



Thanks For The Memories!

by Ed Stokes

1. Flying in the Old Country

Let's see – on December 27, 2005, at about 7:00 a.m. (13:00 real English time) I have completed fifty years in the gliding fraternity. Seems like yesterday when I stepped into that old Slingsby T-21b and took my first flight with Chris Hughes – all nine minutes of it! Winching up to a dizzying height of 900' or so, the cable singing through the grass and scaring the sheep off the runway, climbing through the clag into clear air....ah memories! Southdown Glider Club's Bo-Peep Farm seems like the perfect name for the field – though we only ever saw her sheep there.

At least Chris kept us up for nine minutes and I still don't know how he did it. It always seemed that instructors were above we mere mortals and we students fought over the rights to buy them their first beer each evening at the local pub.

So now I look back on fifty years and wonder where all the

time (and thermals) went and would like to remember some of the great times I've had and the many people I've met along the way. *I must point out that, at 73, more and more of the old grey cells are fading away daily so, if I recall incorrectly or lay a wrong tale on someone from the past, please forgive me – no malice intended, I assure you.*

Just over 600 flights in 50 years equals about twelve flights a year – not an inspiring number when you look at other people with that many years in the sport. Worse than that, no competition wins (haven't been in a contest since 1962 and didn't shine there!) no Diamonds, no 1000Km Diplomes, no World Records. But, you know what, I've had a ball along the way and here's the reason I love this sport so much.

First solo at flight 77 after 6 hours 46 minutes in the air – lots of cable breaks and "stimulated" cable breaks provided by the instructor when the line somehow **wouldn't** break. Incipient

A FLIGHT DOWN MEMORY LANE

Seated in the Slingsby T-21b are (left to right): The author Ed Stokes, sister Jilly Foster, and instructor "Len" Lennard. Photo by R.J. Toms.

spins off the top of an 800' launch – I can still hear Ray Marshall:

“Crikey, Stokes - TOP rudder, STICK forward, get it right will you?” (I must remind U.S. readers that you'd be lucky to get three two-minute flights on a weekend so logbook time added up slowly. Denny Shoener, a Sky Soaring friend, tells me that his first 100 glider flights were off a winch in Germany and he took **forever** to accumulate that time!)

Since we couldn't risk our sole two-seater to novices, we soloed in Slingsby Tutor II's so, with all else going on in your first flight, you had to handle a new plane too. We had two of these ships so, when a new solo pilot (not me) landed short and chopped off the tail of one on the barbed wire fence, it was no biggie.

On the South Downs, at Firle Beacon, we were always waiting for the BIG DAY when a sustained strong wind from the Northwest would allow the winning candidate of the draw to go for his five hours. One morning, around five a.m., we were wakened in our barn dormitory with a nice, whistling wind (gale?) and we rushed to get dressed. Up the hill to the hangar, still in the dark, and I stepped in first – right through the wing of the Tutor and believe me when I tell you that I can **still** hear the “crack” of the spruce and the tearing sound of the linen. Luckily, it only took two hours to mend the damage and get the ship airworthy again – but if you watch the movie of that day's event, you can see clearly the red-doped and patched silver wing as the Tutor flies back and forth on the ridge. The guy got his Silver “C” five hours, by the way – but I wasn't too popular 'til he landed.

In the pub of an evening, I learned a very necessary skill that has stood me in good stead over the years – the hangar flying (lying) ability, which far outranks true stick time.

I honestly feel that gliding youngsters of today are nowhere near up to par in this regard – though we old-timers do try to help them along with recitation of some of our epics.

I must give a plug here for the Midland Gliding Club of the Long Myndd in Shropshire: Southdown took a couple of gliders up there each summer to join the Cambridge GC in a gliding campout.

Winching up to 1000' gave us 2000' over the valley and wonderful views of the Welsh hills to the West. But the evenings were special: sitting in the clubhouse bar, drinking cider and listening to Schubert's “Trout” Quintet as the sun went down over the Stiperstones. You know, you can still experience that – Midland GC has Summer encampments each year and you can even get in some bungee launches if you're really lucky. Had a bad experience when I revisited them a couple of years back – I was waiting in line for a cup of tea when I happened to mention to the young lady in front of me that I last flew there in 1958. Came the punch line – “Oh yes, I was here with my Dad then, when I was two!”

2. Flying in the Colonies

Emigrating to the States in 1959, I was soon able to find a gliding home with the Soaring Society of Dayton (now Caesar Creek Soaring.) I was lucky in this because I was a trainee at Brunswick Corporation in Chicago, flying around the Midwest

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PICTURE PERFECT

Ed Stokes is pictured at Sky Soaring, where beginners and seasoned pilots are equally welcome! Photo provided by Ed Stokes.

as a substitute buyer at various factories. When I discovered Cincinnati, I was able to persuade my boss that I'd found my true calling with MacGregor Golf and wanted a permanent posting there. Never mentioned to him that SSD was only up the road in Richmond, Indiana, of course.

