tiny, but elongated village that was the nearest thing to civilisation, was bizarre to say the least; we arrived at the hotel to find that it, like the rest of the village, was shut. A series of phone calls elicited the information that three keys were placed cunningly under an alabaster statue, we let ourselves in to find the place in darkness and bearing a remarkable resemblance to the Marie Celeste. 'This reminds me of an overnigher in Budapest in '72' Captain Dave mused, ' it was strictly our sense of smell that led us directly to the wine cellar...'





Left: The Rétroplane prime mover: Vincent Besançon displays his exquisite ¼ scale Frankfort Cinema. **Right:** The Cinema's fuselage is made up of silver-soldered steel tube.

Having settled ourselves in, we then drove to the campsite where the Rétroplanistes were to be found, and discovered a hardy bunch indeed, some sleeping in tiny pup tents, didn't they know it was only July? (And anyway, where were the pups sleeping?)

Like any large, well-known event, there is always someone whose enthusiasm forms the core of the whole enterprise, and in this case it is serial model-maker Vincent Besançon, who welcomed us fulsomely, pointing towards the rickety bar which was staying upright only because captain Dave was

already propping it up. With modellers from many countries present: Switzerland, Holland, France, Ireland. We decided that English was to be the Lingua Franca, at least we three Brits did, everyone else seemed to go their own way — ah, c'est la vie.



A selection of gliders on the hill: there were three Fauvel flying wings in attendance.

The next morning (Friday) the heavens opened, mist swirled around the mini-mountains outside and the hotel remained resolutely empty. The three of us sat around until early afternoon talking aviation, possibly a new world record, a period during which I felt I had come to know every member of British European Airways personally. (Dave's best story

during this interminable time was of an overnigher in Dublin where he booked an early morning call at the hotel's reception. *'Dat'll be two shillin', sorr'* said the receptionist. In the morning the call duly arrived with the information that there would be no charge. When queried, the receptionist said, *'dat's all right now, it past nine o'clock anyway...!')*





Left: Frederick Marie with his rocket powered Opel Rak. **Right:** The Rak gets away minus the rocket power.

Miraculously the skies cleared and we hurried to the campsite to see what was happening.

Vincent Besançon has been known to scale soarers in the UK via his excellent website for a while now, and on display was his $\frac{1}{4}$ -scale Frankfort *Cinema*. This model is just about as scale as it's possible to get; the fuselage is built entirely from silver-soldered steel tube with all the cables, sticks and pedals connected to the pilot figure who performs all the appropriate movements; blimey, what a show off! After a while a convoy was prepared to go up to the Schweisel to

scope out the situation and maybe get in a flight or two. A twenty-five minute uphill grind ensued, the road zigzagging its way up above the tree line to where the flying site is, at around 4,300 feet. Here we found the secret that dare not speak its name...there was a fifteen minute walk to the top of the hill, what price the five sailplanes I'd brought along now?



Philippe Briquet's SG 38 primary glider flew well, despite having the efficiency of a half-brick!

When we arrived, puffing and panting, the view was breathtaking, as was the strength of the wind, quite literally. The going was tough, especially on the ankles, and there was a ditch running along the whole top of the Schweisel

which it seems was a First World War trench that the French used for ammunition supply. When you consider that during practically the whole trip from Calais we were passing the names of famous World War One battles, the scale of that war was unimaginable, so I kept the pain in my ankles strictly to myself not wishing to appear a wuss. Alas, wusses we three Brits were, not one of us wanting to trek to the van and back under these challenging conditions. (Joe from Ireland flew, but it was a plastic pig and he was lucky not to be blackballed, this being a vintage meeting).



Unfortunate launch did not end well for Armand Giraud's challenging Planeur Magnard.

By Saturday morning the Marie Celeste was showing signs of life with breakfast continental style (cornflakes, but no bowl to put them in) but that mattered not, because the sun was shining! A huge convoy snaked up through the passes and a parking nightmare ensued at the top as some seventy cars and vans competed for three parking spaces. Eventually, order was restored and the van doors flung back

to reveal, after two days of travelling and hanging about, the precious models we had brought all the way from the Royaume-Uni. As he was three-quarters of the way through building one for himself, Smallpiece got dibs on the *Skylark*, Capt Dave had his *Rhönbussard* and *Jaskolka* strapped to his patented carrying cradle leaving me with the mighty *Minimoa*. Oh how we huffed and we puffed as we trod our way to the summit like a trio of elderly steam engines, although it would have been child's play to any seasoned Crook Peak dweller.





