



# Fuel For Thought

Landspeed Louise

## Happy "BOOM BOOM" Anniversary ThrustSSC

Back in May I realized that a decade had evaporated since the British spanked Mach One with their big black jet car. It was fitting to invite them to help me write this month's column in honor of the monumental speed achievement of October 15, 1997.

Asking some team members to recall the day and share their thoughts, one reply, from an American no less, was so striking and emotionally charged; it transported me right back to the "Supersonic Showdown" – as if it were yesterday, not a decade ago.

At the end of my note to the thrusters, I took a shot at the World's Fastest Man with: "Note to Green: shine up that crown for Fossett, the progress on the car is impressive!" This prompted Wing Commander Green to be the first responder: "Note to Louise — The crown remains shiny and progress will need to be impressive - they've got a remarkable team of people to beat." Just what you would expect from the leader of the speed pack, eh?

So let us return now, to those thrilling speed days of yesteryear... Aerodynamicist Ron Ayers and Mechanical Engineer Glynne Bowsher kept telling me that Richard Noble was really "a very nice chap" when not under the intense pressure of managing the team and securing sponsorship, but as far as I and the rest of the media were concerned; he was the object of our utter contempt most days because he seemed to take pleasure in making our jobs incredibly hard to do.

Years later, Richard and Sally's incredible kindness to me after a nasty motorcycle accident made me understand what a sweetheart Noble really is.

So here, from the guy who refused the driver's slot in order to keep a promise to wife, Sally R. Noble, O.B.E. (Order of the British Empire), offered a humble retrospect: "I was privileged to be a member of the very small team who fought for five very intense years to create our ThrustSSC car and develop it through to eventual supersonic success. In the process, we learned a great deal about each other and how to work as a fully empowered team, which enabled the project to advance very fast on multiple, parallel fronts, compared with a traditional hierarchical structure.

This reached a pinnacle of achievement on Oct 15th when the team was now exhausted almost to the point of collapse after endless 18-hour days on the desert.

With employers demanding their people return and a car which could be seriously fatigued by the engines massive exhaust energy, we went out for one more try to see if we could make the mandatory two supersonic passes within the hour to qualify for the FIA record. Of course, it would have been a far safer, sensible decision to call a halt when we achieved the 714mph record, return to Britain and retry refreshed and safe in 1998.

The financing had been so difficult that there was real doubt about our ability to ever get back to Black Rock. We were on site and had already made supersonic passes - we had to finish the job. I was positioned at the mid-point of the course together with timekeepers and media. The media had become very respectful, in awe of what was about to be attempted.

Andy and the ThrustSSC approached at an impossible speed. The media fell silent. At that awesome speed everyone knew that the slightest failure could precipitate a truly terrible disaster. I was thinking of our first rocket test model, which disintegrated into a million pieces of carbon when the supersonic airflow found a weakness in the bodywork and blew the car apart. On the desert we were collectively reduced to prayer hoping that Andy and the ThrustSSC would clear the measured mile safely and into the deceleration section of the course.

There was no supersonic bang where I stood – just a crack like a whip – but others heard the bangs as they rattled around the mountains. When ThrustSSC's parachute was out we all breathed a sigh of relief.

Very quickly, timekeeper Dave Petrali

It was a great adventure, something you couldn't make it up! I was 50 that year, and just beginning to wonder where the magic had gone. On the desert we decided that the strange days were the days when nothing extraordinary happened.

When the moment came — after all that time and effort — it was like Mad Max, with vehicles and aircraft storming through the desert to the Pit Station. As SSC stood cooling down in the sun everyone wanted to touch the car.

Back in England, there was a second slow realization that continues to this day. I think everyone who was involved, at whatever level, was changed forever by exposure to the SSC effect. It's a hard act to follow but no-one can have a moment's regret - Just gratitude for having been part of the whole."

team to started to gel together, communicating during operations by radio – a rather foreign process for many.

"In my opinion the way we ran our operation, with Martyn "Hawkeye" Davidson in overall operational control" she recalled, "was vital for safe and expeditious running on the Black Rock Desert."

Yet Millington, like many others out on the talcum fine playa surface for 40 days straight, was under extreme pressure to get back home, the military folks were especially feeling the strain as they were on unpaid leave, knocking themselves out chasing a dream.

"It's always unpleasant to have a clear and present threat hanging over one's career," she observed of the period, "Time was running out on the team (fatigue and job realities), weather (rain on the playa,



Andy's office

was on the radio: 'Your speed through the mile was seven six six zero point six zero nine miles per hour. Your mach number was one point zero two.'

We had made it! The long, long fight for the supersonic record was suddenly over – nothing mattered any more. Everyone descended on the Pit Station where the euphoria was total. Andy and I were chaired on the team's shoulders.

Another huge crisis loomed: we owed vast sums of money. The debts were massive, our company was in huge trouble, and we had to call in the Antonov freighter and get the team, car, and support equipment home as quickly as we could. There was no well-heeled sponsor who would ring up to say 'Enjoy yourselves, just take your time, we'll pick up the bill.' The project was never funded that way.

The events of that day must have been the highlights of everyone's life – we had collectively given everything we had to the project and we had won the greatest prize of all. How on earth do you come to terms with the fact that your life has just peaked early?"

