

Team America

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The PW-5 is a fairly lightweight machine and I am only 140 pounds (64 KG, 10 stone) so tow behind the Pawnee was like climbout during a ground launch! I could hardly see over the instrument panel due to the steep angle but managed to box the wake before releasing over the near hills. The cockpit felt more comfortable than the K-6 and the control forces were so light as to be almost unnoticeable. However, there was no sense of over sensitivity and rudder coordination was effortless. Rolling on a point was incredibly easy. Stalls were gentle but clean, with clear indications and easy, straightforward recovery. The same can be said for both incipient and full spins. The airbrakes are very large and powerful for such a little ship and are smooth and easy to operate. This combined with the superb handling makes landing the PW-5 easier than the Blanik trainers, the Schweizer trainers, the 1-26, or the K-6.

A single fifteen minute flight was the only opportunity I had to fly the PW-5 until a week later when I was informed that there would be a two day interclub competition hosted by the Wanganui-Manawatu Gliding Club near Palmerston, about 100 kilometers to the north. Les and I were strongly encouraged to share a PW-5 for the event and soon the title of Team America was bestowed on us. I didn't pay much attention to this plan since I had no way of financing such a venture on my limited expense allowance. I went about my regular duties but Ross and Ian Mugan continued with arrangements for travel and crew. The day before the event Ross assured me that there were "No Worries" as far as the money was concerned and that Bo Nilson, who had fetched me after my first landout, would crew for us. That evening I noticed that Les was closely examining charts of the competition area, comparing notes with other pilots, and scrawling on a turnpoint map.

I finally gave in to the plan on the condition that I'd fly the first day so that I could be back to work the following day. Les agreed, partially I think, because he was no more anxious than I to fly his first soaring competition at an unfamiliar site in a foreign land with little to no preparation! Later that night, I went over the PW-5 manual and made notes of speeds to fly on little adhesive labels to stick to the instrument panel. After sorting charts, sunscreen, passport, money, sunglasses, etc into the various pockets of my flight suit I went to bed.

The day dawned bright and fair virtually eliminating the possibility that Ross, Ian and all the other Team America boosters would come to their senses and forget the whole thing. Despite a bit of trepidation I figured I might as well have a go. Besides, all the pilots I looked up to seemed to have complete confidence in me. On the trip north I realized just how entrenched at Paraparaumu airfield I'd become. Cruising down the open road in Bo's truck, seeing new sights, I was nearly euphoric!

At one point while traveling through relatively open country we came to an area of corn fields and I said, "Look, look!. Right now! This is exactly what the countryside looks like back home in August!" I never thought that driving around in an automobile could be so much fun.

Rigging the PW-5 is easy and quick. Everything went together simply, efficiently, and securely. I was adjusting the seat and posting my little labels on the instrument panel when the pilot's meeting was called. It was hard to believe that this was an informal club competition. I counted over 20 gliders on my way to the meeting and most of them looked like they belonged in the high performance league. A very detailed and concise weather briefing was followed by turnpoint announcements, safety concerns, and a statement concerning the instructional intent of the day. The idea is that pilots who'd never flown a contest were to gain experience and learn from the veterans. I was quite busy scribbling radio frequencies, start and finish procedures, and retrieve phone numbers but noticed that us rookies were definitely in the minority. Team America with our PW-5 was in the club class along with a couple of K-6s and another club's PW-5. There were a number of two-seaters including the WGC Janus and what seemed like dozens of sleek glass ships. Sitting in the cockpit on the runway, I can honestly say that in terms of sun angle, terrain features, and general feel, I had no clear sense of direction. The whole experience seemed unreal but I hoped that as soon as I was airborne I'd sort things out.

Sure enough, from the air I could see the Ruahine Range to the east and Mount Ruapehu to the north. This helped to orient me and I began climbing slowly in a weak thermal. It looked like it was going to be a marginal day at best. The sky had only a few cumulus wisps scattered around in the distance and the wind was moderate from the south. I started to think that it would be a trick just staying up! As the space around me began to fill with gliders I began thinking about running the start gate. Every time I climbed I'd get drifted away from the gate and end up low while trying to run upwind for a start. I saw one glider that managed to find lift upwind of the gate but everyone else was in the same predicament as me. The gate was located right next to controlled airspace. This invisible barrier combined with the limited lift areas had everyone crowding together. I'd never flown with more than two or three gliders in close proximity before. If not for the stability and delicate maneuverability of this delightful little ship I would have been tearing my hair out.

Eventually, I made it high enough to get a start and, though not in ideal position, I took it. I had to climb again immediately but now I could let the wind drift me toward the first turnpoint, Waituna West, twenty-four Kilometers to the north. By this time the airspace had cleared-out considerably and I figured everyone had left me behind. This allowed me to focus on the tasks of staying up, covering distance, and keeping track of my location. The feeling of heading out across unknown territory was exhilarating. I felt a clear sense of adventure and purpose along with a measure of uncertainty as I gazed across the fantastic green landscape searching for clues and signs to guide me. This was true soaring!

I made steady progress north pausing occasionally to climb in weak lift. I was able to reach about three thousand feet above the ground on a couple of occasions and flew conservatively between thermals. I soon spotted what looked like a town and confirmed it was Waituna West by the description on the turnpoint list. After shooting the required

photos I headed north-east toward the next turnpoint, Apiti, twenty kilometers distant. The sky ahead showed no signs of lift and the terrain was looking more folded and wrinkled. There were no elevation values given for either turnpoint but the chart showed values around nineteen-hundred feet a couple kilometers either side of the course line. I found no lift for several kilometers out of Waituna West and realized that a decisive moment was at hand. If I turned back soon, real soon, I might find the last area of lift and delay having to find a place to land. Since the idea was to go somewhere I continued north-east into the hills noting the dwindling supply of suitable landing pastures.

