

Alasdair Mackenzie – Grayburn Scholarship

When I found out I had made it through to the interview for the PPL scholarship, I was nervous and excited. 'Should I book flights down to London, why would I win one anyway?'. After some consideration I booked the flights, and spent a lot of time preparing for the interview. Preparation is important before flying, and as with most skills learnt



within aviation, they can be applied to real world problems too. Down in London I felt a bit out of place coming from the quiet Highlands of Scotland to this busy city, however the staff at the Air Pilots were all friendly and did a good job of calming the nerves. The interviewers were also very friendly, and I felt I could speak to them without feeling like I was being interrogated. I left London feeling apprehensive, however a few weeks later I received the email saying 'congratulations, you've won the PPL scholarship'. I couldn't quite believe it, and I don't think I fully did until the day I passed my skills test and the examiner congratulated me on passing. The idea that I was going to spend my summer learning to fly at my local airport was something that I could only have dreamt of; but this was real!

I started in the last week of May and got used to the aircraft fairly fast, other than the engine management and using the radio. Being a glider pilot already helped with some things, but not these two! Using the engine didn't take too much longer, but I found the radio to be my biggest hurdle out of the whole PPL. I think I was setting my bar too high, as I wanted to sound like the Loganair/British airways captains when they were coming in to land. Around the 10 hour mark my instructor said, 'Tomorrow you can do your first solo'. The next day I did a few practise circuits, and then had the solo. I was most nervous about the radio calls, however the ATC was very kind and broke all of the messages into short lines. The circuit went fine, and I soon started to realise that the radio wasn't too difficult.

It was then onto further manoeuvres and navigation. I really enjoyed getting out over the highlands and flying from A to B, as to me this is what powered flying is all about. I had plenty of spare time in our syllabus so we ended up taking a flight to a short grass strip on the west coast of Scotland, Plockton (we were on the east coast, Inverness Airport). This was a great challenge to land the plane on the short strip and it was excellent flying over the mountains and through the valleys on the way there.



Next were the cross country flights, dual then solo. The biggest issue here is the Scottish weather, as the route set goes up the east coast stopping at Wick and then at Kirkwall, Orkney. Often it was a bluebird day at Inverness, and completely fogged in

at Kirkwall or vice-versa. After a few weeks we managed to complete the dual, and a few days later I was ready to do my solo. Again, I wasn't worried about getting lost or flying the plane, but the daunting thought of hearing an unfamiliar question on the radio coming up was my main concern! Thankfully nothing too eventful happened, and I completed the solo XC. That was the first time I properly felt like a powered pilot, as I did everything myself: from getting the plane out of the hangar in the morning to putting it away at night.

It was then on to practise flights for the exam. It was getting towards the end of August, and I still had some theory exams to do, my practical radio exam, and my practical flight test. I worked hard, finished the theory and radio exams by the Thursday, and so booked my test for the following day. This was great to do it all in the one week, however I was exhausted from all the studying and tests. The examiner gave me the XC route I had to follow the previous night, and so I planned the route that night. I took my time to check for gross errors, and thankfully I didn't make any (on my first planned

route with my instructor I used a wind direction that was 180degrees wrong!).



The morning of the test came and I was sufficiently nervous, but tried to remind myself that he was just there to check that I could fly: he wasn't there to try and make me fail. The flight went well with some minor hiccups with the dead reckoning part, and so we came in to do a final three circuits. The

weather wasn't the calmest of days, and so the circuits were quite sporty. I did one

standard and one flapless on the main runway, with the wind 10 degrees or so off the centre line. The examiner then asked 'do you feel up for a cross wind?', enjoying a challenge, I accepted. The ATC told me to do a left hand circuit for 29, and since the wind was coming from the west, I had a very tight base/final turn to do. After a 2 hour flight, the blustery final approach was quite difficult and I had to use a lot of control input to keep the tomahawk in line with the centreline. The examiner kept telling me to ask for wind checks, however I continued to reply 'no' as I couldn't take in anymore information, so he had to take care of the radio. With a slight bump we landed, and I apologised for ignoring his commands. At the time, I thought he was asking for wind checks to see if we were exceeding the limits for a student pilot, but it turned out he was checking to see if we were exceeding the limits of the aircraft! The examiner told me I passed, and gave me a compliment which I'll attribute to gliding which was 'Your landings were very smooth, I don't think I could have done them better myself'. Whether he meant that seriously or not is another matter, but I'll say that he did.

So that was the summer over, and I had a Pilot's licence. Even writing this seems like I'm back in school and the teacher has asked us to write about a fictional summer we would enjoy. I am very thankful for the scholarship which will allow me to continue my passion of flying by supporting my local gliding club, and hope to encourage others into the world of aviation.

