

Stelios Philanthropic Foundation Scholarship 2025

Alex Cornish

My aviation journey began with the RAF Air Cadets, where I immersed myself in every aviation opportunity available. The highlight of my cadet career was being selected for the Air Cadet Pilot Scheme (ACPS), a two-week residential course in Dundee flying the Aquila A211. After just 10 hours of instruction, I completed my first solo flight, a circuit at Dundee International Airport. This experience gave me an enormous sense of achievement and confirmed my determination to pursue flying as a career.

I am currently entering my third year of Aeronautics and Astronautics at the University of Southampton. Alongside my studies, I am a voluntary reserve with the Royal Navy through the University Royal Naval Unit based at HMNB Portsmouth. My long term goal has always been to serve as a Royal Navy pilot, and I saw the Honourable Company of Air Pilots' PPL Scholarship as the perfect opportunity to further develop my flying skills while gaining valuable experience towards that ambition.

I first applied for the scholarship in 2022 and was unsuccessful twice before finally being awarded it this year. In the meantime, I broadened my skills and experiences, including gaining a drone operator's licence, learning to scuba dive, and taking part in electric flying with the Air League. When I found out I had been successful on my third attempt, I was speechless. I knew I was about to embark on the most rewarding summer of my life.

I chose to complete my PPL with Flight Training London (FTL) at Elstree Aerodrome. Elstree has always meant a lot to me; it's where I took my very first flight for my birthday in a Beechcraft Bonanza, making it all the more special to return years later and complete my PPL.



Above pictures my first flight at 9 years of age (Left), and the very same aircraft on the apron after passing my skill test in September 2025 (Right)

Flight training began on the 10th of June in FTL's Piper PA-28, G-NUKA. The first phase of training focused on revising basic handling skills and adjusting to Elstree's demanding circuit due to the noise abatement procedures. Progress was steady, and I soon completed my first solo circuit, which brought back fond memories of my ACPS solo at Dundee.

From there, I moved into solo circuit consolidation and navigation training. The circuit work was demanding but rewarding, and I quickly gained accuracy and consistency, progressively expanding my spare mental capacity. Navigation flights then expanded my flying beyond Elstree, taking me first to Oakley and Silverstone, and later further afield to Rochester, Oxford, Wellesbourne, and Duxford. Highlights included transiting Luton's Class D airspace, flying over Silverstone during a GT race, and experiencing my first dual landaway at Oxford International. Landing at Duxford was particularly memorable given the many visits I had made there as a child.



Midway through training, I had the opportunity to fly with 727 Naval Air Squadron at RNAS Yeovilton through the University Royal Naval Unit. These flights in the Grob Tutor (pictured left) included aerobatics, practice forced landings, and local navigation, and I had the privilege to fly with an ex-Sea Harrier pilot. It was an unforgettable experience that gave me valuable exposure to the standards of military flying.

As my confidence grew, I completed over four hours of solo consolidation in the circuit and then progressed to solo navigation, flying unassisted to

Duxford and Wellesbourne. These flights included extensive radio work, talking to Farnborough Radar, Brize Norton, London Information, and Southend Radar, which significantly built my RT confidence.

The biggest milestone of the course was my Qualifying Cross Country on the 9th of September. This 175-nautical-mile solo route from Elstree to Wellesbourne, then to Duxford, and back to Elstree took 2 hours 50 minutes. It was a demanding but exhilarating experience, and it confirmed that I was ready for the Skill Test.

Preparation flights covered emergency procedures, stalls, diversions, and a final Luton transit before I undertook my Skill Test on the 13th of September. The 2 hour 15 minute test covered all aspects of the



syllabus, and I was delighted to pass, formally completing my PPL in 45 hours and 5 minutes.

I completed all my theoretical knowledge exams alongside my flying, and I was very pleased to have passed all of them on the first attempt. I also completed and passed the RT practical exam, gaining my Flight Radio Telephony Licence (FRTOL), which ensured I could confidently manage radio communications throughout solo navigation and the Skill Test.

Alongside training, I was keen to give back at FTL. I volunteered regularly, helping to refuel and cover aircraft, securing them in bad weather, assisting students in the simulator with Elstree's circuit, and even supporting the maintenance team in the hangar. These experiences gave me a deeper understanding of aviation outside the cockpit and made me feel part of the Elstree community.

Reflecting on the summer, I am incredibly grateful for the opportunities I have had. From my first flight in a Bonanza at the age of nine to now holding a PPL, the journey has been extraordinary. My time at FTL has been made even more special by the instructors and staff who supported me throughout. In particular, I owe a huge thanks to my primary instructor, Chris Rigby, who worked tirelessly, often sacrificing personal time, to bring me up to a standard far beyond a simple pass.

I would also like to thank the Honourable Company of Air Pilots and the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation for funding me through this journey. Their generosity has enabled me to achieve my lifelong dream of becoming a licensed pilot, and I could not be more grateful.

Looking at my logbook, I am proud of what it represents: a first solo in 10 hours at Dundee Airport, a 175 NM Qualifying Cross Country, a 2 hour 15 minute Skill Test, and over 45 hours of flying this summer. I have learned so much, not just as a pilot but as an individual, and I know this is only the beginning of my aviation career.