This is where the PW-5 showed its true colors. Here I was, a cross-country novice on my second flight in this glider, over totally unknown, somewhat rugged country, altimeter gradually unwinding, and feeling completely confident that if I didn't find lift soon I would have no trouble safely putting the ship down. This was not bravado or competitive psychosis. Indeed, I had little sense of even being part of the contest any longer. I was just having fun seeing how far I could go, feeling relaxed and fascinated with the experience. The fantastic maneuverability of the PW-5 and knowing how easy it would be to land in even a small place is what gave me the confidence.

About half way to Apiti I deviated a bit south of the course line to stay in range of some prospective landing areas. This also put me over somewhat lower terrain. I had no precise idea of my altitude above the ground but the landscape now gleamed with the sharp hazeless clarity familiar below a thousand feet. I felt a slight bump or two over a large sunlit gravel bar sheltered in the bend of a river but couldn't climb an inch. Wasting no time I continued up the valley toward the north-east.

I felt fairly sure by this point that I would soon be on the ground. With this in mind I informed Feilding base of my general location and began to consider where to land. One option that looked intriguing was a beautifully smooth, level, and large pasture right at the top of a sheer three-hundred foot river bluff. It was like a billiard table in the sky. I thought it would be fun to turn the ship around after landing and make it appear to the retrieve crew that I had nearly run off the edge into the abyss! Perhaps wisely, I decided to look for a more conventional landing site. Soon, I found myself on downwind for a small pasture. Just as I expected, putting the PW-5 down was easy as can be, like stepping off an escalator, stopping easily though rolling slightly downhill.

Ah, warm sunshine, birds chirping, a lush green valley; I should have come down hours ago! The sense of tranquility was total. This was definitely "getting away from it all". I felt totally, wonderfully, contentedly, lost. With six hours of daylight left I was in no hurry to spoil the sensation. It was only a sense of duty to my crew that finally motivated me to leave my reverie. After a short walk and several fences I found a small farm house and nonchalantly knocked on the door. I was greeted by a kindly young couple who were quite happy to give me a lift into the nearest village, Kimbolton. On the way I learned that they were both well educated and well traveled, having been to Europe and America. They reminded me of progressive-minded college students one might expect to find in a liberal university city yet here they were on a farm at the end of a dirt road over forty

kilometers from the nearest city. They seemed completely familiar with gliding and thought nothing of my appearance.

At Kimbolton I made the necessary phone calls and bought a can of pop at a tiny general store. As I ambled down main street I suddenly noticed a silent visitor, passing low overhead. The distinctive upturned winglets gave it away as the LS-8 I'd seen on the grid that morning. At least I was beaten by one of the newest, sleekest gliders in the world. I wondered how everyone else had done while I sat on the steps of an empty shop waiting for Bo to arrive with the trailer. If not for the fact that it was the end of February and the sun was high I could have been in any little farming village in Wisconsin, Vermont, California... Knowing that I was on a big island in the south Pacific and had just flown my best lent a sense of surreal satisfaction to the wait.

While we de-rigged and trailered Whisky-Gulf I mentioned to Bo that I had seen the LS-8. He said that it had probably been on final glide when I saw it. This seemed impossible to me since it had appeared so low and was still thirty kilometers from the finish.

Apparently the terrain elevation was considerably higher here than I realized. I was surprised to learn upon returning to fielding that the LS-8 was the only ship to make it home. In fact, hardly anyone had even made it past the first turnpoint! Perhaps I had done well after all!

The next evening when the rest of the WGC pilots and crews returned to Paraparaumu I could hardly contain my curiosity as to the final outcome. I found Les and asked him how the day had gone. I'll never forget his words; "the bad news is that the weather was so rotten we had no contest today. The good news is that I didn't get an opportunity to give up our first place position!" Flabbergasted, I pumped him for more details but he didn't have much to offer and was clearly tired from the long day. Eventually I learned that I placed fourth for the day behind the LS-8, the Standard Libelle (WGCs Gulf-Zulu), and an LS-4. The Libelle and the LS-4 both landed out ahead of me but when the score was compensated with our respective performance handicaps I came out second place. Team America had brought the club class trophy home to the Wellington Gliding Club and no one was more surprised than me.

This was to be my last real adventure in New Zealand. After five days of routine training flights it was time for farewells and the long 747 ride home. I was never able to visit the south island and frankly, I'd had all the flying I could stand. Besides, even the most experienced pilots I met on North Island spoke of wave flying over the Southern Alps as difficult and even frightening.

Les never did get a job and ended up staying another month. He flew several multi-hour cross-country flights in the K-6 and PW-5.

A couple months after returning home my Gliding Kiwi magazine arrived with my photo of Jim on the cover. This was an unexpected treat and crystallized the dreamlike quality of my memories into something concrete.

What I miss most is being part of such a vital gliding community and especially the daily consultations with so many expert instructors, men and women alike; some younger than me and some with measureless experience. My heartfelt appreciation goes out to them for taking such good care of me.

I also want to thank Bob Wander for the good word he put in on my behalf that resulted in my being chosen over 30 other applicants from around the world. I know for a fact that nearly all of them had more experience than me. I never would have had this opportunity without Bob's assistance.

Of course, my wife Lois and my two children, Gabriel and Shelagh Rose, deserve royal honors for keeping the home fires burning and letting me go on such a fantastic summertime adventure while they faced the bleak hardship of another Iowa winter.

I hope you get a chance to go to New Zealand someday and visit the Wellington Gliding Club. If you want to go flying ask for the American instructor. If he's available, and I sincerely hope he is, I'm sure he'll be more than happy to give you a check flight.