

# SAILPLANE & GLIDING

VOL. 66 NO.1

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# SOARING LIKE A BIRD ON A WING

Nick Gaunt reflects on a memorable trip from Aboyne, flown 62 years to the day he flew his first solo flight, at the Mynd aged just 15



Fort Augustus at the south west end of Loch Ness (Nick Gaunt)

**A CROW JOINS ME JUST INSIDE MY WINGTIP – A COMPLIMENT INDEED, IT’S USUALLY ME WHO JOINS THEM WITH THEIR UNCANNY ABILITY TO FIND THE BETTER LIFT**

**T**OWING a glider trailer to Scotland is, in itself, quite an epic journey. An eight-hour trek from Yorkshire and the brakes hot as we drop down to ‘Royal Deeside’ and the neat and tidy town of Aboyne, bump the trailer over the disused railway track and onto the empty airfield. All was familiar: unremarkable airfield buildings, sparse grass and one guy in greasy overalls standing on a beer crate and attacking the engine of the tow plane with a screwdriver. Greasy overalls, the age of my grandson, shrugged his shoulders when asked about parking the trailer. He

waved towards the clubhouse, grinned, held out a hand and said “Polskie, me Thomas”.

The car, freed of the trailer, bounded off towards the digs, friendly glider pilots and magical beer. Tomorrow’s forecast looked good: early morning clear skies; Cumulus, the engines of the sky, forming by 10am; a dry polar atmosphere and with winds light and variable. Promising. Sure enough, at 6.30am the sun was shining from a cloudless sky and the Grampians sharp and blue black on the horizon. Early breakfast, down to the airfield to meet old friends and rig the glider.

I’m still staggered how clever and elegant my 30-year-old glider is. As white as snow with a 50ft wing span, the tiny cockpit moulded to be the most streamlined shape, but comfortable with clever instruments. I check the maps, water bottle, sandwich, mobile phone, dark glasses, crunchy bar and camera. No more than half an hour and we’re ready to go.

“Any plans, Nick?” “*Loch Ness, the Atlantic sea coast around Skye and perhaps Ben Nevis.*” “Aye, well good luck ye old beggar, I’ll buy you a pint if do all that.”

The tow behind the old crop sprayer aeroplane took me to 2,000ft and a sunny south-facing slope soon produced my first thermal of the day to a very satisfactory 4,000ft and the base of the cumulus clouds.

The countryside looked majestic, the Dee Valley meandering to the west past Balmoral, Ballater and Braemar towards the Linn of Dee with ever higher Grampian Mountains on either side. I took the southern route over Lochnagar, the first of the major Munros in the Grampians, seeing my shadow on the crags where the warmer air rises up the mountainside. Relatively populous countryside, this with the odd climber already on the crags and deer in great herds of 30 and more, but none sees the soundless glider ‘in the sun’.

The ground gets higher as I go further west and with it the base of the clouds. By the time I’m over the Linn of Dee, cloudbase is nearly 7,500ft and air rising at 10-15ft per second and the altimeter is going round like the second hand of a watch. As I’m circling with 45 degrees of bank just below the base of the cloud, a crow joins me just inside my wingtip – a compliment indeed, it’s usually me who joins them with their uncanny ability to find the better lift.

So far this has been a pretty easy jaunt, but as I cross the wide Spey Valley and move into the great amorphous landmass that I have to cross to get to Fort Augustus at the southern tip of Loch Ness I feel more nervous. Even the name is alien; the Monadhliath Mountains and no one, but no one lives here. There is no sign of habitation, no fields and nowhere to land if things go wrong. My glider and I have to get it right. We are still amongst 3,000ft Munros and the cloudbase is not so high as we move west towards the sea and fly through damper air. A different technique must be used, so I don’t stop at the base of the next cloud but continue climbing inside.

I’m no airline pilot and concentrating on the blind flying instruments requires great concentration. As we rise to 9,000ft the noise changes, subtle but definite indications that ice is beginning to form on the wing and the performance of the glider will deteriorate if it accumulates, so time to get out. Lining up on a heading and flying straight feels as if we are turning hard in the opposite direction from



our climbing circle and it's very difficult to believe the instruments. The fog thins and suddenly we burst into brilliant sunshine. Far below and stretching to the north is Scotland's magical and mysterious Loch Ness, brilliant blue in the sunshine with black-blue shadows from the clouds. Too high to see Nessy ploughing through the ripples!

