



CHAPTER 13

An Introduction to Gliding

GLIDING had always sounded an adventurous business. It evidently had much in common with sailing. It was one of those things I had been meaning to try one day, but so far the chance had never come my way. And then one day—it was All Fools' Day, 1956—my neighbour rang me up:

“Have you been up to see the gliders yet?”

“What gliders; where?”

“Look out of your window and you'll probably see one flying along the Cotswold edge. They belong to the Bristol Gliding Club which has just moved to Nympsfield.”

Half an hour later I was on the new gliding field being offered a first flight by the Chief Flying Instructor, John Parry Jones, in a side-by-side two-seater. John was a big enthusiastic man with a quiet urgency in his voice. As we waited for the cable to be towed out from the winch at the far end of the field, he told me what to expect. There was a quick cockpit check, a shout of “Take up slack” followed by a shout “All out” and our glider was pulled violently forward. Almost at once it was airborne and heading steeply into the sky like a kite—much too steeply for one only familiar with the take-off attitudes of powered aircraft. Up, up, while John prattled amiably away, and I gripped the bottom of the instrument panel and wondered how he would know when he had got to the top. I wondered too what it would be like then. It was rather like the long preliminary wind up to the top of a scenic railway. What would the downward swoop be like? Unexpectedly it was far nicer than the climb. John released the cable with a click and we floated out over the valley below. It was no more than agreeably draughty in the open cockpit. There we sat side by side 1,000 feet above the airfield, peacefully admiring the view. At first the air was quite smooth, but then as we flew

along the Cotswold escarpment it became bubbly and buoyant. John tipped our wings sharply into a bank and we went round and round in tight circles.

"Look at the variometer!" he said. "Watch the green ball."

On the instrument panel among the standard instruments which I recognised—airspeed indicator, altimeter, turn-and-slip for blind flying—was one with two vertical glass tubes calibrated in feet per second. In one was a green pellet, in the other a red one. As I watched the green one moved up until it was nearly half-way to the top of the tube and reading five feet per second, pushed up, as I discovered later, by expanding air escaping from a flask. Briefly this meant we were going up. John patiently explained that a glider is always coming down through the air, and the only way it can go up is by finding air which is rising faster than the glider sinks. This we had found—a column of warmer air called a thermal, in which he was now keeping us by steering in tight circles. We rose a few hundred feet and then the thermal died, the green ball sank to the bottom of its tube and the red ball began to flicker up in the second tube. We straightened and flew on along the face of the hill. Presently we felt the burble of rising air again, and again we circled in another thermal. These were 'blue' or 'dry' thermals, John told me, for the sky was cloudless. Usually the tops of thermals formed clouds, and indeed summer cumulus clouds were nothing more than thermals which had reached condensation level. But today the thermals were weak and formed no clouds.

From 1,000 feet, but for the thermals, our flight in the T21 trainer would have lasted four minutes; in fact it lasted nineteen, and as we swept in to land at an increased speed and trundled to a standstill on the single wheel I realised that it was not the last flight I would make in a glider.

"How long will it take you to teach me to glide?" I asked.

"If you've had power flying experience, about thirty flights before you can go solo—three or four hours of flying all told, but it may take you a good many week-ends to get them in."

"Never mind," I said, "I'll have a bash!"

A whole new field of experience was about to open up, a new and, as it turned out, absolutely satisfying outlet for my occasional restlessness. To go sailing meant a long car journey from my home, but directly above it was an ocean of sky waiting to be explored.

On 9th June, 1956, I flew solo for the first time in a Slingsby

Tutor. To begin with I thought this might be the limit of my ambition. I knew how to do it. I could graduate slowly to the higher performance club sailplanes. Beginning at the age of forty-six it was absurd to think of doing much more. Perhaps I should have known myself better or perhaps I had reckoned without the cunningly devised 'Certificates' of the International Aeronautical Federation, designed expressly to lead on the aspiring glider pilot. There are, to begin with, A, B and C certificates which in these days of dual training in two-seaters are likely to be achieved in fairly quick succession, but after that come the Silver C, the Gold C, and, most difficult of all, the three diamonds. When I first learned of these things only one British pilot had all three diamonds and even today there are only four. Maybe, I said to myself, it would be fun to have a Silver C, and from then onwards I was committed.

For the Silver C I would be required to stay airborne for five hours, to fly across country for fifty kilometres, and to climb 1,000 metres (3,281 feet) above the height of launch or any subsequent lower point before the climb. It would no doubt be some long time before these three could be achieved.

