

A Soaring Adventure in Godzone

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When I starting gliding ten years ago I often justified the time and expense as "a good way to broaden my horizons". I never realized how broad until a hot August day last year when I took a break from moving my family and renovating our new house to check my email and see if there were any interesting postings on the internet Soaring News Group.

Tow Pilot/Instructor(s) needed in New Zealand (Dec/Jan/Feb 95/96)

The Wellington Gliding Club is the largest and most active Gliding club in New Zealand with around 5000 launches per year and a fleet of 6 Twin Seaters (incl. Janus/Twin Astir), 5 Single seaters (incl. 2 *PW5 world class gliders), 4 Towplanes (2 * Pawnees, 2 * Super Cubs) and around 25 private owners. The club is the only 7 day a week club operation during the New Zealand Summer (Dec/Jan/Feb) and is looking for a couple of keen gliding types who would like a summer sojourn'e in Godzone (New Zealand).

The club is totally voluntary so doesn't have the high charge out rates to sustain a salary as such but free onfield accommodation, a small expense allowance, plenty of flying hours, friendly kiwi hospitality and a freedom to use the club as a travel base mean that you would have the time of your life.

Anyrate the positions available are:

- Voluntary Tow Pilot - Tail Dragger Time essential. Glider experience preferred.
- Glider Instructor: Glider Instructor rating essential (obviously).

If you are interested or want further details please contact...

For a week I exchanged email with Ross Sutherland, the enterprising treasurer of the Wellington Gliding Club. Strangely, he seemed as interested in this video word-game as I. After checking the airfare costs I was surprised to find it not as high as I expected. The idea of going nearly half way around the world was hard to grasp; especially since the entire proposal was delivered through a somewhat abstract medium and projected to me by a faceless cathode ray tube. Maybe it's just an elaborate hoax to get me to buy a set of encyclopedias!

Four months later on the 26th of December I staggered through customs in Auckland looking for a guy in a white WGC cap. Ross Sutherland chauffeured and fed me for the six hour drive south to Waipukurau where the various people charged with checking me out were gathered for the Central Districts Contest. Despite my jet lag I found that racing down the wrong side of the highway with nothing to hold on to but the dashboard really got my adrenalin going!

The lush green landscape and long mid summer twilight was an uplifting contrast to the bleak winter I had just left. As we drove along the eastern side of Lake Taupo the darkening sky was punctuated by long lazy bands of fiery orange wave clouds. My feeling of unreality was deepened as I was led to a big soft bed in a huge, hundred year old country mansion called The Homestead.

Several of the Central Districts competitors were staying there and I was told to make myself at home, rest as much as needed, and give a call when I wanted to go to the airport.

In the morning I hazily made my way through the ornately paneled vaulted halls to the front porch for a dose of sunshine. For a moment I gazed across the broad green lawn, listening to the birds, and trying to come to grips with the amazing and unlikely circumstance I now found myself in. Nothing to do but eat, sleep, and fly for the next two months; that is if I can measure up to New Zealand standards, whatever they are.

There are so many new things to learn; airspace, different gliders, regulations, mountains, weather, navigation... My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a tiny munchkin-like voice firmly asking, "Aah you a glida mon?" Looking down I see a charming little girl somewhat suspiciously eyeing me from the corner of the porch where she is playing.

"Why yes, I suppose I am," say I, trying to sound convincing. The little girl doesn't look impressed and continues playing.

In an attempt to clear my jet lagged mind I take a walk up the nearest hills, emerging from the forest to high windswept sheep pastures for a tremendous view of the countryside. In every direction the land undulates dramatically and sheep fences crisscross from hill tops to valleys. To the west the main mountain range peaks-out from under a shaggy grey cap cloud; an unforgettable sight that would be one of the most memorable of my stay. I could scarcely imagine that I would soon be flying around above it all like I knew what I was doing. Especially not in just a few hours!

