



[Confessions of a powered pilot](#)

June 19, 2014 by Alyssa Miller, AOPA Online Managing Editor

I had been offered glider flights in the past, but I would respond with “someday.” I had heard the arguments for it: It’s so quiet, you only hear the wind over the canopy; it makes you a better pilot. I had watched gliders fly over my apartment on approach to landing at the Frederick, Md., airport. But I was reluctant. I just wasn’t comfortable going up in an aircraft without an engine.

That changed June 1 with my first soaring lesson. I needed to gather aerial video footage for a [story about the Central Indiana Soaring Society](#) and the Alexandria airport the club purchased in order to keep it from being closed. Experiencing their soaring operation firsthand also would give me a better understanding of why this club went to such lengths (and expense) to save the airport. ([See the video](#) at 17:51 in the June 12 *AOPA Live This Week* episode.)

I met John Earlywine, a veteran instructor at the club and competitive glider pilot, and learned about his composite DG Flugzeugbau DG-1000.

For something I had always imagined as one of the purest forms of flight, I was surprised at how unnatural getting settled in the glider felt. Earlywine chuckled when I asked if I needed a headset. (While I didn’t think I would need one to talk to him, I wasn’t sure about communicating over the radio. Turns out, he had a mic in the back.) Once in the glider, I felt like I was practically lying flat and kept trying to move up in the seat until I realized the canopy wouldn’t close. For a Cessna 172 pilot who is used to sitting in a chair-like position, this new position, akin to lounging in a beanbag, took some getting used to.



Kris Maynard takes a break on the Piper Pawnee while waiting for pilots to tow aloft.

Being pulled aloft by a Piper Pawnee piloted by Kris Maynard made me forget about my nerves during the preparation. After accelerating down the runway behind the Pawnee, with only the sound of the glider’s tire rolling over the asphalt, Earlywine lifted the glider into ground effect and held it about three feet off the runway until Maynard was ready to climb out. Once we were about 1,000 feet in the air, Earlywine left me fly on tow. Flying on tow is similar to flying formation in trail. Earlywine counseled me to pretend the Pawnee’s relationship to the horizon was my attitude indicator, to make uncoordinated turns to correct getting out of line with the tow

plane, and to look past the Pawnee as if I were flying an ILS. All of that was easier said than done. I had a couple of formation lessons a few years ago but had forgotten about the uncoordinated control inputs used to keep the aircraft in line with the lead. Each time I entered a coordinated turn to realign with the Pawnee, I shot past and Earlywine helped me recover back to the center.

Once at 3,000 feet, I pulled the tow release and Earlywine instructed me to start hunting for lift. Cumulus clouds would have made it easy to spot the thermals, but this day was clear and sunny, except for a few wispy cirrus clouds. I started looking for large areas of asphalt or dark fields that might offer some rising air. We also circled over the town of Alexandria.

Finally, I found some lift to recover the couple of hundred feet that I had lost while searching. After regaining altitude, I took a minute just to look outside. I realized that I had been tense—almost as tense as I am in the dentist’s chair—up to that point. But the beauty of flight became very real at that moment, and I relaxed. I actually felt as if I were flying freely because the bubble canopy allows an almost uninterrupted 360-degree view; the pilots sit in front of the wings; and the nose of the glider is slender. The only sound was the rush of the air flowing over the canopy, quieting as I slowed and growing louder as I lowered the nose to gain airspeed.



John Earlywine logs my first glider flight.

While circling in the thermal, I had a tendency to do what Earlywine said most powered pilots do: pull the nose up into a climb. In soaring, climbing in a thermal doesn’t mean a “climbing turn” in the sense a powered pilot is used to. We circled and climbed in the thermals with the nose slightly low. The more lift we found, the higher pitched one of the instruments chirped, and the higher pitched Earlywine’s voice grew. Whenever we flew out of a thermal, the chirp turned to a monotone and Earlywine would “turn off that annoying sound.”

Finding lift became a game for me. I wasn’t thinking about getting from Point A to Point B, although with the glider’s 47:1 glide ratio, from 3,000 feet we could have flown to Indianapolis Regional Airport where the glider club had been the day before for AOPA’s regional fly-in. I was only focused on finding that precious lift to stay aloft. I nearly forgot one of the original purposes of going for the flight: gathering video footage. Giving Earlywine the controls, I started filming while we maneuvered and Earlywine brought us in for a landing.

I had been looking forward to flying the pattern and landing but videoed it instead. That gives me all the more incentive for another glider flight!

Responses to “Confessions of a powered pilot”

1. **Anthony Bacio Says:**

[June 20th, 2014 at 11:26 am](#)

I don't want to sound redundant but: great article!

It reminds me of why I decided to become a glider pilot: when you are in the front seat of a DG-1000 it does feel as if you are “flying freely.”

2. **Ric Lee Says:**

[June 20th, 2014 at 3:08 pm](#)

I came to general aviation after decades of flying Hang Gliders. Soaring to me is the purest form of flight that the human race has achieved to date. It is so rewarding to stay aloft for hours on end using only lift provided by Mother Nature!

3. **Ed Pataky Says:**

[June 25th, 2014 at 1:00 pm](#)

Fabulous that you got to go gliding! I was hooked in 1971, and it wasn't until 2007 that I was able to start in earnest. Sadly, work and distance interfered, but I was able to complete the commercial add-on in 2012.

Gliding is the unsung diamond of aviation. Nothing like it. The soft rush of air compared the roar of an engine... being able to fly formation with a hawk while in lift... always having to think ahead several steeps farther than in a powered aircraft... gliding will make anyone a better pilot.

Its utterly magnificent..