

Reach for the sky



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WHEN YOU ARE FLYING THE NORTH ATLANTIC OVER FROZEN CANADA OR GREENLAND, THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO ROOM FOR ERROR

Former Rugby League star David Plange has one of the most unusual ‘where are they now’ stories we’ve ever heard. TIM BUTCHER explains

IT ALL STARTED LATE LAST YEAR WHEN an email arrived from a guy called Pat Malone which read: ‘I publish niche magazines in the aviation sector. I have an article about a pilot who has one of the most dangerous jobs in aviation, delivering small single-engined planes from America to Europe, flying across the Greenland icecap and the Atlantic in all weathers. His name is David Plange and he used to be a rugby player...’

My initial reaction was: ‘Well, there was a rugby player, and a good one at that, who was called David Plange, but... the bloke is probably a bit confused.’

Two months later I’m standing on an old World War II airfield in Lincolnshire and the individual I’m shaking hands with is instantly recognisable, not looking much older than when he quit Rugby League almost ten years ago, after being sacked as head coach at Warrington Wolves. He certainly looked more relaxed than the last time I saw him, despite the temperature struggling to get much above the overnight low of minus 14.

David Plange’s Super League coaching CV isn’t a lengthy document. He took over as head coach at Wilderspool in April of 2002 and was sacked in August. It was a job he’d never wanted anyway, but more of that later.

His profile on internet networking site LinkedIn is more impressive: ‘Worldwide aircraft deliveries with personal experience in USA-Canada-Greenland-Iceland-Western, Central and Eastern Europe-Russia-Siberia-Mongolia-Australia-South America-Egypt-Djibouti-Eritrea-Kenya-Saudi Arabia-Bahrain-Oman-India-Thailand’.

Fly by night

Plange’s Alpha2Bravo ferry company delivers aeroplanes of all types from North America to all parts of the world at any time of year. On the Monday following our meeting, he was due to fly out to Florida on a sub-contracting job, picking up a plane ordered by the Civil Aviation Flight University of China in Sichuan Province. He’d just returned from a delivery from the States to the Congo.

The trip to China will entail at least one stop somewhere in the Atlantic, depending on the weather conditions that could be Greenland or the Azores, and then more landings and take-offs in Spain, Qatar and then Thailand, before the final leg to China.

There the aircraft and David will meet up with 

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the other six planes in the consignment, when it will take two days for the extra fuel tanks to be taken out and replaced by the seats that were in there in the first place, and a final 50-mile hop will complete the job. Then he can come home. It will mark his 28th trans-Atlantic flight, nearly all of them in single-engine craft.

Plange didn't take to flying until he was 35-years-old, at a time he was making a pretty good fist of Rugby League coaching, guiding Hunslet Hawks to the Northern Ford Premiership Grand Final in 1999 and beating Dewsbury, who had pipped the Hawks to the League Leaders trophy, in a thrilling match by 12-11, having beaten Widnes and Featherstone in the play-offs.

"It started as a hobby," he says. "I took a flying lesson, mainly because a friend of mine was doing it. My instructor Tony Hather said I seemed to have a knack for it." He did. The minimum training in preparation for the test was 45 hours. Plange got there in a record 29 hours, and used the rest of the time to check out on different aircraft. Once qualified he kept training up and learned the techniques of night flying and for flying mountains.

He spent the next few years increasing his flying experience, part-owning and owning several aircraft. After Rugby League Plange had embarked on a catalogue returns business in Carlisle and was evidently doing pretty well out of it.

Before long he had a multi-engine rating and a licence to fly commercially, although at that stage it was still a leisure pursuit. But a trip to the USA turned out to be a huge career shift.

"I was looking to buy an aircraft and the cheapest place is America. I had to go and do some training, get an instrument rating and stuff like that and one of the other things I needed was insurance. Only one company would insure me and only if I had a ferry pilot with me in the right-hand seat. So I advertised and eventually found somebody that was really enthusiastic about it.

"We got to be really good friends. He told me about the ferry industry and how cut throat it was and asked me if I fancied doing a little bit of work for him. You had to have five Atlantic crossings to get insurance to fly solo and he took me under his wing and I got the experience and did a little bit of work for him. It snowballed from there."

Survival rate

Plange had featured in many Rugby League publications over the years but his first appearance in an aviation mag came in the October 2009 issue of *General Aviation* under the headline 'A one per cent chance of survival'. Apparently that's the odds in those frozen



// The approach to Narsarsuaq in Greenland means flying 60 miles up this dead-end fjord.



Photos courtesy: General Aviation

northern seas, far off the shipping routes, when even the best survival gear will just delay the inevitable. "The survival suit is largely a psychological prop," Plange says. Little surprise there is only a handful of people willing to take on the trip regularly.