The checkout procedure was a pleasure! I didn't even realize I was really being checked-out at first. Everyone was so accommodating and friendly, I thought they were just showing me around. Ross introduced me to Ian Mugan an instructor from the WGC who was flying in the contest. Ian put me in the back of their Twin Astir "WZ" and off we went for a local tour and what turned out to be a successful checkflight. Next, I was introduced to Hugh Turner, the Regional Operations Officer from the New Zealand Gliding Association (NZGA). The NZGA has complete regulatory authority over all gliding activities, gliders mechanics, and glider pilots in New Zealand. Because of this my checkout was quickly and efficiently handled. During my flights with Hugh we went through maneuvers and procedures germane to the job of instructing. This was very comprehensive but relaxed. I found Hugh to be warm, laid-back, and ruthlessly thorough. He issued me a New Zealand C. category instructors certificate. This rating allowed me to act as instructor but without the authority or responsibility for sending a student pilot solo. This is left to the more experienced B. Category Instructors. Only the Chief Flight Instructor for a gliding club holds the A Category rating. All potential instructors spend some time as Air Experience Pilots giving formal guest flights before being nominated by a clubs instructor panel for the Instructors training program. This training program is only by invitation and is provided free of charge. This step by step structure works very well and as a fairly new instructor myself I found the daily consul of the B instructors invaluable. Within a month I was informed that I had been moved up to B category.

The next day Ross drove me west across the mountains and south along the western coast to Paraparaumu, the home of the Wellington Gliding Club, and for the next two months, my home. Paraparaumu is located about 40 kilometers north of the capital city of Wellington on the Kapiti

Coast. Kapiti Island is a two by ten kilometer island about 1500 feet high that sits six kilometers off Paraparaumu, dominating the sea view. The airfield is located virtually in the middle of town with only a small area of houses and businesses between it and the sea. Later, I would find that when taking-off to the west one would be over the water just seconds after leaving the ground. I'd also learn that when the wind is from the west Kapiti Island generates a nice wave and a lot of not so nice low level turbulence right over the airfield. To the east a couple kilometers the land rises up in a regular series of increasingly larger hills and ridges, some forested, some grassy, right up to the main Tararua Range with peaks between four and five thousand feet some twenty kilometers inland.

At the clubhouse I was introduced to a tow pilot from the UK also recruited through the internet posting. Neil had arrived a month before me and being well acquainted with the facilities showed me around. We were given "caravans" (14 foot travel trailers) to use as our private quarters. Having lived and worked out of one for years I found this quite adequate. The main clubhouse had several rooms including a bar and kitchen, lounge with TV, two bathrooms, and a computer area for keeping in touch with the world. Nearby, there was a bunkhouse with kitchen and shower. The bunkhouse was often introduced to visitors as a "three beer bunkhouse" since it was difficult to imagine actually sleeping in it before having at least three beers! Not being much of a beer drinker, I was grateful for my caravan.

During the first week at Paraparaumu I flew over fifty flights in Blanik L-13s, mostly primary instruction and some trial flights. I started to learn how things were done both on the ground and in the air. Generally, things are fairly similar to what I was used to in the states. However, several interesting differences became apparent.

Each glider contained an inspection logbook which required a signature by a qualified pilot for each preflight inspection. If the ship had been rigged it required an additional signature from a second pilot indicating duplicate inspection and positive control check. This requirement is for all gliders in New Zealand not just the Wellington Club. I very much liked this system and would like to see a similar standard in America.

Another thing I liked was the use of a "Base" to coordinate gliding activities out on the airfield. At Paraparaumu this consisted of a red and white checked caravan outfitted with solar powered radios, ballast bags, extra cushions, chairs, telephone, and gliding manuals. Before commencing flight operations each day "checkers" was towed out to the flightline and moved about during the day as necessitated by wind vector changes. I noticed similar trailers at the other gliding sites I eventually visited.

Vocal styles and accents were quite variable, mostly variations of styles from the UK. Some I had no trouble understanding while others were almost incomprehensible to me. This was most noticeable while trying to communicate over the radio. On one occasion after having a message repeated several times I replied, "Please speak very slowly and try as hard as you can to talk like an American". This generated quite a bit of amusement with the other pilots who were already having a laugh listening to my stilted Yankee delivery every day.

