

POLE TO POLE



Grub Street Publishing

A record breaking single-engine flight around the world.

Polly Vacher, mother of three, first learnt to fly at the age of fifty. She then flew twice around the world. On her second around-the-world flight, at the age of 60, she became the first pilot to complete a solo flight around the world via both poles in a single-engine aircraft.

Her “voyage to the ice” in her Piper Dakota was a 60,000nm journey that took her to 34 countries on all seven continents. Vacher’s 156-page book recounting her flight has just been released by Grub Street publishing.

The trip was done in a spirit of adventure with the aim of raising funds to support the charity, Flying for the Disabled, which helps disabled people rebuild their lives through the physical and mental challenge of learning to fly.

Flying for the Disabled was first established in memory of one of Britain’s most famous World War 11 pilots, Sir Douglas Bader. Bader became a World War 11 flying ace after having both legs amputated as a result of a low-level acrobatic accident in a Bulldog before the war.

“OK, I’ve lost my legs,” he said, “but I can still pilot an aircraft”.

With two tin prosthetics, Bader eventually flew a Hawker Hurricane, and ended up shooting down 22 enemy aircraft. Following the Battle of Britain he was chosen to lead the three hundred aircraft victory flypast over London. Each year 10 flying scholarships are given to people with disabilities in honour of Bader’s courage. It is a story that inspired Polly to her own achievement.

North then south: The reader follows Polly Vacher’s meticulous preparations, which included training to survive a forced land-

ing anywhere – including ditching mid-ocean and the possibility of facing polar bears if forced to ditch in the Arctic.

The whole flight took a year, with a total of 550 flying hours and 106 stops. She had one oil leak, one brake failure and a cracked window. Although she carried 60 spare parts, only the spare oil filters were needed.

► **Chugging southwards over a vast expanse of sea ice, everything suddenly turned silent. It was the most terrifying moment of the trip – an engine failure.**

She set off from Birmingham International Airport with a Hurricane and Spitfire escort provided by the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight. Flying north to Scotland, Vacher went on to the North Sea and then Norway, before waiting for clear weather for the trip over the Arctic.

Escorted by two Norwegian F16s she flew her Dakota to Longyearbyen, a Norwegian Island close to the Arctic Circle, and then over the North Pole to Canada. The flight from Longyearben to Resolute Bay took 14 hours.

Chugging southwards over a vast expanse of sea ice, everything suddenly turned silent. It was the most terrifying moment of the trip – an engine failure. Initial panic, and then into automatic mode, “Carby heat on, fuel pump on, change tanks”. The engine sprang back to life. Later maintenance checks in Alaska found nothing amiss.

Down through Canada, the US and South America, the challenge was to become the first woman to fly solo in Antarctica. She

describes the trip from the southern most point of Chile to the Antarctic Peninsula as an experience of “sheer elation”. Landing on a gravel strip which runs out to sea on Adelaide Island, Vacher’s final approach was surrounded by huge icebergs – a precarious landing in a spectacular environment.

Vacher recounts sights that few will ever see – the vast ice stream of the Hampton Glacier, tops of mountains protruding from the ice, known as nunataks, the huge ice plateau of Ellsworth Land, Vinson Massif, the tallest mountain in Antarctica.

But strong headwinds consumed too much fuel, and Vacher was forced to turn back to the British Antarctic base, Rothera. Fuel supplies became a problem and she had to abandon plans to fly to the South Pole. Crossing the Antarctic Peninsula to land at the Argentine base of Marambio, Vacher had at least crossed Antarctica close to the magnetic South Pole.

After a long detour to New Zealand via California and the Pacific Ocean, Vacher headed across Australia, Indonesia, southeast Asia, India, the Middle East and Europe before arriving back at Birmingham International Airport exactly 352 days after she left.

Three records were established: Polly Vacher became the first woman to fly solo across the North Pole in a single-engine aircraft, the first woman to fly solo in Antarctica, and the first person to fly solo around the world landing on all seven continents. As a result of her efforts, she raised over \$1m for Flying for the Disabled.

Wings around the world, by Polly Vacher, is published by Grub Street Press. The Australian version of Flying for the Disabled is an affiliated organisation called Wheelies with Wings, which has been running now for five years (see www.wheelieswithwings.com.au).