

ON A WING AND A PRAYER

Writer Eric Minton steels his nerves and takes to the skies. He tells how you can soar with the birds, too.

Gracefully banking out of the clouds over a ridge on Scotland's west coast, like an eagle with wings extended, a glider carries two human beings through the sky. One is an instructor, the other gliding for the first time ever, quaking at the knees, but still taking the control stick and soaring in spirit with the birds.

The glider makes a circuit of Ardmucknish Bay and turns down the coastline toward Connel. On one side of the cockpit are the islands in the ocean-blue Firth of Lorn, on the other the Western Highlands of Scotland, green, gray and gold where the sun breaks through low clouds. This, however, is more than a visual experience for me, the beginner; it's a learning experience, too. I hold the stick and steady my feet on the rudder pedals to try my first turn.

It is also the start of a week-long vacation adventure in gliding in a colorful

corner of Scotland, at the Argyll and West Highland Gliding Center near Oban. From March through September, the AWH Gliding Center offers all comers the chance to learn the sport of gliding, with lessons in flying that, by the week's end, will make novices proficient enough to take off, pilot the glider over highlands, islands and sea, and perhaps land it, too. No prior flying experience is required.

It is, in fact, the absolute novice that Tony Shelton wants to attract with his course. "We do aim at recruiting people to the (gliding) movement," says Shelton, fifty-one and one of Scotland's premier gliding enthusiasts. "If gliding is going to survive as a sport we've got to start training people and getting new blood into it. This is my attempt to do that, to raise the level of the sport."

Shelton's recruiting pitch is, simply, one flight. Fans of the sport contend that the first flight hooks most people—even those afraid of heights. "Understandably, on the first flight there's apprehension," Shelton says. "But once you get down, you relax, and you start to think about it and what you've done."

One Monday in September, three such novices gather at Connel Airfield to take instruction in gliding. The airfield consists of two paved runways, 3,000 feet and 4,600 feet, and one hardstand where the runways meet. A corrugated tin hanger and a dismal Royal Air Force storage hut are the only



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Top: Flying gliders in formation is not for novices. **Above:** The thrill of piloting a glider hooks students, once they learn to relax and enjoy the view.

permanent buildings on the site; a mobile home housing the Connel Gliding Club stands next to the hanger.

The AWH Gliding Center is also in a mobile home, a cramped and drafty office for Julie Angell, twenty-eight, Shelton's partner in the enterprise. Here, at 9:30 a.m., the course members crowd onto a bench for their first briefing from instructor Phil Marks, twenty-six. A Newcastle, England, native, with brown leather flight jacket and brown hair swept back from a handsome face that always has a devilish grin and glint



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Anthony Kemp, front, and instructor Phil Marks prepare for a flight.

in the eye, Phil lacks only a scarf to play the part of an Alaskan bush pilot. He starts the briefing by drawing the glider on a chalkboard, outlining the cockpit and saying, with a grin, "You'll sit up front in case we crash."

Somehow this man inspires confidence. "He likes to perform," says Shelton, who has known Phil since Phil was gliding in his early teens. "He likes to shake people up, too. But when he gets around gliders and equipment, he's very serious."

Phil is also an outstanding instructor. In his briefings, he describes equipment, procedures and principles of glider flight in easily understood terms and graphics. In the cockpit, he shows exceptional patience, calmly talking the learner through every minute of the flight. He maintains this demeanor through 10 flights a day.

The daily briefing done, the day's flying begins. The center has two two-seater gliders, a high performance Romanian IS 28 made of duralum, an alloy of dural and aluminum, the other a simpler fiberglass glider made in Poland called the Puchacz, which means owl in Polish. It is the Puchacz the students will start with, that will take them to the domain of owls, as well as seagulls, buzzards and an eagle that has taken up residence on the ridge above the airfield.

"When you begin gliding, you'll get a new appreciation of birds," Phil says. "You'll watch the birds and see how they perform. They don't want to flap those heavy wings too much."

The aim of this initial flight, though, is merely to appreciate flying a glider. "The first flights are just to let you get the feel of coordinating the elevator,

ailerons and rudder to see what it's like to take off and land," Phil says. "Later we'll get you to look out the window."

The first student up is Ray, thirty-eight, of Kent, a computer manager for an insurance company making his first-ever glider flight. Phil reviews the pre-flight checklist with him. The tow line to the winch that will lift the glider into flight is hooked to a latch under the fuselage, the other students give the all-clear signal, the winch at the end of the 3,000-foot runway revs up, the glider slides swiftly across the pavement, lifts a couple of feet off the ground, then suddenly climbs at a 45 degree angle to 600 feet and is released from the winch. Ray and Phil are riding the wind in free flight.

It is a cold and wet day with a ceiling under 1,000 feet. Although gliding ostensibly depends on wind, the weather rarely affects the center's operations. Shelton says that only in winds of about 25 knots and a driving rain do they interrupt their instructional flights. Otherwise, adverse weather is part of the experience. "The weather factor is valuable," Shelton says, "because it introduces people to different perspectives of the sport."

A glider keeps aloft by finding rising air currents to give it lift. There are three types: "hill lift," when the wind hits a ridge and rises; "wave lift," when the wind rides over a range of hills and continues to rise and fall some distance beyond; and "thermals," when sunshine warms the ground, and the hotter air above these areas rises. Thermals form cumulus clouds, and looking for such clouds, as well as reading topography, are the glider pilot's challenge.

