

On a wing and a prayer

UP, UP AND AWAY WITH GREG FLEET AND NO ENGINE.

Words **Greg Fleet** Photography **Arsineh Houspian**

A call from my manager; “We’ve got you a job. It’s at the Geelong Gliding Club”.

“Great”, I reply. Images of corporate comedy come to mind – a podium, a microphone and lots of people in suits. “Should I wear a suit?”

The reply was a couple of seconds in coming, “ahh...no. Wear something loose fitting and...do you own any goggles?”

This was my introduction to the world of gliding.

Gliding has been around for a long time. It’s not one those ‘sports’ thought up by a couple of bored New Zealanders, “Hey Bro, let’s jump off that cliff wearing only a hat” or “let’s roll down that hill inside a giant truck tyre while holding a tray of cutlery”. However, history doesn’t change the fact that before this time most of my flying experiences involved craft with engines larger than myself. None the less it was a paying gig (go gliding, survive and then write about it) and as a comic I was obliged to say yes.

Kevin from the Geelong Gliding Club (mysteriously located in Bacchus Marsh) arranged to meet me opposite the hospital. Was he making sure I knew where it was in case of...? At least he didn’t meet me opposite the coroner’s court. A big jovial ‘mine host’ of a chap, Kev is about the size of a glider, and one of his official titles is ‘Tug Master’. Wisely I made no jokes about this. The trip to Bacchus was spent with Kev telling me the history of gliding and easing me into the concept. By the time we arrived I felt like a WWII fighter pilot, all “Tally-Ho” and “Damn you Jerry”. I jumped out of the car and met the pilot.

Rolf is a warm, confident, funny guy. He is also one of the best glider pilots in



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Australia. I dropped the “Tally-Ho, Jerry’s for the drink” routine on learning that Rolf is also German.

Getting in the glider, a Puchaucs Eagle-Owl, (my personal favourite of any glider

I’ve been in) I noticed a distinct absence of drinks carts and ‘what to do in case of emergency’ speeches.

We were hooked up to a tow plane (piloted by Kev – thus the ‘Tug Master’) and dragged bumpily down a field and into the air. Turbulence is weird without engine noise to cover it. Dragged up to 4000 feet, Rolf promised that upon release from the tow plane everything would be far more pleasant. He was right. Suddenly we were no longer attached and it became one of the most exciting experiences of my pleasure heavy life. We were literally... gliding. It is peaceful and exciting all at once. I don’t pretend to understand how it all worked. Until then I’d thought of thermals as amusing underwear, but I loved it. Gliders can stay up for 10-12 hours and cover thousands of K’s.

After a short while of gentle flying, Rolf asked me if I wanted him to do some more action packed stuff. I hated this because as a bloke I couldn’t say no without revealing myself as the coward I clearly am. “Ok”, I replied in a voice pitched somewhere between high and hysterical. He pulled off a couple of high speed turns where the glider banks heavily and the ground seems disturbingly close. “Is there anything you would like me to do?” he enquired. I knew that there were things a glider just couldn’t do, so went for one of those. “Yeah, Rolf. Could you put this baby into a loop?” This way I would seem outrageously brave but not be changing my underpants on landing. Ingenious. “Sure”, came the reply, with just a hint of Germanic glee, “That’s the spirit!” Before I had time to beg or plead “Loop? Did you think I said loop? No I said land!” we were plunging toward the earth at way



over the speed limit before something happened and we were heading toward the sun, (not a good place to land I remember thinking) and then upside down and suddenly we were gliding along as before, except that I was cheering and begging for more.

Rolf then showed me a number of tricks including one where we pulled “a couple of G’s” and I was pushed so flat in my seat that I couldn’t lift my arms, and one where I experienced weightlessness. All of this with a centimetre of fibreglass between me and the distant planet I called my home. I loved it.

Rolf told me that eagles sometimes fly next to the gliders, just checking them out. Brothers in arms. Or wings. “Would you like to take the controls?” Another question that I could have done without. “Ok”, this time I was sure only dogs could hear my response. There was a joy stick in front of me and after a few tips from the man behind me, I took charge. “To speed up just push forward on the stick.” He could have added that to do this would also send us plummeting toward a paddock full of cows. “And to slow down and level out, just let go of the stick.” I thought I would help everything along by not just letting go of it but by desperately pulling back on the stick. We stopped diving, levelled out and then started to climb. I only let go of the stick when we seemed to almost stop still and Rolf said, in a disturbingly ho-hum fashion, “And if you keep doing that, we will fall out of the sky”.



Rolf brought us back to earth with less bump on landing than you would feel in Qantas business class and that was that. If you want to feel what flying actually is, not just get on a plane and arrive somewhere else, gliding is magnificent. It made me feel alive and brave, neither of which I am.

The last word goes to Rolf, “A good landing is one which you survive, a great landing is one you can walk away from and a perfect landing is one where you can use the glider again”. I’ll definitely do it again. Now where is that giant tyre and the cutlery tray? ■

Geelong Gliding Club offers budding aviators Air Experience Flights from \$90. For more information visit www.gliding-in-melbourne.org or call 0419 212 527. For information on a gliding club near you visit The Gliding Federation of Australia at www.gfa.org.au

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