The ferry pilot who showed him the ropes was called Dustin Rabe. He was killed when an aircraft he was ferrying to Antwerp crashed on landing at Mount Pleasant, South Carolina in July 2010. He was 29-years-old.



It's not all been plain sailing, or rather flying for Plange.

In the spring of 2010 he was ferrying from Florida to Bratislava, the Slovakian capital. It was a week before he was due to get married. There didn't seem to be any problem hitting that particular appointment as conditions were very good and the forecast was for tailwinds. He had climbed to 13,000 feet for the crossing to Greenland.

"The engine started running a little bit rough, and the temperature dropped on the number three cylinder gauge," he recalls. "I lost a cylinder. I was coming across from Canada to Greenland. It started vibrating and sounded like someone was firing a shotgun in the back, I was 200 miles from land and thought 'this could be a bit hairy'. I managed to limp in (the local air safety had recommended he perform a crash landing short of the airfield, 'with a relatively good chance for survival') and do a textbook landing.

"The problem was I was getting married that weekend - it was the week before Easter 2010. There is only Air Greenland who fly out of Narsarsuaq and everybody was going home for Easter and all the flights were booked up. A friend of mine rang around the pilots and managed to get me a jump seat to Nuuk, the capital and then on to Sonderstrom. Then I was



able to get the scheduled flight to Copenhagen, from there to Amsterdam to Manchester. I got home on the Friday evening and got married on the Saturday. It cost me a fortune ('but not as much as if he hadn't got back in time for the wedding', he smiles)." Then he made several flights back to Greenland and delivered the repaired aircraft. "I planned a route to Kulusuk on the west coast of Greenland, a short and then on to Keflavik, Wick and Bratislava, and the engine never missed a beat."

On another ferry crossing he experienced a 'tracker failure', and his wife Caroline was informed of his death. "Difficult telephone conversation after that," he said. The couple have a three-year-old son, Bailey, and a new daughter on the way this month ("I've got a trip to Jakarta, Spain to Florida to Thailand. I'm trying to get everything out of the way in time"). His wife, a teacher, understands the risks.

"There's a lot you can do in your preparation before you take off, that's what takes up the bulk of your time, the paper side of it, the flight planning, the weather briefing and all that kind of stuff just so everything's right. All you can do is give yourself the best possibility that nothing will go wrong because you haven't done everything you can do. I always say if anything goes wrong it won't be because of something I have done or failed to do. You have got to know when to go and when to not go."

So it's not like Rugby League coaching, you can't learn from your mistakes.

"When you are flying the north Atlantic over frozen Canada or Greenland, there is absolutely no room for error."

Tiger tiger

Plange was born and brought up in Hull. His father came to England from Ghana to study law and met his mother there. The young David had no ambition to fly, his focus solely on being a professional Rugby League player. He played for Hull Schools in 1976 ("a 5-all draw, we won the replay before the Yorkshire Cup Final," he instantly recalls) but moved to Scunthorpe when he was 15 because of his dad's job and played for the local rugby union team.

A trial at his nearest professional club, Doncaster, was the start of an illustrious career as a speedy, no-nonsense kind of winger.

"It was always my ambition to play professional rugby; that is all I ever wanted to do." It was a good grounding for the up and comer but Doncaster was a struggling side at the time.

"After a year or so they decided they were going to sign me on, for 500 quid, but the cheque bounced.

"I felt let down, it wasn't the money, it was the principle. I didn't want to play for them anymore. The way I looked at it there was no contract and I was a free agent. They saw it differently. I almost ended up at Carlisle with John Atkinson, but

Doncaster wanted a transfer fee. So Castleford did a player exchange and I preferred going there, even though I thought I'd have to settle for reserve team. I played one A team game then the following week played for the first team against St Helens - I looked at the team sheet, Mal Meninga was on it and I thought this is a different world. I managed to stay in the first team pretty much after that."

It was a glorious era for Classy Cas with the 15-14 Challenge Cup final win over Hull KR in 1986 the highlight.

Plange's personal best moment, though, was representing Great Britain, scoring a try in the 1988 Test against France, though he missed the fabled 1988 tour down under with injury.

"I was in the squad for the tour, I had all the jabs. We were due to fly out on the Tuesday and the last game on the weekend I did my ankle in. I never got a look in after that (apart from playing in the 1990 game against the Rest of the World that autumn)."