Thus, with sea on one side and mountains on the other, the topography around Connel is ideal for instruction in gliding. That and the ever-changing weather off the sea and highlands give the AWH Gliding Center more flexibility in its programs and more flying hours



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The Puchacz makes a training flight.

"Getting through West Point is no snap. Especially if you get cancer, as I did."

Lt. Robert Johnson



"For me, the news that I had a malignant tumor in my right elbow was a double blow. I learned it shortly after I'd been elected Captain of the Army football team.

"Thanks to early detection, effective surgery and treatment, I was back in three and a half months—not playing football but functioning in every other capacity as captain. I graduated on time. And today, I'm a Lieutenant in the Infantry.

"You know, millions of people like myself owe their lives to cancer research. And that takes money. Lots of money.

"Think about it. We want to wipe out cancer in your lifetime."

American Cancer Society

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than training centers operating in south England, Shelton says.

Just north of the airfield is a 1,000-ft. ridge. Even in dead calm, that ridge gives all the lift a glider needs. "That ridge," says Shelton, "is like having a big engine."

Phil crosses back and forth along the ridge's face as he gives Ray a feel of how each of the steering mechanisms work. Then he lets Ray fly a few turns on his own. After about 30 minutes, they land at the airfield, the students push the glider into position for the next take-off and Anthony, thirty, of Ayrshire, a computer systems analyst for an insurance company, takes over in the front seat.

Soon, they are aloft in Anthony's second-ever glider flight. He took one when he joined a weekend adventure package that featured all major aerial sports, from microlighting to piloting prop aircraft. Of the activities he tried, Anthony preferred gliding, finding it both more exhilarating and challenging than the others.

Yet, gliding, which boomed in popularity in the late '40s and early '50s, has declined in favor against the speedier, more daring sports of microlighting, hang gliding and wind surfing. Gliding's challenge is more mental, as the pilot seeks nature's offerings and taps his own well of stamina to go to new heights and farther distances.

"Gliding is a great adrenaline generator," says Shelton. "That's part of the sport, you keep pushing yourself because the glider is always better than you are." Shelton is himself one of Great Britain's best glider pilots, the first in Scotland to earn all three Federation Aeronautic International's diamond awards, gliding's elite goal. The diamonds were for altitude (5 kilometers,

Above: Gliding over the west coast of Scotland, above Connel airfield.

Right: Tony Shelton, AWH Gliding Center director and gliding enthusiast.

or 16,400 feet), a declared goal flight of 300 kilometers (186 miles), and a free distance flight of 500 kilometers (310 miles).

Anthony returns to earth and now I climb in. I am sincerely afraid of heights. The tow line is attached, the winch revs, the glider drags into flight, then as it steeply climbs to 600 feet I gulp, hard. The line releases like an umbilical cord being snapped off; time to cry—or at least tremble, with knees shaking so hard it threatens to steer the glider into a spin.

Time, as well, to remember Shelton's answer to the question, Is gliding safe? "Quantitatively, it's a lot safer than walking down your street."

Phil has been talking since the glider first started dragging along the pavement, calmly providing a blow-by-blow account of every maneuver. After several examples and a hands-on dry run, Phil lets me steer, talking me through patiently, correcting me gently, ignoring my chattering teeth and trembling voice, and seemingly unfazed by the lurching aircraft.

Even if the first flight is a bit nerve-racking, subsequent flights embrace the sensations of this sport. With growing confidence, we students begin flying the glider more competently, and so the adventure takes shape. Meanwhile, the scenery is stunning.

On the north shore of Armucknish Bay is a village and Barcaldine Castle, one of many castles, residences and ruins along this stretch of coastline around Oban. Loch Etive, a long lake that opens into the Firth of Lorn at



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Connel, stretches out toward the mountains, its calm, glassy top glistening in splashes of sun. The ridge looks bright when we fly by it, with rich red and green splashed across gray rock, and sheep grazing contentedly as the aircraft passes quietly overhead.

It isn't that we are merely in the domain of birds, but that we are using their domain—the air. Soaring up there in the comfort and safety of a glider, working in tandem with the wind, the novice pilot experiences the freedom of flight.

Then he takes the stick, lightly shifts it over as he presses the corresponding pedal, and banks and turns the glider around and levels out again. From the back seat he hears the ever-calm voice of Phil say, "Perfect," and it turns the thrill into a lasting accomplishment.

—ERIC MINTON

TIPS

A ONE-WEEK COURSE at Argyll and West Highland Gliding Center, offered late March to mid-September, costs 180-205 pounds or about \$300-350 (with accommodation 230-265 pounds, \$390-450). A one-day course costs 36 pounds (about \$60). Write The Secretary, Argyll and West Highland Gliding Center, P.O. Box 8, Oban, Argyll, Scotland, PA33 4AA; or call (059284) 288. When calling from abroad, first dial the country code and drop the "0" in the prefix.

British Rail and Scotrail combine on regular service from London to Glasgow, with connections to Oban and Connel. By car, it is 400 miles from London to Glasgow, and 85 miles farther to Connel. Ferry service connects Great Britain with the rest of the Continent. Glasgow and Prestwick airports serve all major European airlines, and either rail or rent-a-car services are available to complete the last leg of the journey.