Left: Laurent Beldame's 1:3.5-scale Habicht proved convincingly aerobatic. **Right:** Laurent prepares to launch the Habicht.

What a sight met our eyes though, at journey's end — the top of the hill was liberally coated with wood and fabric machines of every size, shape and description. Well, they don't call it *Rétroplane* lightly; the first thing to catch my eye was model of an early Lilienthal design, with Otto himself at the controls; gliders simply don't come any more vintage than that! Inevitably, the eye is drawn towards the larger machines, especially on the slope where the launching of such creations can be a sure source of entertainment. Erwan Plu's massive Waco troop carrier we have seen before, being

aerotowed at Caen, but up on the hill, on the shoulders of two hapless, sweating launchers, this model seems much more close up and personal. Erwan is not without a sense of humour though; quite what a fuselage full of combat troops would have thought of their aerial conveyance looping and rolling over the French countryside doesn't leave a lot to the imagination. Similar convolutions were required for the launching of Marc Hecquet's enormous version of the Penrose *Pegasus*, but once in the air this model's performance was smooth and convincing.



Two man launch for Marc Hecquet's enormous version of the Penrose Pegasus.

Whilst on the subject of aerobatics, for most of the day there was a rather tasty looking gull-winged machine with a blue sunburst finish flying some very smooth manoeuvres indeed, even if not in a scale fashion; this turned out to be the Sperber *Junior* of Uwe Gewalt, better known for his range of glass ships, although he has now apparently retired. I was more than a little interested in Laurent Beldame's *Habicht* as it sported a colour scheme I had marked out for my own version, thus shattering the illusion that I had found it first. Laurent put on a spirited aerobatic display, a hesitation roll along the slope being his speciality, and it was here that one downside of French flying manifested itself...they fly Mode 1, just like me. Insisting that I have a go, I gingerly poled the *Habicht* about for a minute or two before risking a roll, thus garnering the shouted comment 'look, ze Engleesh always roll to the left!' (To my shame, I couldn't think of a single comeback). Frederick Marie's Opel *Rak* is a bird with a difference: the original was rocket powered! Having followed Fred's build log for this machine on the *RCGroups* website I was looking forward to seeing a smoky demonstration, but unfortunately on the day, a problem with logistics prevented it happening, although the twin-boomed *Rak* flew very well without chemical assistance, especially as this was its first time out of the shed. It wasn't all about large models, of course, as there had been a group build competition for 1/10th-scale and smaller, and some of these diminutive machines were little pieces of museum art.



Jean Claude Bachetta's M200 gets under way.

After the launch of the *Pegasus* it was funny, I admit, to see two burly Frenchmen pretending to perform a committee launch on one of these tiny gliders. (Missed it, of course, the camera was turned off). The Fauvel series of flying wings are something peculiar to France, over a hundred being built, some home-built from kits. Great claims were made for the flying wing set up over more conventional sailplane arrangements, claims that never really came to fruition. Despite this, with a reflexed section over the entire wing and minimal CG changes whatever the weight of the pilot, the Fauvels proved safe and stable in flight with concerns only at the critical take-off and landing phases where the flying

wing's behaviour could become a little squirrely. Pascal Bissey's two-seat AV 22 and Frank Albrecht's AV 36 put on many excellent flights during the day and the AV 22, particularly, was thrown about with great gusto. Emulating the full-size behaviour, it was noticeable that unless the landing was an absolute greaser, the nose would bounce up and down mercilessly without a conventional fuselage and tailplane to smooth things out.



'Looping Fred' prepares to launch Walter Wachtler's Musger MG 19a.

