

The Donaldson Private Pilot Licence Scholarship Report

By Kane Stanislas – 2025 Honourable Company of Air Pilots Scholar

My Journey to the Scholarship

Aviation has been the single, unwavering passion in my life for as long as I can remember. My earliest memories are of pressing my forehead against the terminal window at Gatwick Airport, watching aircraft taxi out, and wondering how it must feel to be at the controls. At age twelve, I joined the Royal Air Force Air Cadets, and by thirteen, I was airborne for the first time. Those early experiences – the hum of the Grob Tutor, the thump of the runway on take-off – lit a spark that never left.

Since then, I've seized every opportunity to build experience and deepen my understanding of aviation. From gliding in the Viking to achieving my first solo flight in the Grob Tutor out of Belfast International through the Air Cadet Pilot Scholarship, each milestone has fuelled my motivation further. Alongside this, I became an active member of the Honourable Company of Air Pilots, Fantasy Wings, and The Air League, all of which have provided invaluable mentorship and insight into the aviation world.



Working as a dispatcher at Gatwick Airport also gave me a front-row seat to the operations that keep aviation ticking. I often watch crews preparing for departure and think, *one day that'll be me*. The Donaldson Scholarship has been that vital next step in turning that thought into reality.

The Application

This wasn't my first time applying. In fact, it was my *fourth*. I have in fact received sixteen rejections from various flying sponsorship schemes to date. Seeing that golden word – "Congratulations" this time around on the email notification was such a buzz! Some might have thrown in the towel after so many knockbacks, but I've learned that aviation doesn't reward those who give up at the first hurdle. Every "no" taught me something, and those lessons brought me to this scholarship.

When I received the offer, I promised myself that I'd make the most of every single flying hour. I knew it would be a summer of long days, early mornings, and plenty of coffee – and I was absolutely right.

Training Experience

My scholarship began on 12 June 2025 at Flight Training London, Elstree. The familiar smell of Avgas and the buzz of aircraft engines instantly felt like home. My first lessons focused on rebuilding confidence and refreshing the fundamentals that had dulled slightly over time. Before long, I was deep into circuit training – the part of flying that truly sharpens your focus and discipline.



Elstree's circuit patterns can be tricky, and I'll admit, it took me a while to get them consistently right. But once I did, I moved on to my first solo flights – an indescribable feeling that never gets old. Between lessons, I buried myself in the PPL theory exams. I'd underestimated how tough they'd be, but persistence (and a lot of late-night revision) paid off in the end.

One of my most memorable moments was my qualifying cross-country. It was a bright, calm day – the sort of weather pilots dream of – and for the first time, I felt completely at ease in command. Navigating from Elstree to Wellesbourne and then to Duxford, I felt the real freedom of flight. I even imagined I was flying a commercial airliner, approaching to land with invisible passengers onboard. Sadly, there were no claps after touchdown, but the grin on my face was applause enough.

In total, I completed my PPL in 48 flying hours – just three over the scholarship's 45-hour funding limit – which I happily self-funded to finish strong.



Challenges Along the Way

Of course, the journey wasn't all smooth air. Balancing my full-time job at Gatwick with training at Elstree meant a gruelling schedule. Many days began before sunrise and ended well after dark, often involving four hours of driving. To make the most of my commute, I recorded "revision podcasts" for myself – talking through checklists, air law, and meteorology concepts out loud. Slightly mad, perhaps, but it worked wonders for memory!

I also faced challenges with one instructor, and things here became increasingly difficult. After discussing the situation with the flight school and the Honourable Company of Air Pilots, I was supported and reassigned with a new instructor – a turning point that restored my confidence and enjoyment of flying. I learned an important lesson: that professionalism, communication, and the ability to adapt are just as vital in the cockpit as flying skill itself.

Completing the Course



By late September, after a whirlwind summer of learning, revising, and refining my flying technique, I passed my skills test with a strong result. Hearing the examiner say, "*Congratulations, you've passed,*" was one of the proudest moments of my life. I thought back to the twelve-year-old boy staring out of the airport window – and realised he'd finally taken off.

Looking Ahead

Now that I hold my PPL, my immediate goal is to share the experience with those who have supported me – taking family and close friends flying and giving them a taste of what their encouragement helped achieve. Professionally, I plan to keep working in the aviation industry, building experience and preparing for future airline cadet schemes.

I'm also passionate about giving back. As a Training Officer within the RAF Air Cadets, I already mentor young people, but I plan to expand that – speaking at schools, career fairs, and aviation events to help others, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, see that becoming a pilot is *possible*.

Long-term, I aim to progress through modular ATPL training and eventually to the airline flight deck. Beyond that, I'd love to take on executive leadership and training roles, helping to shape the next generation of pilots and make a positive impact on aviation operations.

Final Reflections

This scholarship has been more than a flying course – it's been a lesson in perseverance, humility, and gratitude. It's shown me that challenges are simply opportunities in disguise, and that with enough determination, you can always find lift, even in turbulence.

I owe immense thanks to everyone at the Honourable Company of Air Pilots for believing in me, to Flight Training London for their instruction and support, my *AiR* Mentor - Andy, and most of all, to Captain Colin Donaldson, whose generosity has changed my life.

The Donaldson Scholarship didn't just help me earn a licence; it helped me grow into the pilot I always hoped I'd become. The journey now continues ...



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