

Luca Kulacz The Duke Scholarship

This August just passed, I was fortunate enough to be invited for a week's gliding course at the Cambridge Gliding Centre, organised and sponsored by the Honourable Company of Air Pilots.

When I arrived on Sunday afternoon, about two hours late (as is typical when travelling with my parents), I found the clubhouse completely deserted! Fortunately, I quickly bumped into Paul, a member of the club, who kindly offered to drive me across the airfield to watch that day's gliding from up close. After a couple of hours of generally pestering everyone at the launch site with my questions, I returned to the clubhouse where I met Camilla, who very kindly gave me a tour of the rest of the club. Later, my course mate Patrycja arrived (and I thought I was late!). We spent the rest of the evening getting to know one another, before heading off to catch some sleep for the early start that greeted us the next morning.



Not wanting to be late for my first day, Monday began with about 10 alarms at 7 o'clock. I met Steve, my instructor for the week, over breakfast and was introduced to the Puchacz (which everyone at the club pronounces wrong much to the Polish in me's annoyance), the glider that we would be flying for much of the week. I then very cleverly volunteered to tow the glider to the launch point, despite having not driven in over 3 years. A few stalls later, having reached the launch point, Patrycja kindly allowed me to prepare for my first winch by volunteering me to go up first. After, two 8-minute flights, not helped by a lack of thermals (and a lack of talent!), I switched over to ground training. Chris, the launch marshal that day, taught me the launch procedure, including how to the attach winch cables to a glider, and how to run the wing (not "walk" the wing as he reminded me multiple times that week).

After lunch, the thermals had become much

stronger which enabled me to complete a 58-minute soaring flight, during which I experienced my first stalls and practiced trimming the aircraft.

Tuesday was an entirely different beast to Monday; I remember waking up and being nervous to fly because of just how windy it was. Fortunately, the wind was blowing straight down the runway, making it easy to gain over 2000 feet directly off the winch. Unfortunately, the wind destroyed all the thermals, meaning that my morning flying ended up consisting of just 3 short and turbulent (but exciting!) flights, with plenty of opportunity to practice the landing circuit. After lunch, with the wind having picked up further, we decided not to fly, instead Steve had us trying take-offs and landings in the club's simulator. Once we were somewhat comfortable with these (it's surprisingly easy when you don't have to worry about the consequences of stalling near the ground), Steve





introduced us to ridge and wave soaring at the Long Mynd club and in the French Alps. Patrycja and I continued to explore the capabilities of the simulator, performing some pretty terrible attempts at aerobatics and avoiding head on collisions with F-15's that the other had spawned from the instructor's seat. After a particularly bad crash, attempting to land directly into the hangar, we headed outside to offer ground support for the evening flying (I definitely wasn't hoping that by doing this I'd get a flight myself). Unfortunately, I didn't get the opportunity to put my newly acquired skills from the simulator to the test, but with few helpers on the ground, did manage to get a lot more practice in the ground training exercises I had learnt the day before.

Wednesday was much like Tuesday except it was even windier and the wind was now blowing across the runway. As a result, it was unsafe for me to take control of the take-off and landing near the ground, but I did manage to control the 2nd phase of the take-off and much of the landing (although I found it hard to be too proud of myself with Steve doing the airbrakes for me). My flights were even shorter this morning, with an impressive 10-minutes being my best. I did, however, get to fly my second glider, the Perkoz, which I remember fondly for its trimmer and comfy headrest (not that I got to use it much with my granny-like

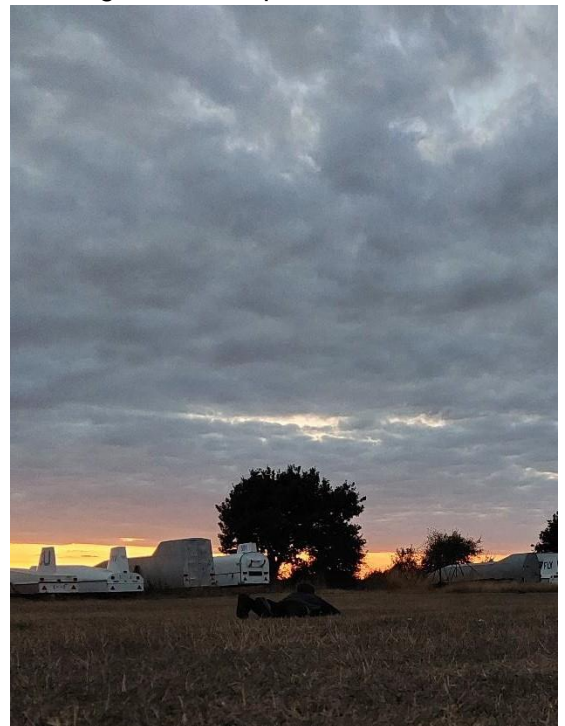
flying). The Perkoz was sadly taken away from me in the afternoon, but with the sun now shining and the wind having died down a bit, I managed to fly for an entire 38 minutes with only prompts from Steve. That evening, Patrycja and I once again provided ground assistance for the flying, and despite running out of light for us to fly at the end of the day, being the only two helpers, we did get all the responsibility of launching and retrieving the gliders, which really enabled me to improve my ground skills.