Picking out the Man of the Match was a very difficult task indeed, especially as Vincent's steel-tubed *Cinema* seemed

to perform as well as it looked. At the end of the day, though, the Queen's Award for Industry must go to local hero Jean Claude Haller of the host CMHV club, whose trio of varnished wooden sailplanes were an absolute joy to behold. His early Grunau *Baby 1*, *Professor* and *Wien* models were immaculately built and finished and flown to great effect, the *Wien* especially, as it frequently skimmed the grass on the front edge of the slope to perform elegant chandelles at either end. The original full-size was a serial record-breaker in its day with its pilot, Kronfeld at the helm, and watching the model in flight it was possible to see in the classic, elegant, simplicity of the design, the heritage of which can still dimly be seen in today's modern glass sailplanes.







Left: Erwan Plu's extraordinary Waco nears Pegasus Bridge. **Centre:** The Fauvel AV36 gets the two man launch treatment. **Right:** A picture of absolute beauty: local hero Jean Claude Haller's lovely Wien.

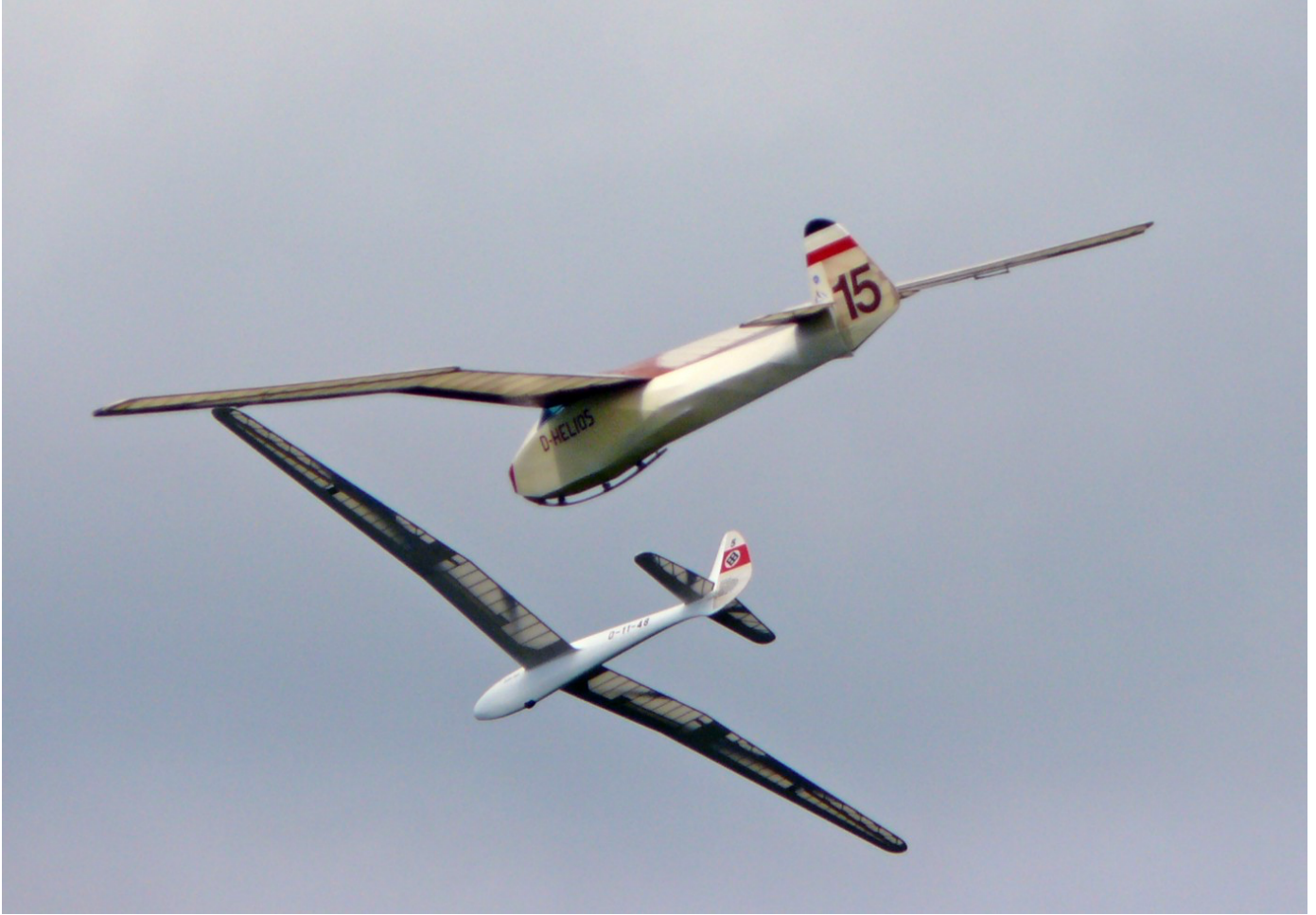
As the day slowly wound to an end, and the trek back to the car park began, there occurred one of those magical periods that have kept my interest in scale soaring at full throttle these many years. The wind had eased somewhat, the sun was shining and the air as smooth as the finest woven silk. Wrestling my *Skylark* from Smallpiece's stubborn grasp I proceeded to enjoy one of those flights where you can see the results of the slightest movements of the controls and you know that anything is possible as the model skims the earth and rides the sky as though on the shiniest of rails.

