

On Cloud Nine

By John Sharpe



Sitting quietly beside my glider on a dusty grass runway in the middle of nowhere, a powerful rush of emotion swept over me. I'd done it. I had just landed after a five-hour soaring flight, an achievement I'd first dreamed of half a century before.

I patted my sleek sailplane and said a silent thank you. I also thanked the clusters of cumulus clouds that helped me rise to almost 9000 feet, fly more than 100 kilometres and stay aloft for a crucial five hours. Crucial because the Silver badge qualification, the international mark of a qualified glider pilot, requires five hours duration, a height gain of 3000 feet and a cross-country distance run of at least 50 kilometres. You can do them all separately, but I had managed them all in one flight.

I was so happy I even said a friendly hello to the kangaroos gathering on the remote NSW airstrip as the daylight began to fade.

The duration task had been touch-and-go. The weather at Lake Keepit Soaring Club was perfect – sunny with fluffy white clouds. But this was autumn, and there was the problem. Gliders stay aloft by

circling in columns of rising air (thermals), which are triggered by the sun heating the ground and the ground heating the air just above it. As this warm air rises a few thousand feet and cools, water vapour condenses into water droplets and gives birth to clouds.

The lower sun and shorter days of April mean the thermals don't start to work until after 11am and finish about 4pm. I was towed up to 2000 feet at 11.45 and then climbed in thermals to 6000 feet to begin my 50-kilometre task. Cross-country gliding involves a close relationship with the clouds born from the thermals. When they gave me good lift, I thanked them. When the lift was weak and I was getting low, I wheedled, cajoled and pleaded for more. When they tricked me and gave only sinking air, I cursed them.

I was proud to be at the birth of my favourite cloud – it was just a little baby

wisp of white vapour when I detected lift. As I circled underneath, it grew into a majestic mature white airy castle that pulled up so strongly I had to speed away to avoid being sucked into it. It had taken me up to 8700 feet – and my toes were getting cold! (It was 27 degrees on the ground, but 5 degrees up high).

I wasn't alone in the sky as a huge wedge-tailed eagle shared a thermal and glared at me, and tiny swifts darted across my path chasing insects that were carried aloft in the rising air.

I achieved my distance task – Manilla to Gunnedah – and returned to Keepit in less than three hours. Then I needed to loiter in the sky for another couple of hours.

But by 4.15 I was struggling to stay aloft in weak patches of lift, using all the concentration and willpower I could summon at the end of the long flight. The last 20 minutes was in still air, a gentle

downhill cruise that gave me time to enjoy the magnificent scenery of inland NSW. I could see Tamworth to the east, below me gleamed the Namoi River and the shining Lake Keepit, to the west was Gunnedah and beyond that was a narrow column of smoke from a fire in the Pilliga Scrub near Coonabarabran.

Then I came down to earth – literally – and looked at my watch. It showed I'd managed several minutes more than the five hours – but I had to subtract a few minutes for the tow up to 2000 feet behind a power plane before I started my proper soaring flight.

Nigel, a friendly fellow pilot (all glider pilots are friendly, but he was especially so), helped me with the unfamiliar task of downloading the GPS flight logger into the clubhouse computer. Whew! The logger showed a soaring flight of five hours and 30 seconds! I bought us both a beer to celebrate victory by a hair's breadth.

The slim, efficient 15-metre long wings of the glider, a Rolladen-Schneider LS7, helped me stay aloft. The machine lost height at just 125 feet a minute.

My first solo in a glider was 48 years ago at the age of 16 with the RAF air cadets at Spitalgate, England. The glider was an ancient canvas-and-wood craft called a Slingsby Tandem Tutor T-31 and the winch-launched flights lasted about three minutes. (The Tutor can glide 18 kilometres for a 1000 metre (3280 feet) height loss while the streamlined glassfibre LS7 can glide

more than 44 kilometres).

That 16-year-old's dream of a Silver badge has now been achieved. My next task? I need a flight of 300 kilometres for a Gold badge, and then 500 kilometres for a Diamond one.

But then there's the other dream of my youth. I'm only 65 now. That's not too old to begin a career as a rock star, is it?

Gliding

I did my recent training at **SOUTHERN CROSS GLIDING CLUB** at Camden, south of Sydney. You can take a trial flight for \$220. More training will cost about \$75 a flight. www.gliding.com.au/

Lake Keepit, near Tamworth, runs seven-day-a-week courses. www.keepitsoaring.com/LKSC/

The Gliding Federation of Australia www.gfa.org.au has details of more gliding clubs and guides to gliding.

John Sharpe has returned to gliding after more than 1100 hours of flying powered light aircraft and competing in aerobatics. He won the Advanced class at the Australian National Aerobatic Championships in 1999 flying a Pitts Special biplane. ■

John is the winner of an AOPA National Airfield Directory. If you have a story you'd like to share, email your story and pictures to editor@aopa.com.au. you could win a fabulous prize.



Gliding vs Power

I love flying in any type of aircraft (and I've jumped out of them too!) Gliding brings the enjoyable challenge of using natural forces to stay in the air. It's not difficult to learn how to pick thermals and work them and it is fun. The flying can be difficult in strong winds and thermals can be rough.

Costs:

POWER: \$200-\$250 an hour for something simple. \$350+ an hour for a Pitts Special.

GLIDING: About \$110 an hour (\$60 for a tow to 3000 ft and about \$50 an hour for the glider). With special packages, a three-hour flight including the launch can cost about \$90 – just \$30 an hour. BUT you have to join a club and the Gliding Federation of Australia – about \$680 a year.

Most club instructors are volunteers – there's no charge.

Convenience:

POWER: If renting, you can book, turn up and fly, then go home. If you have your own aircraft, there's a bit of work preparing it before flight and putting it away after. Plus all the times something goes wrong and you have to get it fixed!

GLIDING: If flying club gliders arrive at 9am, unpack hangar, wash down gliders, tow out gliders. Fly, help retrieve other gliders, log flights. Go home. If you arrive later, you help put the gliders away at the end of the day.

If you want to go it alone, a used glider can cost anything from \$15,000 to more than \$100,000.

Fun:

POWER: You can travel to places and take friends if the weather is good and you can afford the bills. You can do aerobatics and compete.

GLIDING: The challenge to stay up is always there – if there's no lift you may be down in 20 minutes. You are pitting your wits and skill against the elements. On good days you can fly for 1000 kilometres and average more than 100 knots. In wave conditions you can climb to 33,000 feet (the Australian record). The club atmosphere means that when you come down you can tell the other pilots about your achievements (if you stayed up longer than they did!)

You can try for badges for distances flown and height gain. You can enter state, national or international competitions. You can travel to different sites to try soaring low along ridges or high in wave conditions.

You can do aerobatics. You can take friends (but only one at a time).