There were several other areas where I had to do a little translating as well. The gliders had maximum and minimum cockpit weights listed in either pounds or kilograms and people who showed up for instruction or trial flights would present their weights in pounds, kilograms or stone! Also, some of the gliders had altimeters that had apparently been converted from meter scales and read three thousand feet for every sweep around the face. This was quite an adjustment since I was used to reading "standard" one thousand foot altimeters at a glance. In addition, some of these three thousand foot altimeters had zero at the top while others had zero at the bottom! Eventually, like most things, it became second nature. Weather maps were another matter however! With the circulation around high and low pressure areas reversed relative to the northern hemisphere, maps looked impossibly convoluted at first glance. I found that by holding a map up to a light and viewing it from the back, in essence seeing it in reverse, I could get a general impression of the big picture like I was used to doing back home. In a way, things like this were good for me in that I never took anything for granted, be it wind vector, preflight inspection, checklists, radio frequencies, ballast, heading, whatever. I always took the time to consider carefully what was going on.

By the second week I was gaining confidence in the local area and began flying trial flights with the Twin Astir. I really came to love that Astir. It's such a comfortable glider to me, very quiet, a nice user friendly cockpit, great visibility from the rear seat, and effortless to fly. In contrast, the Janus, which I began to fly during the third week, was a brute. I had noticed a certain attitude around the club about the Janus and also noticed that not very many people flew it. Those who did were clearly very fond of it but their testimonials carried an air of foreboding as well. I remember instructor Kim Mugan saying something like; "she goes like lightning but you have to treat her with respect". I found this all somewhat intriguing and further questioning only deepened by curiosity. I had very little time in high performance ships and no experience with flaps.

My introduction began on a good thermal soaring day over the hills between Paraparaumu and the main Tararua Range to the east. My instructor (in the front seat) was Ian Mugan. We flew for two hours and covered quite a bit of territory. With a 40:1 glide ratio at 59 knots it was mostly a matter of pointing it where we wanted to go. I found the controls required a good deal of pressure except, as I'd been told, for pitch. The all flying horizontal tail was very peculiar feeling to me, not giving the kind of response and feed back that a conventional elevator does. It took me quite a while to get a sense of what it was doing.

For example, on recovering from incipient spins I kept going a bit negative G before pulling out of the dive. Ian laughed like a fiend as dirt and grass flew about the cockpit. He may have cursed a time or two as well. Later, he gave me good marks for effort and seemed pleased that I was ready for more.

The following day we went up again for just under an hour and satisfied Ian's requirements for my Janus checkout. Upon landing I was offered a trial flight with an eighty year old grandmother who was celebrating a birthday. It was a ride she will likely not forget soon enough! At about 1200 feet the tug gave me the wave-off. Later I learned this was due to a minor engine overheat. OK, no problem, we'll just have to go again to give her a proper ride. As I set up my landing the pesky sea breeze front quietly passed over the field and changed the wind vector about 180 degrees. Now, this is not an unusual occurrence nor was it serious in the sense that the wind was usually quite

light. Often we were required to change vector three or four times a day as this atmospheric apparition surged and ebbed along the coast. On this occasion, being occupied with my passenger's comfort and concentrating on gracefully wrestling this glider-beast to an elegant touchdown, I failed to notice the subtle exhalation on my tail.

Everything was just dandy until the Janus settled to Earth. The combination of the few knots extra speed from the wind and my years of carrier-style Schweizer landings, in concert with my meager comprehension of the Janus pitch sensitivity set me up for a rodeo bull ridin' triple bounce landing worse than anything I'd experienced since primary training! Bang...Wham...Ka-BAM! Grandma flopped around like a rag doll. I thought I was finished in New Zealand. After consoling Grandmother and making sure she was all right I looked the glider over to make sure it was still in one piece. Amazingly, it was though later I noticed that the nose wheel housing was a little cracked.

I was quite shaken by this but Ian, Kim, and Ross were all very understanding. Indeed, they seemed to find it somewhat nostalgic and while repairing the nosewheel housing that night, went on and on about their own troubles with the Janus when the ship joined the fleet. They could tell my confidence was dented and made every effort to reassure me. I was skeptical at first; no glider had bitten me that hard in years and I had expected some sort of serious curtailment of my flight status. But, they had seen it all before and the very next day Ross took me for a two-hour tour of the local hills convincing me (and himself perhaps) that I could handle the Janus. The day after that I logged three hours and seven, smooth, full flap landings. I had tamed the beast.