Laurent Beldame wandered over and commented 'she seems very forgiving, n'est pas?'



Captain Dave's Jaskolka in action.

I know a hint when I hear one, so I handed over the box and watched his smooth flying instead. Then we called Vincent Besançon over for a go too, and all in all it seemed a fitting end to a perfect day.



With all those sailplanes in one place, the sky got a little crowded at times: to wit, Uwe Gewalt's Sperber Junior and Jack Kaegi's Helios.

Not quite the end, though, as we still had to get back to the van. On the way up we had plenty of help with all the spare kit, but now we were the three last men standing and decisions had to be made. I gave Smallpiece this choice: the *Skylark* and my tranny case, or the big *Minimoa*. He chose the *Minimoa*, the poor sap, and by the time Captain Dave and I reached the car park he was still halfway up the track, face red and legs all bandy with the strain.



Christian Jungert's Racek ready for flight.

That evening, the Marie Celeste had burst into life, the huge restaurant was full and we were lucky to scrape in in time. As we discussed the days events we all confessed to being as tired as any of us could remember and we looked forward to the next day when we could do it all again.

In true French fashion, the best part of the next morning was dedicated to ceremony back at the base camp with speeches and a tabletop groaning with giveaways. (The serried ranks of wine bottles had Captain Dave drooling at the mouth). I was especially touched when Jean Claude

Haller presented me with a book he had put together entitled 'Recueil de plans trois de planeurs anciens', a book of vintage glider three-views no less, and I was very happy to include this amongst my collection of goodies. Still, never mind the Buzzcocks, let's go flying we muttered, piling in the van and struggling to find space amongst Captain Dave's empties.







Left: The Frankfort Cinema in flight. **Centre:** Some spirited flying from Pascal Bissey's AV 22 . **Right:** '...to perform elegant chandelles at either end' Jean Claude Haller's Wien

Alas, continental weather forecasters are no better than their UK cousins, and as we ground up the mountain passes the

clouds lowered and the heavens opened. As it was midday by now, we were faced with the choice of sitting it out at the hotel or making a mad, last-minute dash for the shores of Blighty, one day earlier than planned. Reluctantly, we agreed the latter, and for us *Rétroplane 2007* became history.

So, what can we conclude from the foregoing? Firstly, the art of building your own models is far from dead, and secondly, interest in vintage sailplanes is still alive and kicking.

Vincent's accomplishment is to have put together what must surely be the largest meeting of its kind in the world (unless you know better?) with nearly seventy entrants and probably going on for a hundred vintage gliders if you count all those left in the cars. All that's left is for me to thank Vincent and the CMHV club for their efforts, and on behalf of Smallpiece, Captain Dave and myself, our anonymous sponsor for supplying the van and the fuel.

If your interest lies in this area, and if you possibly can, I would urge you make your way to France some day for a future *Rétroplane* event... you won't regret it.







Left: Hand out time at the closing ceremony. **Centre:** Well, this is France! **Right:** The official Rétroplane 2007 logo. (image: Rétroplane)

©2007

Resources

- <https://www.retroplane.net> Vincent Besançon's website is a must-visit: here you can download free plans and scale documentation packs, see videos on the art or steel tube silver-soldering and generally view workmanship of the highest quality.

All photos are by the author unless otherwise noted. Read the [next article](#) in this issue, return to the [previous article](#) in this issue or go to the [table of contents](#). A PDF version of

this article, or the entire issue, is available [upon request](#).