On Thursday, the weather was much better for soaring. For the first time all week, the club was packed, with the private owners having come out in the hope of flying cross country.



To avoid the queue at the launch point, it was important to remain in the air for as long as possible, which meant plenty of practice thermaling. As there was lots of air traffic, I soon found myself thermaling with another glider for the first time. My lookout skills aren't something I'm particularly proud of, so it required every bit of my focus and willpower (and prompts from Steve) to keep the other glider on my wing tip.

I managed just under an hour of flying that morning, and for the first time managed to take-off and land (minus the landing flare) completely unassisted. Back on the ground, Chris taught me how to retrieve the winch cables and, since I'd stopped stalling the HiLux, entrusted me to pick up gliders that had landed long and tow them back for another launch. After lunch, I flew my first aerotow, and reached cloud base for the first time (about 5000 feet on this day!). I flew for 42 minutes straight, this despite working on further stalling exercises. At the end of the day, Chris allowed me to drive the bus back to the clubhouse (although he didn't trust me enough to allow anyone else but him on it). Later, Patrycja and I had a drink with some of the instructors, after which we spent far too long trying to catch a rabbit to prove to David, one of these instructors, that you can (spoiler, you can't, even with a coat that makes you look like a cabbage),



all while I threw an evening-long strop over losing the string that secures my glasses (which turned up on my doorstep the next morning!).

Friday was “the best day for gliding all year”. The club was even more packed than on Thursday; there were so many gliders to launch and they just kept arriving throughout the morning. When Patrycja returned after a near one and a half hour flight, I remember saying to Steve that I would somehow manage to miss all the lift and I proved myself right by managing my shortest flight of the week at 4 minutes. I made up for this on my second flight, which was my first over one hour. During this, I



once again got the opportunity to refine my thermaling technique as well as to experience my first spins and reduced g manoeuvres (at least my first intended reduced g manoeuvres). Although I could've easily flown for longer, with my flight already running well into lunchtime, Steve asked me to bring the glider down. With the thermals being so strong, however, this was difficult; even after pushing the speed on to 100 knots, we failed to lose any significant altitude. In fact, the only way I could bring the glider down was to pull the airbrakes at around 2,500 feet (which felt really wrong). I even had to fly the downwing leg of the landing circuit twice due to picking up too much lift on the first attempt! Nearing the end of the day, I had my final flight of the week, and was fortunate enough to be allowed to fly another aerotow, with too many gliders queuing for a winch launch. Just before I launched for the final time, a representative from the Honourable Company of Air Pilots arrived to discuss the experience with Patrycja and I and to issue us with our certificates. While I was flying, two of our interviewers also arrived, which was nice as it gave us the chance to have a quick chat with them about our plans for the future and to thank them for selecting us for the scholarship.



All in all, I managed nearly 6 and a half hours of flying throughout the week, but there was so much more to this experience than just the flying. I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone who's played a role in making this possible for me. Firstly, to Errikos, my personal tutor at uni, thanks for recommending this scholarship to me and for pushing me to apply for it. Next to Steve, for being just the best instructor, I always

felt laid back and comfortable flying with you (although you wouldn't have been able to guess from my white knuckles at the end of each flight) and you even seemed to particularly enjoy the times I turned the glider into a rollercoaster! To Patrycja, for being such an awesome course mate; thanks for putting up with all the times I tried to annoy you and for just generally making it such a funny and enjoyable experience for me.

Thanks to everyone else I met at Cambridge Gliding Centre for being so friendly and welcoming, I had the best week at the best club and can't wait to visit you guys again soon. Finally, thanks to everyone at the Honourable Company of Air Pilots; to my interviewers for seeing the potential in me; to Angie for always responding quickly to the barrage of questions I had; to the four who made the long trip up to Cambridge to visit us on the final day, and to everyone else who is involved in organising and sponsoring such a great experience for young people like myself. All of you have inspired me to continue flying; I can't wait to join the gliding society on my return to uni, and to pursue powered flying through the University Air Squadron and 2023 PPL scholarship.