His Castleford career ended in 1991 when he fell out with then coach Darryl Van de Velde. "I honestly can't remember what about!" he laughs. "Me and Darryl didn't see eye to eye on a number of things, but strangely enough once I got into coaching we got to be really good friends. He was a fantastic coach. He introduced the mental aspect of the game and I really was into that. But people like me and Singe (the late St John Ellis) we had a bit of fun in us, jack the lads, and it didn't go down very well."

Three years at Sheffield Eagles followed, another fruitful spell and then two and a bit seasons at Hull KR, who were pulling up trees in the second division. In 55 games Plange scored 64 tries - "Not bad is it!" he laughs again. "I wanted to play in my home town. It didn't bother me which club it was, I would have loved

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to have played for either. People in Hull have got a certain type of humour, I enjoyed that time."

At the start of 1996 he was persuaded by Steve Ferres, a Sheffield connection, to join him at Hunslet, combining his playing with a development officer job with Leeds City Council. At the end of that season Ferres took over at Huddersfield and Plange became player-coach.

"I really enjoyed the coaching side, it was a natural progression, I was coaching more and playing less, it's hard to do both. I played off and on from that point."

He took Hunslet to the Challenge Cup Plate final at Wembley in 1997 and in 1999 won the Northern Ford Premiership Grand Final.

But the club's application to go into Super League was turned down.

"I was assured everything would be alright," he remembers. "I don't think anybody expected us to win it to be honest. The people at the club did all they could, I'm sure. Once the application was turned down it was the death of the club really."

Over the next two seasons the club and the Rhinos attempted a link up that would have seen young up-and-coming Leeds players play for the Hawks, a prototype dual registration system that never really took off (no pun intended), and which saw Plange go to Headingley as Academy coach.

That's life

At Headingley he came across the Rhinos Performance Director, Australian Steve Anderson, who in August of 2001 succeeded Plange's old coach Van de Velde at Warrington. He took Plange with him as his assistant.

"When we were at Leeds we

had a real good relationship but when he took on the head coach job at Warrington he just completely changed. He started putting curfews down - on me not the players!

"I remember one game, we were losing against Halifax, but we came back and won it. All the players came off delighted they had turned this big deficit around. He kept them in the changing room for about two hours having a go at everybody. It didn't go down well at all - I think we had 11 straight defeats after that

"I had no choice but to take over. It was either be head coach or walk out of the door and be unemployed. There was no discussion.

"In all fairness I thought it was too soon, but I had to give it my best shot. It wasn't a nice situation, the politics were unbelievable."

Plange was sacked (by mutual consent!) in August 2002

"They'd already done the deal with Paul Cullen, who was coaching at Whitehaven, when we played Leeds away. We were 22-6 down at half-time and they were going to announce the new coach the next day, but we turned it around. Then we beat Salford and it looked like we might be alright." But after three more defeats Plange, one of a heralded generation of young English coaches (Daryl Powell was another at Leeds), had gone, and his involvement with Rugby League was over

"I did a little bit of media stuff but I had lost interest to be honest. The politics in the

sport wasn't healthy. I'm sure it still goes on
"I always said 'the first time I get sacked I am going to walk away'. Maybe I shouldn't have done. I probably still had something to offer.



"I thought I was going to spend a good few years as assistant to somebody who was at the top of his game, but that just didn't work out for me. It was a shame, but that's life."

An hour in the company of David Plange convinces me that the aptitude and skills he has shown in his new career would have served him well in coaching in the top flight. Preparation and attention to detail wins coaches games, it keeps ferry-pilots of single-engine aircraft alive. With that comes mental toughness, and on top of that no-one could doubt David Plange's knowledge of the game. In 445 first-class games he scored 272 tries.

Not that he has any regrets whatsoever. He operates in a different world than he did for 20 years and has no contact with former teammates, even missing last year's re-union of the Challenge Cup winning team because he had a plane to deliver. "It was a long time ago, 25 years," he says.

Besides, he's moving on to bigger things.

"There is a progression. The small planes I usually give to other people so they can get the experience, I'm into bigger stuff. I have just done my airline pilot's licence. I want to get into delivering those big aircraft. If you get somewhere in three hours instead of five days, it's hard to go back. Corporate jets, I wouldn't mind doing a few of those."

With that David Plange, at 47 years of age still looking fit enough to play although he says he plays no sport any more, headed back up to his mates at the Lincoln Aero club, sat about chewing the fat, gazing wistfully out at their aircraft covered in snow and ice.

I told them it was nearly as cold as Widnes on the first night of the season. "Widnes aren't in Super League are they?" Plange asked, who was also surprised to learn that his old Eagles teammate Daryl Powell was coaching Featherstone. He really hasn't stayed in touch with the game. After clocking up over 1600 hours flying, he probably hasn't had the time. ●