

Change Your Life, Learn To Fly



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Photo Credit: Neil Lockhart | Dreamstime.com

It is quite true that learning to fly can be life changing and anyone can experience it.

It was a rare spring morning in London. The ubiquitous damp grey cloud cover was giving way to patches of blue as British Rail's 6:27 train pulled out of London's Victoria Station. Soon, the urban landscape changed to fields, woodlands and tiny villages as we pressed on into the Kentish countryside. My excitement grew steadily. Today was going to be a big first in my life: I was going to fly.

An hour or so later, we were creeping silently into the small village of Charing on England's South Downs close to the Southeast Coast. The station platform was deserted. Only the solid clunks of wooden carriage doors closing, the sound of chirping birds celebrating the unusual warmth of an April morning, the electric hum of the milk van and clinking milk bottles punctuated the silence. It was still early.

As I continued along the station road past small shops and little cottages with tiny gardens profuse with impatiens, daffodils and primrose, it was clear that the village was still in slumber. So was the small tabby cat blissfully curled up in the sunlight with one eye shut and the other trained on a finch frolicking in a small puddle left by the evening rain.

Along the winding lane leading to the top of the ridge near the gliding club, a small sign post marked "Pilgrims Way" caught my eye. It indicated the centuries-old footpath, unchanged since Chaucer's day, that passed through a small bluebell-filled wood along which pilgrims made their way to Canterbury Cathedral.

In about 10 minutes, I reached the top of the ridge and followed a dirt track leading to a large open field filled with grazing sheep. This looked nothing like a place to fly, but as I approached one of the small farm buildings I could see the scurry of activity. My friend, Duncan, appeared from the midst. "Hello," he called out, "Glad to see you, Now let's get you to work."

About a dozen people helped drag sleek sailplanes from long trailers. Three grabbed each wing and joined them to the fuselage with large bolts. Others struggled to open the huge creaking doors on a World War II-vintage corrugated aluminum blister hangar. Inside was an aging relic — a Slingsby T21 open cockpit glider. It was ungainly compared to its sleek counterpart outside, and with its snub nose, patched fabric fuselage, hard plywood bench seat and two small windscreens resembling a motor cycle and sidecar joined together by accident, it looked very homemade.

In preparation for flying, sheep needed to be cleared from the field. I was assigned the task of rounding them up with a tractor and penning them in beyond the stone fence. I had never driven a tractor nor had I herded sheep. Still, I willingly climbed up onto the metal saddle yelling, "Can you tell me how to drive this thing?" A half-clever sheep dog could have done a better job. Eventually, I succeed and none too soon. The fliers were ready to launch.

Duncan told me that I was last on the flying list since I was the last to arrive. Many had been at the site since daybreak and others had slept in the bunkhouse in order to be first on the list.

The Kent Gliding Club had a minuscule budget which allowed them only an old rusty hulk of a fire engine that they used as the launch vehicle. It lay at the opposite end of the field 400 foot above the valley below. The truck engine had a large winch wrapped with a thick steel cable.

The tractor driver dragged the free end of the cable down the field and the ground crew attached it to the glider. Then, wingmen supporting the single-wheeled glider's wing tips waved a signal flag, the winch driver revved the engine, slipped the clutch, and with formidable display of power, reeled in the cable pulling the glider into the air like a kite.

Being part of the launch process, steadying the wings and running beside them until the glider had sufficient speed, was exhilarating. Once the wings were self-sufficient, the glider rolled along gently bouncing over every bump until it reached about 35 mph at which time it lifted into the sky and climbed steeply. The roaring fire engine shook violently as it swallowed up the extended cable. As the glider reached its maximum altitude about 700 feet above the winch, the pilot disengaged the cable using a hand release. The cable dropped back to earth, the winch driver throttled back so as not to ensnare it and in the stunning, momentary stillness, the glider, now released from its terrestrial tether proceeded silently over the ridgeline in search of lift.

The day wore on. The repetitive club glider launch, cable retrieval, land routine was punctuated only by several high performance sailplane take offs. While the club glider remained airborne for about 10 minutes, which only allowed it to make a few turns and a quick return, the high performance machines, were remaining aloft for hours.

As those hours passed, I had gotten the hang of the tractor and could retrieve the cable as fast as the most experienced club members. Duncan suggested that I try the winch, which was not an appealing idea. The winch was noisy and nerve wracking. I was taking others' lives in my hand as well as my own. Too slow on the accelerator and the glider would fail to climb. Too fast and the glider would climb too steeply putting excess strain on the cable's weak-link, which was

designed to break before damaging the glider. An aborted launch could mean a landing in treetops and even more ghastly, the cable could lash back at the winch driver. The thought of being sliced to bits by a stray steel cable was unsettling. I wanted to fly before death by cable snap.

