

Darrell Ikechukwu Kovac

The Donaldson PPL Scholarship – Final Report

How It All Began

My aviation journey started not from a school visit or a lucky trial flight, but from something far more personal — the realities of my early life. My parents lived in two different countries, and since their separation shortly after I was born, I became a frequent flyer, literally. Holidays, half-terms, summers, Christmases, I was always in the air, going back and forth between homes. My dad would always pay for the unaccompanied minor service, meaning a cabin crew member would pick me up at security and often take me to the flight deck during the flight. Those memories are where the seed was planted. Before I even realised it, flying was a part of me.

My first real taste of aviation came through the Air Cadets. I joined in Year 9 after Pilot Officer Coralie Young visited my school for an assembly. The word "Air" was all I needed to hear. I took a chance and joined. I never looked back. Through cadets, I experienced Air Experience Flying in the Grob Tutor and Vigilant, and even flew in a Tornado GR4 with 31 Squadron RAF — the same number as my own cadet squadron, 31 (Tower Hamlets). Every one of those experiences built my love for aviation even more.

The Scholarship Journey

I first heard of the Honourable Company of Air Pilots back in 2016 when I was 16. I applied on a whim, not knowing much about the process or what the outcome would be. I didn't apply again for a few years, and it wasn't until after COVID that I got serious. What motivated me to apply again and keep applying was simple: I didn't have the money. This scholarship felt like the only real way I could get my PPL without a mountain of financial pressure. To be selected meant I could focus on training, not just costs.



When I finally got the call, I was at work. Alone in the office.

It felt surreal. I'd applied in 2016, 2022, 2023 and it was in 2024 that I finally got it. I had a small hint it might be good news when someone called me for a follow-up chat after the interview, something that hadn't happened in previous years, but I didn't want to get ahead of myself. When the confirmation came through, I was in total shock. It felt like a massive weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Like someone finally said, "We see your dream, go chase it."

Training Highlights and Challenges

I trained at Stapleford Flight Centre, flying the Cessna 152. My standout moments? There are many, but none quite like my first solo. It was a defining moment because up until then, landings were my Achilles' heel. In fact, I once landed so badly that the aircraft was taken off the line and sent for maintenance, I nearly damaged the nose gear! I struggled with the final part of every circuit, the round-out and flare, and it was a slow climb to proficiency. Other highlights definitely included the love/hate relationship I had with my instructor Parsa, he was certainly someone who would give it to me straight but with good reason. He knew there was excellence within me and it was just about unlocking it that made flying training hard. Some of his more "motivational" comments included:

"The centreline is not where *you* are."

"Put more rudder in!"

"I think you want to kill the both of us?"

"You really need to think about what you're doing."

And my personal favourite: "Training you is going to make me retire."



At the time, these words frustrated me. I even considered switching instructors. But in hindsight, I'm so glad I didn't. Parsa saw potential in me and he demanded nothing but excellence. He gave tough love, but it was always in service of pushing me to be better. His knowledge, humility, and realness made all the difference.

My cross-country qualifier was another unforgettable moment. I flew from Stapleford to Lydd, then to Earl's Colne, and back. I spoke to

Farnborough Radar and transited through Southend's airspace. I remember thinking: this is it. This is what I was meant to do.

As for my Solo Nav, it had a rocky start. The practice flight with Parsa wasn't great, but he trusted me to get it done. I flew from Stapleford to Maldon to Witham and back and made it in one piece!

The biggest challenge? Keeping up. Flight training doesn't wait for you. You've got to be sharp, prepared, and constantly ahead of the lesson. I kept a detailed journal in the form of a spreadsheet where I logged every lesson, the theory, the drills — everything. When it came time for my Skills Test, I didn't have to guess. I just revised the journal and trusted my prep. And it worked.

Would I do my skills test and PPL training again? Absolutely no way. But am I glad I did? Absolutely yes and without a shadow of doubt.

Obstacles and Sacrifices

Surprisingly, I didn't have to make any massive sacrifices at least not in the traditional sense. Work was supportive (though I kept things vague I just told them I was doing an "aviation course"). I had the annual leave, and I used it.

That said, I did give up some things I love. I stopped going to the gym, which is a big deal for me it's my mental reset. I also paused cadets. And those were real sacrifices because those are outlets I deeply enjoy.

The biggest hurdle was the weather. It turned on me just as I needed consistency, and it threatened to derail my progress. I had to get the Air Pilots involved to help keep things moving. Another challenge was my struggle with landings. Had I started practicing them earlier, I would've avoided major setbacks. That was a hard lesson.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to Parsa Motlagh, my instructor. You made me the pilot I am today. Your directness, patience (even when it didn't look like it), and expertise pushed me to be excellent. I wish you all the best with Aer Lingus — they're truly lucky to have you.



To my HCAP mentor Dee Limbaya. I genuinely don't know what I would've done without you. You knew exactly what I was going through, and you stepped in to help, guide, and advocate when I couldn't. Your support made this scholarship possible and to Captain Colin Donaldson and the Honourable Company of Air Pilots team (Dominic Registe & Will Wright) — thank you!

Looking Ahead

Next, I'm aiming to join an airline cadet program. The financial pressure is still there to an extent, but I won't let it stop me. My ultimate goal is to fly commercially — whatever pays the most. Whether that's as a private jet pilot, test pilot, or airline captain, I'm driven by financial security. Coming from a lower socioeconomic background, I've seen what financial instability does to a family, and I want to break that cycle.

Flying is my passion, but stability is my goal. And the two don't have to be mutually exclusive.

Final Reflections and Advice

This scholarship taught me that I'm stronger than I thought, mentally and physically. It also reminded me that setbacks are just bad days, not bad careers. When things go wrong, just keep pushing. It won't rain forever the sun will shine, and when it does, it'll be blinding.



To future scholars:

1. Start IMMEDIATELY. Book your Class 2 medical straight after you get that phone call.
2. Don't waste time. Every lesson counts and keep track of what you're doing as well as getting your exams done as soon as you can.
3. Start practicing landings and take-offs early — even before circuits. That was my biggest struggle, and if I had started sooner, I would've saved literal hours of my scholarship.

There's a plan A — and then there's everything else. Be ready for everything else. Flight training teaches you that. Be humble, be ready to learn, use your resources, and always have a plan B.

Thanks to this scholarship, I can finally say: *I am a pilot.*