

# The Third Attempt

Chris Atkinson

It was the week leading up to Saturday 13 March when I decided to have another attempt in breaking the Australian record, previously set by me to 278km.

This time around my personal goal had been set a lot higher, and I was absolutely determined to leave no doubt in anyone's mind about my goals, and to set a distance that would take some serious planning to beat.

Many months of painstaking preparations and testing of equipment had gone into today. I had modified my frame to fit two 20-litre fuel tanks, giving me a total of 70 litres, followed by all the testing and making sure everything worked as planned. Important issues needed consideration, such as ideal hang points,

fuel lines and flow, the extra weight, wing loading, just to name a few. I had to build a test bed to compare propellers and engine performance. This helped cut out the hearsay and let me separate facts from fiction about performance. I was

looking for the thrust and fuel economy needed to cover a very long distance, and every bit would count. Not only was the right choice of equipment essential, but the weather would be absolutely crucial

for a successful record attempt. Observing weather patterns and looking at past records helped me to make up my mind when to try.

We also worked through possible scenarios of what could go wrong, safety being a top priority.

My new large 34m<sup>2</sup> wing had arrived and I was keen to take it for its maiden flight. Several sessions of ground handling in winds up to 12kt prepared me for the big day. I was very impressed with my new Dudek Nucleon.

After several hours of preparations and a last weather check, we arrived near Canungra at 5:45am. Looking up from the Turf Farm near Canungra towards Mt Tambourine, the first light of the day was showing promising signs of a relative clear day. The wind was too strong for recreational flying with cycles at the upper limit of manageable.

The race had started, setting everything up before the wind would get too strong to launch. I decided to fill the tanks with 45 litres of fuel. A purpose-build bench helped me to test-run, warm the engine and have my pre-flight safety check. I put on layers of clothes to protect myself against the extreme cold at high altitude.

Nearly an hour had passed and we were ready. The wind had eased and was nearly too light. Everything was going to plan. Before long my ground crew laid out the wing for me and removed the bench. I was on my own, ready to launch. The weight was pulling down my shoulders, as I had more than 70kg on my back, waiting for the peak in the cycle. I managed a good reverse launch, and the wing came up beautifully. While adjusting to a change in wind direction, I powered on my engine and started to run towards a very slow climb out. It did not take too long before I found a patch of buoyant air to circle in. Once I had reached 1000ft, I headed west towards the Great Dividing Range which lay approximately an hour away, well aware that I had to gain substantial height to make it over.

Heading west climbing steadily, I noticed the wind coming even more cross with the gain in altitude. I had to crab my way towards the near vertical faces of Cunningham Gap. I got some more lift on these near vertical faces but crossed further north of where I had originally planned. This was another first for me, crossing the range. My first real challenge was out of the way. The wind direction soon became a more favorable straight



Warming up the Ros 125

south easterly, helping me to reach ground speeds of up to 122km/h. My progress was on track and I was well on the way to achieve my goal.

Flying at 6500ft, the air was relatively smooth. I felt the cold creeping into every bone of my body, and soon I started to shake badly to the point where I felt quite ill in

the stomach, forcing me to drop lower, looking for warmer conditions. I realized at this point that more research into protective clothing should definitely have been higher on my list of priorities. I was struggling, feeling very ill and cold.

Flying at 3500 to 4000ft, the air became a lot rougher. It was a price I was willing to pay for warmer air. I had to fly quite actively and this helped me take my mind off the cold and stomach for a while. I made great progress passing Moonie on the way. My Nucleon was a dream to fly. It handled great in all situations and I have to say the engineers did an awesome job designing it.

Observing the country below, very green and lush from the recent rains with bits of water around in some areas from the recent floods looked gorgeous from the air. What reassured me was that we had checked with the RACQ and the police before leaving and had been told that all major roads would be open. Close to six hours into my journey, south west of Surat, my stomach started to give me more trouble. I vomited for the third time during the flight. I regained my composure and pushed on. A few minutes later, my motor started running rough, and I realised my air box must have copped some of my stomach contents as it had made its way into the carburetor. Seeing the rough and heavily timbered country ahead helped me make up my mind, as the risks were now getting too high, so I turned back to a farm house I had recently passed. I used full reflex for about 10km, tracking back to finally land



Testing manoeuvrability under load

at 12:50pm on Siwa Farm, on Woodburn Road. I found myself with 17 litres of fuel left in the tanks which should have allowed me to exceed my goal of 700km. Safety had to come first and it was the right decision to land, even though it was disappointing.

