Go Gliding this Summer

Contributed by Jill McCaw

THE NEW ZEALAND soaring season is well underway with the Central Plateau and South Island Regional competitions just completed. Competition gliders have flown up to six days out of seven over courses ranging from 200 to 500 km long, with average speeds of up to 190 kph. I emphasise that that is average speed over the course, as gliders have to stop tracking over the course to find and climb in lift. That makes their top cruising speed pretty fast which is fairly amazing for aircraft without engines.

Hi. I'm Jill McCaw and I'm the editor and publisher of SoaringNZ, the official magazine for Gliding New Zealand. I've been a glider pilot for more than 20 years and I have been tasked with introducing the readers of KiwiFlyer to the sport of gliding.

There are 25 gliding clubs around New Zealand and they are all interested in hearing from new members and sharing the fun of our sport. As a first port of call, check out the GNZ website www.glidingnewzealand.co.nz and the link to clubs in your area. Most clubs operate trial flight schemes and offer gift vouchers (perfect for Christmas presents).

If you come out for a trial flight you will not be flying at speeds of 200 kph. A trial flight is a little more sedate but is still interesting and exciting. Most clubs around the country have modern fibre-glass two seat gliders for instructional flights. The Twin Astir, a commonly used twin seater, has an L/D of 38 which means that for every metre of height the glider can travel 38 metres forward. Or to translate that to practical terms, if a glider tows to 2,000 feet AGL it can travel 7.6 kilometres before it lands. In reality we prefer to join circuit between a thousand and 800 feet, but you get the idea. It will go a long way. It doesn't fall down "if the wind stops".

Your instructor will brief you on your aircraft and strap you into the front seat of the glider. Gliders have exactly the same controls as other aircraft, without the engine controls. After control checks, you'll be hooked onto the rope from the towplane or winch. A winch launch works in the same way as launching a kite but with precise parameters on speed and load weights. It's very fast and to the uninitiated feels a little like a bungy jump in reverse. A good winch on a good day can launch a glider to 2,000 feet in around 30 seconds.

Above: Student and Instructor prepare for launch. Below: World champion pilots prepare for a task. Bottom of page: The contest grid at the Gliding Nationals held in Matamata earlier this year.

Most clubs launch with towplanes. The glider formation flies behind the tug up to the release height. The release is pulled, the glider turns right and the tow plane left and then you're alone in the sky. The instructor may try to establish lift if he can, to gain height and extend your flight time.

You'll be given a brief rundown on effect of controls before being given a go yourself. If you've had any light aircraft experience it will be easy. Gliders are very responsive aircraft but they're also very stable. In still air they require virtually no control movements to fly straight and level.

Of course you won't only be noticing the effects of controls. You'll be discovering just how great it is to be in a non powered aircraft high in the sky. People imagine that it will be quiet, and compared to a powered aircraft it is. One of the surprising things to discover is how much noise the air makes moving past the aircraft. Competent glider pilots become able to judge their speed by the sound.

Depending on the weather conditions you may be taken for a small cross country flight using thermals and ridge lift to fly away from the airfield. The instructor will explain local conditions and you'll have quite a bit of control time if you want it. Thermalling, involving circling in lift, can cause airsickness in some people so be sure to warn your instructor if you're not feeling well and he can modify the flight accordingly. Some people just lap up the whole experience and ask for loops and aerobatics. That may or may not happen, but if you want to try that a special flight can be arranged.

At some stage you're going to have to come back down to earth and the instructor will have you overhead the airfield at circuit height. Our circuits are smaller than power circuits and we don't have a go around option. We use airbrakes to help us maintain our glide path. The landing will be smooth and precise and your flight will be over. Most people land with a huge grin on their faces. A great flight just leaves you high.

We hope you'll come back and sign up to learn to fly.

In the next issue I'll explain lift sources and how glider pilots use them to keep their aircraft aloft and take them where they want to go.

If you'd like to comment and for copies or subscriptions to SoaringNZ email: soaringnz@mccawmedia.co.nz