Fort Augustus does have the odd field and a landing would be possible, but I fly for nearly 20km before I hit the next bit of lift and a further five before it's worth circling. This time I know I have to make a good high climb so into cloud once more, leaving at 10,000ft. Ahead is another towering cloud with tops at 13,000-14,000ft and I enter at the side.

Now if you have air rising at 15ft a second in the middle of a cloud, it's usually going down at about the same speed at the edge and it's rough, very rough. Feet jump off the rudder pedals, head bumps against the top of the plastic canopy, cockpit full of dust, full and fast movement of the controls inside a big black rough cloud which could be dying, in which case I'll sink like a brick instead of climbing. I did judge it right and again rise like a cork from a champagne bottle.

This time I break cloud at just under 12,000ft and have the most fantastic view of my life. Fortunately it's all recognisable and my dead reckoning was right; below was the Sound of Sleap ahead the Isle of Skye, to the north-west the Kyle of Lochalsh. I was right over Glenelg and spot on track. As I went forward to actually get over Skye and 175km from home, I moved into very gently rising

air. The wind was about 15kts westerly at this height and, I guessed, blowing over the Cuillin to the west and undulating in a wave formation and so giving me lift in clear air with no cloud with it. A true bonus.

Turn around, back through the wall of cloud, around Fort Augustus again and down the Great Glen to Ben Nevis. Cloudbase getting very low and not much above the mountain top here. Fort William at the bottom and a positively suburban landscape, beyond, Loch Linnhe stretching down to Oban. From just 500ft above the summit of Ben Nevis, I could see two climbers fooling about in the patch of snow just below ☺

Just east of Skye over the Sound of Sleat, looking north towards the Kyle of Lochalsh and almost overhead the village of Glenelg on the coast (Nick Gaunt)

■ Nick Gaunt thanks Justin Wills for chivvying him to ever greater distances in the Highlands, but says he could never go as far as Justin

Nick Gaunt's flight from Aboyne, 62 years to the day he flew his first solo flight from the Mynd (Illustration by Steve Longland)



Loch Ericht looking towards the north east  
(Nick Gaunt)



Nick Gaunt went solo at the Mynd, aged 15. He now flies at Yorkshire Gliding Club, where he is president. He has about 3,400 hours, three Diamonds - the last in 1982 - but no Bronze (too recent an invention!). Nick is a founder member of Leeds University Gliding Club with Barry Goldsborough, 1955/6. He always tries to fly in Enterprise and at least one other club other than YGC once a year



↳ the top, but I hurried away to the east where less damp air was to be found and better lift to go with it. Past Loch Rannoch to Loch Tummel and then time to head for home.

On any other day, the ride back to the Linn of Dee up Loch Ericht via Glenfeshie Forest and so to Aboyne would have been

memorable and indeed it was, but masked by the wonderful magnificence of where I had been. Whatever happens to the independence of Scotland in the future, I know that the natives of Aboyne will always welcome ancient glider pilots, the flying is truly magnificent and dozens of Munros can be covered in a day!

## PHILIP WILLS MEMORIAL FUND SUPPORTING GLIDING IN THE UK



### Scholarships 2015

Applications are now being invited for our second scholarship year, in which we will be making awards of up to £500 each for post-solo development for suitable candidates aged less than 30. Closing date for applications is 6/3/15. For further details please go to [www.gliding.co.uk/bgainfo/pwmmf/scholarships.htm](http://www.gliding.co.uk/bgainfo/pwmmf/scholarships.htm)

### Loans

The Philip Wills Memorial Fund has cash available now to lend to gliding clubs for capital projects. For a limited period only until the end of May 2015, we are offering interest rates as low as 1.5% to 2% for new projects initiated in this period. Conditions apply.

More information is available on the BGA website. If you want to just discuss informally, please email Steve Lynn at [Stephen@srlynn.co.uk](mailto:Stephen@srlynn.co.uk), or please just download the application forms at [www.gliding.co.uk/forms/clubmanagement/PhilipWillsMemorialFund-ApplicationForm.pdf](http://www.gliding.co.uk/forms/clubmanagement/PhilipWillsMemorialFund-ApplicationForm.pdf)

We look forward to hearing from you.

In conjunction with the