John Coppinger, who was briefly involved in Thrust 2, also worked at Farnborough with Mike Horne, during the final days of ThrustSSC construction and on the bodywork at Black Rock. He said: "I was amazed by the trust in people that Richard and the Team lived by. Three days after starting, me, a relative stranger, got the duty of getting all four desert-running wheels balanced.

Robin Richardson, the man with a wicked sense of humor and deep-rooted love of velocity, was not only the Mach One Supporters Club founder, but was instrumental in convincing Noble that a website would be a key component to the team's success. As it turned out, the website pulled the team off the brink of disaster more than once.

"I genuinely wish Steve Fossett and his team well" Robin offered, "but whatever happens, it's nice to know that we will always be the first to have done it. As Ron Ayers put it at the time, 'we were the pioneers, others who follow are tourists.' Bloody fast ones I'll grant you!"

RAF Group Captain (Full-Bird Colonel), W. Jayne Millington, was the communications hub for ThrustSSC. Then, as now, she outranks Wing Commander Green and is currently in charge of Air Surveillance and Control System for the UK. Her force also conducts air surveillance and air policing operations on behalf of NATO and the UK in the airspace around the UK, and supports deployed forces, most notably in Southern Afghanistan.

"I took immense pride in being part of a committed but diverse team who triumphed over much adversity to attain a World first," she explained.

They had come an awfully long way since the days when ATC handed over control of the Farnborough airfield to Millington to coordinate the early runs of THRUST where the large and diverse

snow on the surrounding mountains) and car (tired). How long could we realistically go on?"

Of the supersonic day, she said, "Overwhelming feelings: thank goodness it's over, but bloody hell, we did it! Extremely proud to be a part of it, and especially proud to have been able to utilize my RAF experience to help mold a crack team of world-beaters. I have no shame to admit that I was tired after holding down a pressured Ministry Of Defense job alongside the larger-than-average 'weekend' hobby of supersonic cars for a number of years."

Millington's view of teamwork can metaphorically be compared to a zipper: if only one prong is missing, the whole thing quits working right. That sums up the importance of every ThrustSSC member; Green was only one of those prongs with Noble acting as the zip!

"Trackmaster" JV Franck and Sonny the Super Sonic Dog were the lone American team members. A knuckle-busting general contractor by trade, his words are tempered with heartfelt admiration and affection. Today, JV remains not just a good pal of Green's, but could easily be the guy's adopted big brother.

"October 15th? A great day. But the date that stands out during that campaign was September 25th, 1997 - when ThrustSSC went 714 MPH, broke Richard's record and was the first to exceed 700 MPH – because I saw something quite unique happen. Before that date the team,

almost to the person, when asked, all spoke with much bravado about how breaking the existing land speed record would be no big deal. It would be 'Just another day on the way to the final goal' I heard several team members say to many spectators and media people.

Well, on September 25th, the team was forever changed. I could see it in their stunned faces. There was no more relying on belief, on faith, or hope, or scientific projection that ThrustSSC was capable of setting a record. With that, the totality of what they were doing, had done, and were going to do, finally set in. On that day the bravado and swagger was instantly gone, replaced with confidence, determination, and an appreciation of the task ahead.

For me, the comprehension hit that the next goal of going into the unknown could very well be a life and death issue

when the paramedic told me she had phoned the hospital informing them that if they received a call about someone injured and being flown in while driving supersonic it would be no joke.

I was now faced with a moral question and decision. I had no comprehension of the emotional toll that decision would extract from me. Andrew Noble, Richard's brother, had tried to warn me of it. How could I, or anyone, until they had experienced it, as he had with Thrust II?

A couple of days later I went out onto the track to have a look after a very fast run and I saw the wheel tracks suddenly veer left 50 feet onto an adjacent track and then veer back. I turned white with apprehensive fear. I found Andy and told him about what I had just seen, that I felt that he had to stop, that no one would think less of him if he did because that car appeared so damned

unstable. It was not until later that I understood there had been an on-going steering problem.

I told him that I was an older responsible adult (Ok, that's debatable) and felt it was my moral duty to warn him of danger he may not comprehend because he was so committed to the program. He laughed, put his arm around me, looked me in the eye and said, "JV, I have four runs left in me, if I don't set the record in those four runs, I will throw the keys into the cockpit and walk away. I promise."

He broke the sound barrier and set a record on the fourth and final run. Years later, I reminded him how happy I was he didn't have to keep that promise. I also told him that my every action, every waking moment, had been totally geared to nothing but preparing for the next run. Each time he climbed into that cockpit, all I

wanted was for the run to be over; I never enjoyed the driving bit, only the time after it was over. Those last four runs were the very, very worst. I teetered on being physically ill during them, thinking of the huge emotional price we would all pay for the rest of our lives if there was a tragic accident. And then, on run 66, the last run of all, when it was finally all over, I went to my truck and for a short time burst into tears of joy that it was over - and tears of sadness that it was over." **GG**

*Note:* Photojournalist Louise Ann Noeth is the authoress of the award-winning book, "Bonneville: The Fastest Place on Earth," a complete historical review of the first 50 years of land speed racing now in its 6th printing. For more details and to order, go to: [www.landspeedproductions.biz](http://www.landspeedproductions.biz).



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