What I did not know at this point was that the adventure only just had begun! I knew I had a new record. I thought about the highlights of the flight while packing up my wing and stretching. Sand flies and mosquitoes started to attack me in plain daylight as I walked towards the farm house. Thousands of sand flies had had ideal conditions to breed and were now swarming everywhere. I had no phone reception, but was lucky to find a phone working in the temporarily abandoned farm house on the property. Herbert was nowhere to be contacted, and I assumed he was out of range. I had been flying with a satellite tracking system called a Spot. It relays my exact location at 15



Groundhandling the new wing in strong wind



Ready to launch on a record flight

minutes intervals to the laptop; Herbert was carrying in the car and home to my desktop computer where it displayed on a Google map. I was quite confident Herbert would not be too far away and

would eventually turn up. We had agreed to have a back-up via my home phone. I rang my wife to let her know where I was, but she had been following my progress on the computer and already knew. If necessary, Herbert could get an update by ringing home. In the meantime I had walked several kilometres towards the front of the property and realised that flooding was still a very real issue here in the back country with miles of knee-deep water and mud on the road. This explained why no one was home on the property. I had to put my flight suit back on as the sand flies were having too much of a smorgasbord. The only sensible thing I could do was to take refuge in the house and wait for my crew to pick me up.

### EQUIPMENT USED

- Kangoon frame
- Ros 125 engine
- RS Ultra propeller
- Dudek Nucleon wing



Launching the 34m<sup>2</sup> Nucleon



Climbing out above launch

## Recovery

Herbert Hobiger (member of the ground crew)

While Chris was flying, I had had my own troubles trying to follow him with his Patrol Ute. We had good contact until Dalby, with occasional messages on the phone and regular checks on the laptop confirming my heading in the right direction. Everything seemed to go well.

As I travelled deeper into the country side, contact started to get more difficult due to poor phone reception. Lunch time came and no word from Chris, no phone reception with Optus. I started to get concerned when the laptop's batteries gave up. Arriving in Roma, at last I had phone reception again. I called Chris's wife Tina to find out about his whereabouts and was told he landed safely on Siwa Farm with coordinates to type into the Tom Tom of his Ute.

Off I went to Surat, and then passed south, only to find out that all minor roads west were impassable due to the recent flooding, with some bridges still 1.5m under water.

Looking at the GPS coordinates; I knew Chris was not that far away.

It could probably only be about 50 to 60km as the crow flies, but getting there was a real problem without any local knowledge. So I started asking on properties SW of Surat if anyone knew the way around the local flooding. There was a real chance I would not be able to retrieve Chris today.

When I finally located Mark, a local farmer, who knew the area and where Siwa Farm was. Again I must praise country folks, always helpful giving up their time after a hard day's work. Mark had offered to come with me to help retrieve Chris. We left at around 6pm driving approximately around 150km with tremendous detours on heavily washed out roads, edging ever closer to the farm.

The last 10km were horrendous: with knee-deep water, progress was often difficult. We had times where I walked ahead of the Ute, making sure we did not get bogged in the mud or in unexpected holes one could not see under the water. I was glad Mark was driving, as I would not have made it without him and the well equipped 4WD Ute.

At last we made it to the entry



Flying low with 30 litres

of Siwa Farm. We called Chris on the property's phone. Borrowing one of the property's tractors, Chris came to us. He then showed us the way and we managed to load all his gear. After a lengthy drive back, we arrived in Surat by midnight, returning Mark to his

family. We did not waste much time, climbing into our swags for some well deserved sleep. What a long and adventurous day! We both learned a lot on what had to be done to prevent similar mishaps.

After checking the GPS, we discovered that Chris had managed to fly a total of 464km in a straight line from take-off to landing. This is one serious distance covered by a foot launched paramotor! It was only made possible through the sheer dedication and effort put in by Chris. Knowing him, I would be astonished if this were his last attempt! He has his sights focused on the 800km mark and aims to seriously attempt to break the world record of 1105km later in the year. He has the right equipment and is determined to give it a go. Chris is competing against professional pilots. This makes his recent achievements all the more impressive.