The Soaring Society of Dayton was an old, very active, club with members always planning badge attempts and forming groups who would crew for one another on cross-country attempts. A great group of guys and a wonderful environment for getting deep into soaring.

The instructors were tough and again my solo came late – after getting 41 flights under my belt. Never did claim to be a natural pilot, and learning to stay behind the L5 tow plane and **not** pull back on the stick a la winch launch had to be constantly on my mind at first. But, one day, Duane Sprague turned me loose in the 2-22 and not much later - after Tom Holloran cleaned up my act and Joe Bearden (rest his soul) took me to the next level, I was ready for my flight test at last. Joe Bearden had a sad experience early on – his son told his Dad that he “didn’t like gliding at all” and Joe was devastated.

Now I feel good when I see Chip Bearden’s name in the contest sheets.

On the fated day, I got to the field early and checked out the 2-22 and made it ready. It still being early, I talked Bob Nelson, another candidate for a PPG that day, into taking a quick circuit with me as a warm-up. Don’t know what was in my head because, when “Rube” Ruble, duty tow pilot, showed up he asked the guys “Where’s Stokes?” – “Up in the air” was the answer.

“Where’s Nelson?” - “Up in the air...!!” Rube just ran his finger across his throat. Luckily, the Examiner was a little late that morning.

So, PPG Certificate in hand, I went looking to buy into a private ship and was accepted into Joe Bearden’s group in an old 1-26 (Ed Mooney and Jim Hurst were partners, too.)

Owning a ship was an awesome experience after always having to wait my turn in a club plane. Sadly, I had overlooked one little thing – I’d never been up in a glider more than an hour **ever** and discovered airsickness all by myself on my first long flight. No whoopee bag of course, so I learned a new rule of flying – the P.I.C. cleans up any mess himself! (Tom Atwood at Sky Soaring, ever the gentleman and finding no bag handy, doffed his hat and handed it to his lady passenger as he noted the back of her neck turning green. She was able to put it to good use and he was awarded the SSI Bully Bag for 2004.)

Took many flights to complete my 5 hours – 4:48 being my limit until I learned to fly and upchuck with the stick between my knees and bag in hand!! Then lots of tries at cross-country for a Silver “C” before pulling it off. The classic was a day I landed after a gallant 8-mile attempt, finishing in a farm field. Went up to the farmhouse and persuaded the farmer to call SSD and then he came out to inspect the damage. Since, while I was waiting, I’d loosened the wing bolts and pulled the wings out to rest the tips on the ground each side, my farmer was intrigued. “Anyone hurt?” “No” says I. “Well sure smashed it up didn’t you? Luckily, Thelma Bearden showed up then to help load up and leave.

The poor 1-26 came to a sticky end – and we might have seen

it coming. One day, I'm-walking the wingtip of our ship as we got ready to launch and I saw **both** ailerons drooping! Checked under the turtle-deck and saw that one aileron had not been hooked up and, when I called Ed Mooney later, he told me that it had felt a little "stiff" last time he flew it. Those Schwiezer brothers can sure build ships, huh?

Sadly, Ed next took our baby up to Elmira to try out ridge soaring, got caught in the curl-over and totaled the ship. Wasn't hurt, thankfully, and he was decent enough to buy us all out – and that put me into Bill Coverdale's record-holding (at one time) 1-23.

I mentioned Duane Sprague earlier as one of my instructors (he was also one of Instructor Tom Knauff's instructors, incidentally.) Duane was a sparkplug type of guy – always thinking up new gliding ideas and encouraging others to stretch a little. At the height of his powers, he decided to go back to school (Penn State) and, true to form, he joined the University Gliding Club there. Told a classic tale – seems he was pulling most of the instructing load and, one day, really tired at the day's end, he told the student – "You got it" and settled back to rest. Sees a tree fly past at their level, wakes up and grabs the stick "I GOT IT!" They've overshot the runway and Duane flies the ship between a farmhouse and a barn. When the guys tow the ship back to the runway, the wingman calls a halt – they're going to hit the barn. They have to try it twice to get between the house and the barn – seems that adrenaline can accomplish miracles in flight!

My gliding home is now (has been for over twenty years) Sky

Soaring – flying out of Hampshire, Illinois. Seems like I saved the best of my gliding career 'til last – what a GREAT bunch of guys! We own our own field and take all grades of pilots from beginners to ATP guys and we fly every chance we get – even on weekdays when the weather co-operates. We probably have the highest-quality hangar flying of any club I've visited – seems a shame that our cross-country performance doesn't match up with the end-of-day tales, but that's another story.