The sun was low on the horizon now and Glynn, the chief flight instructor, bellowed, "OK, last flight of the day." There were still a few on the flying list ahead of me, which was enormously disappointing. Then someone shouted, "Come on, let the Yank fly!" I was the only American there, and despite the common bond of the English language, they were all amused by my so-called mispronunciations and colloquial expressions, which were as foreign to them as Sanskrit. While the idea of flying was a thrill, the idea of flying with Glynn was not. He had the demeanor of a British Army Staff Sergeant trained in the RAF tradition, which meant he shouted everything and had no tolerance for imperfection despite one's total lack of experience. Butterflies raced in my stomach. I was simultaneously elated and terrified. Strapped in with a five-point harness, I knew I wasn't going to get out in a hurry. There was no changing my mind now.

"Follow me through on the controls," Glynn snapped in a particularly gruff tone. With the wing tips level, the signal was given and we lurched forward accelerating quickly. Through the hard wooden bench seat, I could feel every stone and imperfection in the field. If we had we run over a shilling, I could have told you if it were heads or tails.

After bumping along for several yards, we were suddenly airborne. The blister hanger grew smaller and the roar of the winch engine changed pitch as we climbed skyward. It was adventure beyond belief! Protected only by the miniscule curved plexiglass windscreen, the full blast of air, the sound of the wind and a crystal clear view around and below enhanced the experience of flight a thousand fold.

As the ridgeline passed beneath us, Glynn shouted for me to pull the large red knob in the center of the meager instrument panel. "Pull it twice!" he shouted. With a loud bang, the cable fell away and the winch went silent.

The Slingsby T21 stalls at about 35 mph. That's the point where the air can no longer flow efficiently across the wing surface to create lift. We were gliding at about 42 mph for minimum sink, taking advantage of every ounce of energy. I was in unadulterated ecstasy.

Then Glynn shouted, "You have control." What did he say? I have what? I nudged the stick right and the horizon obliged. I nudged it back to the left and the horizon moved in the opposite direction. I was flying! I couldn't believe it. I dared not push forward for fear of descending too quickly and, of course, I knew we were only slightly faster than stall speed so edging the control column back could result in a stall. It was like balancing act, but with the stick forces trimmed out, the glider was amazingly stable.

Although a glider is in a constant descent, glider pilots seek rising air to counter the sink and, at worst, remain level or, at best, climb. Glynn pointed to the variometer – the vertical speed indicator. Thanks to a fresh evening breeze streaming up the ridgeline giving us what was known as ridge lift, we were holding altitude.

Suddenly, Glynn bellowed, "Follow that hawk!" Birds know how to glide far better than man. We followed the hawk in close formation and astoundingly, traveled along the ridge in a continuous slow climb. Soon the hawk began a turn back. Whether it turned for better lift or to search out prey mattered not. I followed obediently. I was giddy with delight and so fully intoxicated by the experience that I couldn't believe my senses. The experience was indescribably delicious.

Gliding isn't silent. The sound of the airflow is considerable, but it's a lot less than in a powered aircraft and compared to the roar of the winch, it was bliss. It was the overwhelming visual images, however, that riveted my attention. The puffy cumulus clouds that dominated the daytime sky were turning pink. Below, the village looked much like my Lionel train layout from childhood. I could see the entire southeast coast of England and the French coast some 30 miles beyond enveloped in the glow of late afternoon light. Probably nothing much had changed in the 30 years since the Battle of Britain. This was the same view that Spitfire pilots had as they valiantly fought Messerschmitt Bf 109s in a battle to death above the white cliffs near Dover. The fields below had certainly seen their share of carnage, not from Hawks but from Hawker Hurricanes in search of prey.

The experience of being suspended aloft by nature, of seeing the deep blue of the Channel, the sandy beaches and the deep shadows traversing the forest green fields below, was dazzling. But most of all I remember the hawk. It seemed as if we were one.

All too soon, the variometer indicated we were in a descent. It was time to return.

Glynn took the controls, cruised along the field boundary and banked steeply, descending into wind. The hangar, the tractor and the tiny specks of people in the field were returning to life size. In the low light, the imperfect bumpy field had morphed into a velvety green welcoming carpet and we greeted it with a gentle bounce of the nose tire and a solid plunk from the tail skid.

Even from this ungainly pile of plywood and fabric that looked much like a handmade soap box racer with wings, I had been free of the bonds of Earth. I had been free to view the world from a unique perspective where all seemed well — no wars, no prejudice, no anger, avarice or economic travail. For that brief moment aloft, I had harnessed the power of nature and rode the sea of air like a surfer rides the waves, I had experienced flight and it had transformed me. It was an epiphany more powerful than any spiritual encounter, and it was a feeling, an experience and a yearning that will remain with me forever — together with the image of my flight companion and mentor, the hawk.