



Tom Linzell

Royal Air Force Charitable Trust Gliding Scholarship

Hosted by Portsmouth Naval Gliding Centre



From Friday 14th to Friday 21st 2026, I was fortunate enough to participate in a week-long gliding scholarship, organised by the Honourable Company of Air Pilots (HCAP), sponsored by the Royal Air Force Charitable Trust, and hosted by Portsmouth Naval Gliding Centre (PNGC). The week started with 2 days flying out of Middle Wallop, followed by 5 days flying out of Upavon. For the week, we were accommodated in the Army Aviation Centre.

On Friday 14th, I packed up my car and made the 2-hour journey from St Albans to Middle Wallop. Arriving at the Middle Wallop Officers' Mess, I met my cohort. On this evening, we had a welcome dinner and a range of introductory talks. These included introductions from David Durston, the chairman of PNGC; Sub-Lieutenant Philippa Griffiths, who handled much of the behind-the-scenes organisation; and Dave Howell, who handled our general organisation and was an all-round great character. After our introductions and getting to know the rest of the cohort, we retired for the evening to get rest for the exciting week ahead.

Saturday kicked off with a cooked breakfast, a staple of the week. We headed to the airfield, where we had a slower start, organising syndicates and being briefed on general airfield conduct and safety. From there, we headed out to the launch point to begin the part that all of us were most excited for: flying. Our instructors introduced themselves and got us acquainted with our gliders, their controls, and our parachutes. After this, we got our first flights. The winch launch is a spectacular experience, going from 0 to 60 mph in 2.5 seconds. The climb angle is steep enough to view the rapidly departing ground over your shoulder behind you. After this excitement, and the bang of the cable release, you are then met with a much calmer experience; just you, the instructor and the ever-present sound of the wind over the airframe. From here, I started to learn basic primary controls of the airframe on these first few flights, as well as the basics of aircraft attitude and speed control. At this time, I noted that while intuitive, flying a glider is most definitely not easy. Lightweight and highly sensitive, the glider feeds back any uncoordinated flying. For these first few flights, the yaw string more closely resembled a pendulum swinging than a smooth yaw indicator. Nevertheless, it was this challenge and the slow improvement that came with it that made it unbelievably fun.

Also on this first day, I got to experience a flight in a motor glider. This was actually my first experience flying in a powered light aircraft. Much louder and with more vibration than the glider, it was fantastic fun. I got plenty of time on the stick, wobbling my way above the countryside around Middle Wallop. It was also interesting to see how the pilot, Barney, followed his training and processes to fly the aircraft. Watching him run through checklists and the process side of flying provided great insight into the realities of safe aircraft operation. It was a valuable insight into flying a powered aircraft, and something I will not forget.



The cockpit view of the G109b motor glider

This first weekend at Middle Wallop was incredibly formative. While we'd all like to be the next Maverick, it introduced us to the realities of glider flying and the safety-first approach to learning. This approach also extended to learning on the ground. I learned glider flying is not an individual sport in which you simply go flying all day. Instead, it is a club sport with a strong sense of community. When not flying, you are assisting with launches, recovery, logging flights, and making plenty of coffee. Being on the ground is just as busy, and as interesting, as being in the air. Learning the safe processes to keep ground and flying operations going was not something I had considered much before the course, but I came away thoroughly enjoying this side too, with my eyes opened to the whole picture.



An ASK-21 glider on Middle Wallop Airfield

Moving into the next week, from Monday we made the move to Upavon. A longer drive gave us more time to chat about our day's flying (and other nonsense) in the carshares we had organised ourselves into for the journey. Ground operations became more refined and streamlined. While the weather was not particularly suited to soaring flights, it was suitable for practising our circuits. This would be key to progressing to landings throughout the week.

Throughout the week, a recurring highlight was the fireside talks. Each night, a guest from an aviation background (military, civil, pilots and aircrew) would give us a talk, providing knowledge on different career options within flying and aviation, as well as their routes there. These provided a fascinating insight, and as someone who has an ambition for a career within aviation, these were just as valuable as the flying. These talks helped to make this course unforgettable and something that will be acknowledged as a key part, or even the start, of our early flying careers.



Final approach to Upavon Airfield

As the week progressed, and with only a few brief showers stopping us, progress was good. While we all progressed at different rates, we were all flying safely and having fun doing so. By the end of the week, while I was not yet solo and in need of more experience before that, I was having fun launching, flying the circuit, and landing. This progress, from uncoordinated turns to full flights, is an amazing feeling. Throughout the

week, progressing through the SPL syllabus, I experienced and/or flew stalls, thermals, spiral dives and more. Unfortunately, due to being unable to find any lift on the final day, I was unable to experience a loop. However, this provides me with even greater motivation to get back out, continue my gliding training, and get that elusive loop in.

The week concluded with a ceremony in which certificates were handed out, thank-yous were said, and funny stories shared. My syndicate presented our most frequent instructor, Nigel, with a card to thank him. His combination of clear instruction and dry humour made our training effective and fun.

I will continue the thank-yous here, as there are many who deserve it. To the whole of PNGC, thank you for being the most kind and generous hosts for our week of flying with you. To Philippa and Dave, thank you for the work in organising such a fantastic week. To David Durston, thank you and your contacts for providing us with the most helpful and insightful career talks any young person with aspirations in aviation could hope for. To the Middle Wallop Officers' Mess, thank you for letting us use your space. To HCAP and the Royal Air Force Charitable Trust, thank you for providing opportunities to young and budding aviators, including myself. To everyone else, all the staff and everyone else involved, thank you for your time, effort and care.



Me, my certificate and the glider, N3

I promise you it won't be the last time you see me in a glider!

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