Our senior instructor is a guy named Jim Skog – he has a wonderful teaching technique: when he first flies with you, he stays really quiet until he spots your weak points and then he probes at those on every checkride thereafter (I don't know how he remembers all this stuff – must keep a secret diary!) Boxing the wake is my bugaboo and, for good measure, circling a local church steeple in a strong wind – I can do beautiful ovals to follow his perfectly demonstrated circles. But, he keeps us all safe!

Over the years at SSI, I've had many great experiences but one of the best was a flight in a 1-34R (Doris Grove's old record-setter, actually.) It was sunset and I was just doodling around in an evening thermal when Steve "The Wazz" Wasilowski joined up with me in his World's Finest Luscombe. Setting sun, last flight of the day, imported beer awaiting us at the local bistro...heaven!

Many people (well, a couple anyway) have asked me why I don't "give back" to the sport by becoming an instructor. Easy answer, supplied by two recent typical experiences:

We're at the C.A.P. encampment at Mauston, Wisconsin, where I'm and Orientation Pilot, giving cadets their first

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The gang at Sky Soaring. Photo provided by Ed Stokes.

experience in a glider. Been doing it for a couple of years now and very much enjoy it.

So, I'm up at 3,000 feet in a 2-33 with an eager young guy who is very impressed with his O. Pilot in the rear seat. Keeps telling me how much fun this is and how much he's learning – as we do the routine: adverse yaw, slow flight, steep turns, etc. We had to get to the 3,000' demo height by climbing past widely scattered cumulus and I noted carefully where the tow plane departed the scene. But, when we had finished our program and were down below cloudbase, the hero in the back

seat was totally LOST (did I mention we aero towed up to Mauston and had no trailer?) Anyway, not wanting to disturb the troops, I called back on the radio "Mauston ground, this is 46 Tango." "Go ahead." "Give me landmark for the field." "The lake is to the Northwest of the field."

Then, did a 180 and saw our field. Trouble was, we would be lucky to make it – so I tell my cadet – "Now I'm going to demonstrate Best Speed To Fly, you'll need this when you take up the sport."

Then, I get a cadet who's very good indeed and I let him have the 'plane after we get off tow. I talk him through the flight syllabus and he aces it! Then I tell him that we're at 1000' and need to plan our landing pattern. I call in on the radio and start in to the pattern. Turning base, (man, the wind's picked up) – I can hardly get the wing down enough in the turn and the turn onto final is a nightmare - never had it so tough. Down to about 100', still struggling, sweating, the kid in front says, "Shall I let go the controls now, sir?" "Sure" says I, nonchalant-like.

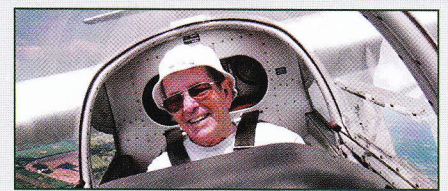
3. The Future

I worry a little about our sport – it seems that we're not getting anything like enough new blood into the game (though things are looking up at Sky Soaring, right now.) Having four kids, I exposed them to gliding early and not one took it up (shades of Joe Bearden!)

Now I have eight grandkids and I'm trying once again and now I see some hope.

My eldest grandchild, Raeann 13, as have nearly all my grandkids, took her first ride at age three. She's in the back seat of the 2-33 and we're just off tow – suddenly, I hear this little voice say, "I'll never see my Mommy again!" Quickly, I scan the sky – am I about to be hit by another 'plane, is a strut loose on the ship?? Carrying on, she says "Grampy, go faster' go faster – the cars are beating us!" "I'm flying at the right speed" – "No, cars are passing you on the Toll way" says she!

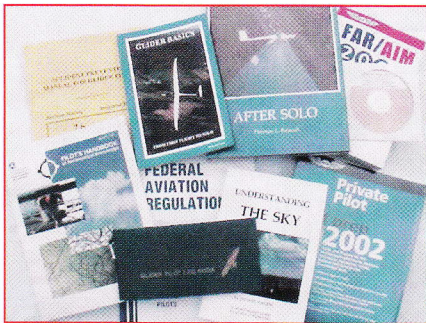
I think I've got her hooked!



About the author: Ed Stokes took his first flight in 1955. He is still trying to master this wonderful sport. He has been a member for over twenty years of Sky Soaring. Ed is happiest putting on the Ground Safety Officer's vest and bossing other pilots around. In his other life, Ed works at helping small manufacturers develop niche export markets wherever they may be found.

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