My principal instructor was a cynical young man with blue eyes who always wore a blue jersey and wrote novels which did not get finished. He was a skilful flyer and knew no fear. He had a devastating turn of phrase, took life as he found it and may yet be a great writer; his name—Peter Collier. At the time of which I write he was instructing the club's weekly summer courses.

"Now that you've got your C," Peter said, "if you come up during the week there's no reason why we shouldn't fling you off from time to time in the Tutor, without interrupting the course."

So I went up to Nympsfield on the Thursday. The T21 was doing circuits and was back on the ground each time before the cable had been retrieved; but as the day developed, the two-seater began to stay up longer. After the first two soaring flights had been occupied with taping up some bad places in the cable and running out of petrol in the retrieving car, there was at last a cable waiting when the T21 was still airborne. Here was my opportunity—I must grasp it with both hands, or something . . .

Three minutes later I too was airborne. There was no wind at all and I barely squeezed 700 feet from the launch, but I found lift at once and began to circle. It felt nice and buoyant, but the green ball fell back and the red one bobbed up. I straightened and headed for where I thought the lift should have been, but the

red ball only went higher. In two minutes more I was back on the ground—total, five minutes. This was repeated twice and then I found something better. The green ball stayed up at three, occasionally five feet per second. Even the altimeter needle moved up—very slightly. When the green ball dropped back I went on circling for a long time in ‘no sink’. Rather weak, these thermals, but really there’s nothing in this circling business! We could stay up for quite a while—in fact we’ve already *been* up quite a while. (We? All this ‘me and the Tutor’ stuff which always creeps into all solo pilots’ accounts of their flights.) Hullo, that red ball’s going rather high—worse than ten red. Oh dear, it’s no good, we’ll have to go in. But it was more like a flight, we must have been up at least half an hour. What did you say? Nine minutes? Oh well . . .

The next launch provided fifteen minutes of fumbling at 600 feet, and when I got back there was a cable waiting for an immediate relaunch. Now this was absurd—five launches and I still had not hooked myself on to the sky. Something positively must be done this time. If the T21 can stay airborne for half an hour, and the Olympia is up there circling at 3,000 feet or more, surely, having kept the standard work, *Soaring Pilot* by my bedside for the last month, I can centre on a thermal and *gain* a little height above the launch? I watched the Olympia circling effortlessly, and wondered how much mental effort the pilot was putting into it. The silent lazy circles gave no clue, and already the sailplane looked small away up there, a thin little cross, not much more than a speck in the sky. I wondered when I would be good enough, or lucky enough, to become a ‘speck in the sky’. But the first thing to do was to make a positive advance on the launch height; that was the immediate objective. Well, let’s have another shot.

“Can-I-Take-Her-Off-Safely”—the initial letters each stand for an item in the cockpit check—“All clear above and behind—Take up slack—All out!” Here we go again. Hold on to your hats! Screaming launch, let’s try tail wagging (the signal to the winch driver that he is hauling in too fast). He can’t have seen it. Oh yes, he did—I think we’re going to stall. Ah, that’s better. Considering there’s no wind it’s going to be quite a nice launch, 800 feet. Now, what did they say, “Turn right off the launch and try the little bowl on the slope?” Well, let’s try it—but it’s no good. Not a peep, and we’re back to 600. We must turn back into the circuit. Hold everything—here it is, a strong turbulent surge, the starboard wing blown into the air—tuck it down again like it says in

