

Maurice 'Flying Vet' Kirk



Philip Whiteman

MAD, BAD, AND dangerous to know.' Lady Caroline Lamb was writing of Byron, but these epithets might just as well be used for Maurice Kirk. The self-styled Flying Vet reached the zenith of fame in the flying world through entering an ancient Piper Cub in last year's England to Australia air race, and simply not giving up until he got there—that act alone would be enough for most people to call him mad.

Time and again he has faced prosecution at the hands of the authorities, especially the CAA—so they would certainly call him bad. As for the dangerous to know? Well, having spent some hours in his company, all I can say is that he turns out to be a rather likeable chap and a most considerate host—especially when it comes to topping up the wine glass.

However, once he has started chasing down a hare, Maurice is a very intense man indeed. He has thought deeply about the things he says, and all this reflection seems to have boiled off many of the usual conversational niceties. That is not to say that he is an uncivil or uncivilised character—far from

it. Rather, there remains the impression of turbulence below the surface, a volcanic temper, ready to erupt if one becomes too much of a fool to be suffered.

Press cuttings, and the polemics expressed in his colourful website, suggest a spring trap of a man, liable to snap on the unwary. In cyberspace, his electronic portrait fixes the surfer with a quizzical glare—peering over his half-moon specs he looks unsettlingly like Richard Ingrams. In person, this impression fades—he is all sinewy arms, grey hair standing out like wire and intense staring eyes—his craggy features somehow change to remind me more of the former Rhodesian Premier, Ian Smith.

Certainly, Maurice rather put the wind up me, the first time I met him. Clearly very tense and agitated before the start of the air race at Biggin Hill, he gave me his quarter-million map so I might help him prepare the “bloody silly” flight plan the organisers had insisted on. Given the circumstances, I was expecting something neatly folded and new.

Instead, I was handed a highly-wrinkled sheet that looked like a sweet wrapper fetched from a

Above: 'a very intense man indeed.'