

Sophie Durbin- The Sir Sefton Branckner PPL Scholarship 2023

It's such a cliché to say that as a small child I wanted to be a pilot, but for me it was true.

I was very fortunate as a child to travel a lot with my family, pre 9/11 my father would always ask the crew if it was possible for myself and my brothers to visit the flight deck in the cruise. The lights, buttons and sheer magic sparked my young imagination and I am so grateful to all those pilots who have inspired me to follow in the same footsteps. I later found out that my grandmother was a member of the WAFF so clearly some of this flying bug was passed through generations.

Unfortunately for me my dream was put on pause, this was due to finances and having a young family so I embarked on a career in midwifery.

Attending various air shows around the country and sitting in the fields behind Heathrow watching in absolute awe, wishing that was me bringing those aeroplanes in to land kept that little spark alive but it seemed so far out of reach.

When COVID19 hit, many of us had a whole new perspective on life, working on the front line in some of the most harrowing conditions made me realise how short life really is, and that there's no point working a job that doesn't completely satisfy you, the aviation spark had been fully reignited and I knew that I just had to pursue it properly this time.

I decided to attend pilot careers live event in Heathrow, here I met members of The Honourable Company of Airpilots who told me about the scholarships available and gave me the courage to apply stating that they were open to everyone from all walks of life.

When applications opened the following year I spent hours trawling over my application, thinking about the best ways to word answers and how to fit them within the word count. I finally sent it off thinking "I'm not sure I'm what they are looking for but if I don't try then I definitely won't get it". Several weeks passed and I received an email to say I'd been selected to move to the next stage! In awe but excited to have gotten this far I completed the second stage and then was informed I'd been invited to interview!

On the 3rd May 2023 I made my way down to London from the South West not knowing what to expect but excited to attend Airpilots House.

Firstly I met Angie who was so welcoming and reassuring and also met Molly who was also interviewing at the same time as me. We went downstairs to sit the aptitude tests, these were pretty much what I was expecting in terms of being reasonably challenging with some easier questions and some harder ones. Having the opportunity to sit and chat with Molly and the lovely Chris really put me at ease.

Eventually it was my turn to be called in to interview, making my way all the way up to the top of air pilots house was a challenge in itself at 9 months pregnant! Very much out of breath, I introduced myself to the three person panel who must have thought that 1) I was terribly unfit and 2) wondering why on earth someone whose about to have a baby would want to apply for a PPL.

Kat, Liam and Bobby were so quick to put me at ease, the questions were thought provoking and definitely designed to really find out about each candidates background and future aspirations. I was kicking myself as I left thinking that I'd messed the whole thing up after saying some really stupid things, but regardless I was thrilled by the opportunity and experience thinking if it's not my year this year, then I can always reapply next.

Just a few days later I received an email from Airpilots, convinced it wasn't my year, I took myself off to a quiet room away from my family as didn't want them to see me upset. I opened the email and saw in bright red writing **Congratulations!** At this point I didn't know what to think or feel, I couldn't even read on I was in such disbelief. In true British style I made myself a cup of tea and reopened the email to finally read what it actually said. It took a while for the news to sink in, I opened and closed

that email so many times just in case I was imagining it until I finally accepted that I had actually been selected and then announced the news to my family. Just 6 days after interview my baby boy made his way into the world, I can only thank Airpilots house for the stairs and the sheer exhilaration of the PPL scholarship news which I'm sure helped him make his rapid entrance!

Exactly one month later on the 12th June I had my first flying lesson, I had been dreaming about this day for so many years and it was finally here. A mixture of emotions of excitement and nervousness filled me, I had chosen a flight school at Cardiff international airport, hearing those words "cleared to take off" was possibly one of the most surreal and exciting experiences. My first lesson ended up finishing earlier than planned due to poor horizons however I came back overjoyed and excited for what was to come next. In my scholarship plan I thought I had factored in lesson cancellations for bad weather however I was not prepared for one of the wettest summers on record. Lesson after lesson was cancelled due to poor weather, scuppering my plans and making it feel like every two steps forward was one backwards. Little bit, by little bit I made my way through the PPL syllabus, finally a good summer week arrived.

Following a circuits lesson my instructor radioed the tower to request a first solo flight plan! Still to this day I cannot describe what that first solo felt like, I recall how fast the aeroplane took off with one less person in it and the moment of "that's it! We're off the ground! I'm actually flying, no going back now, I have to land it", taxi'ing back in, legs like jelly from the adrenaline and absolutely beaming, I had several radio calls of congratulations from the tower and a Tui airliner waiting to depart- the "I did it" finally sunk in.

Following solo consolidation, the course started to go really quickly, I particularly enjoyed the navigation stage of the course and as much as I was terrified I was going to end up lost on my solo navigation flights, it really made it all feel real and that I was actually out, flying an aeroplane, alone which really helped boost my confidence. Yet again poor weather scuppered my plans, finally a good weather day came and I managed to do my QXC (albeit taking off later than planned due to a plane stuck on Cardiff's runway but we eventually set off).

I had originally planned to fly Cardiff-Swansea-Kemble- Cardiff however on the day Swansea's runway was closed so I had to use a backup of Cardiff-Kemble- Wellesbourne- Cardiff. Due to the late take off time in Cardiff there was sadly no time to explore Kemble or Wellesbourne airfields, I did however park next to the beautiful Vulcan and take a quick snap before making my way back to Cardiff just in time before the sunset. Back on the ground I had a real euphoria of "I've done it! I've actually flown by myself to two different airfields and come back alive with an aircraft that can be used again!" This was the confidence boost I really needed.

Following my QXC I had several brush up lessons prior to my test as yet again I was struggling with weather cancellations (who knew, Cardiff seems to have its own microclimate). Test day finally came around, I had the most wonderful examiner who made me feel so at ease, we ended up with a real diversion as the cloud base started to drop, with all the high ground around Cardiff I made the decision to divert to another area. If there's one piece of advice I can give fellow student pilots sitting their test it's this- it doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be safe. When the cloud base lowered I thought it was all over for me and that I'd have to come back another day to resit however that decision making to divert showed the examiner more than just "can she fly a navigation leg?" It showed him that I had the skills to know when plans need to change for the safety of the aircraft and all on board. Following the navigation and diversion part of the exam, I completed the general handling section followed by the circuits back at Cardiff. Back on the ground I was informed I had passed my test and got some brilliant feedback from the examiner. I think it took several weeks before I finally accepted I'd done it, I actually have my own Private Pilots License, something I've been dreaming of for so many years. Receiving that little blue CAA wallet and license through the post was better than every Christmas present combined!

I honestly cannot thank the Honourable Company of Airpilots enough for giving me this opportunity, everyone has been absolutely amazing and so supportive throughout my journey to gaining a PPL, the generosity of the sponsors is truly amazing and I hope that one day I'll be able to give back and sponsor a scholarship myself. Here's to the next adventure of hour building and starting ATPL's, perhaps I'll finally get those blue skies!