the book and start circling to the right. You're skidding, too much rudder again! That's better, and the green ball's still shivering at three feet per second. There's the winch immediately below and they're working on the cable again. Quite nice turns now, and still two or three green. Oh look, we're at 1,000 feet! A surge of lift, straighten for three seconds and then into the turn again. Oh yes, five green but not all the time. Now we're going to work at this, let's try the book methods. Worst heading, where's that? O.K., straight up the ridge it's only two green, now sixty degrees, straighten up and into the turn again. Golly, it worked! It's five green all the way round. This is fun! No wind at all; the winch is still directly below. Wonder if we're interfering with anyone's launch. No aircraft on the ground, and anyway they're still mending the cable. Hey, watch it, the lift's falling off. Green ball's dropping right back on one side of the circle. Let's try the *best* heading method. Five green there—what's just behind the left wing-tip now? Easy—my home beside the bend in the estuary. Round to it, straighten . . . and two and three and in again. There it is, a real surge of it. It's worked again. It's really quite simple; needs a bit of concentration though. I wonder why I'm so dry in the mouth—wish I'd remembered to bring those peppermints to suck. The winch is still more or less straight down there. It looks pretty small, we must be quite high. Cor! 2,500 feet and still going up; not only that but the green ball's going higher now—up to ten. Ten feet per second—that's pretty fast climbing. Time to look round and enjoy the scenery, but it's a bit hazy now and rather cold. It's also suddenly rather lonely and frightening with no windscreen, and nothing but a little plywood bucket to sit in. What the hell am I doing up here anyway, and at my age too? Hullo, not going up any more. Perhaps the thermal has 'thrown us out'—let's try over to the north. Yes, there it is again; really strong now, bursts of twenty green—3,500 feet and no barograph in the locker. Perhaps I could get Silver C height but it would not count if I did not have a barograph trace to prove it. "*Never* go without a barograph," one of the pundits had told me, but I had thought it could not apply at my level of proficiency. All the same we must get to Silver C height just for the fun of it. What's 1,000 metres? Three thousand, two hundred and eighty-odd feet. Well, we're higher than that already, but then there's the launch, another 800, call it 1,000 for safety and then add some to make a round figure. We must get 4,500 on the clock. We're really in the core of the thermal, fifteen green

all the time, sometimes twenty, and lovely big lazy circles with the lift steady all round and the ground getting hazier and the curious flat cloud on top like a grey pancake. And there's Silver C height. But we might as well go on to cloud base now, though we must be careful not to get sucked into it. There are no blind-flying instruments in this glider, and even if there were I shouldn't be able to use them. It doesn't look a *very* big cloud, but with all this twenty green about . . .

And now suddenly there are dark wisps of cloud trailing below us and the horizon has disappeared. The altimeter says 5,500 feet. It's time to stop going up. Nose down, speed up to fifty-five, and a whole lot colder, in fact perishing cold in the open cockpit with no windscreen and clothing for a summer's day. And, look, the green ball is still up at five and the ground is hardly visible at all. Nose down some more and out spoilers. The little slats on the tops of the wings ought to counteract all this lift. That's better but the green ball won't go right down. It hovers between one and two. Oh golly, this is serious, we *are* being sucked right into the cloud. Maybe this is a Cunim—a thunder cloud in the making, maybe it's already too late to escape and the Tutor will break up in the cloud, and me with no parachute. And then suddenly we're out into sunshine, and blessedly the red ball has popped up. Panic over, but it's still horribly cold. I'm shivering uncontrollably from a combination of fear and cold. But the horizon is there again and the sun is comforting and the cloud is quite definitely *not* a Cunim. Let's fly out over the Severn estuary, over my house and enjoy the view in spite of the cold. I'm still shivering. I've throttled back now to thirty-five m.p.h. but I wish there was a windscreen on this fuselage. There's still this feeling of loneliness too. It's really very silly. After all, I'm much safer up here at 5,000 feet than I would be at 500, and yet I should feel quite at home dicing about over the ridge, and up here I feel definitely unsafe. I suppose it's all a question of what one is used to.

Now, how far can I go and make certain of getting back; there's not enough wind to worry about (or to warrant trying to get Silver C distance—thirty-two miles). What did it say in the book—"four miles for every 1,000 feet?" Well, it's about five miles to home and five miles back—ten miles, 2,500 feet—well, that ought to be O.K. and anyway there are patches of 'no sink', which, combined with the cold wind, indicate that we should fly as slowly as possible. And so out over the ponds of the Wildfowl Trust, a tight circle there and on out over the river, another

circle, and now let's head back towards Nympsfield. Still nearly 4,000 feet on the clock. Another circle over my house; I bet nobody down below has seen me. Pity really, but it's too far to shout. Might as well go back by way of my cloud which is still sitting more or less where I left it. There's only weak lift under it now—that I can find anyway. But it's too cold to stick around, and so I go gently back, my world becoming gradually more and more familiar the nearer I get to launch height. Finally, the approach. This they had said was the time when one's judgment failed, after one had been high up for a while. I must exercise more care than ever. No wind. Much floating even with the spoilers out. Patience, there's no hurry. Hold off six inches above the ground, and then hold off more and . . . down. Quite nice really, and just as well with everyone looking. And down on the ground it's hot again, no need to shiver any more.

It was one minute under an hour since I had taken off, they told me. "You know," they said, "the Tutor looked absolutely tiny up there, straight above us—just a tiny speck in the sky."

