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Flying with all 5 senses

Contributed by Jill McCaw

A WRITER friend of mine challenged me to write about a glider flight using all five of my senses, with descriptions good and bad. I've accepted the challenge and I hope that some of what I mention won't put you off the idea of trying gliding. Some of the good aspects may in fact hopefully tempt you to try it out.

We'll start before the flight. It was hot on the ground, very hot. Wrapped in my hospital grade adult nappy, I was even more uncomfortable than usual. (That's one of those details that don't usually get mentioned.) I didn't actually use the thing but knowing I had it gave me the freedom to enjoy a long flight without worrying about in-flight lack of bathrooms. It's important to stay hydrated and that fluid has to go somewhere.

I wrestled with my parachute and settled into the cockpit of the single Astir glider getting even more hot and bothered. My water bottle went under my left armpit while apple and muesli bar, cell phone and map fitted into the pockets beside me. It's quite a job getting everything fitted in where you can reach it and where it can't move and get in the way of the controls. A jacket, in case of landouts got shoved into the fuselage behind my head. The glider smelt of someone's forgotten salami sandwich that I discovered in the pocket. I smelt of sunscreen.

I always have a feeling of anticipation as I run through my checks and wait for the towplane. The sky was showing signs of wave clouds, that magical elevator that can lift gliders high into the sky. I had oxygen ready and was hoping I would need it, the mask sitting just behind my shoulder where I could get at it. Getting into wave was my goal for the flight.

The ground roll briefly bounces the glider before we lift off and I hold the glider down waiting for the tow plane to get off the ground too. I settle into the tow but a buzzing noise gives me a jolt. I'm only worried for a moment before I realise it's caused by a loose end of a piece of tape used to seal the wings. I wish I'd noticed it before take-off but it was too late now. The sound faded from my consciousness once I realised it was not a threat.

At 2,000 feet AGL I pull the release knob. It gives a satisfying clunk and I turn to follow the ridge line and the air rising up it.

There are plenty of sounds to hear in a glider. There is the radio to start with, often with a lot of chatter and "Ops Normal" from other pilots. I change to 133.55 and ask those nearby where they're finding the wave. The airframe can creak and groan and the air rushing past gets louder and changes pitch with speed. With practice, listening to the air gives the pilot a fair indication of how fast they are going without looking at their instruments. We use a variometer to indicate if the glider is in rising or falling air. It comes with sound, the beep beep becoming shriller and faster for rising air and slower (and depressingly) deeper for falling air. Flying with your head out of the cockpit is important after all and glider pilots need to find the rising air. There is another sense that's involved

in finding lift. It's a feeling of pressure on the seat of your pants. I can feel a thermal before the instruments register it and I'm not a particularly skilled pilot.

On this flight I climb in the ridge lift until I'm high enough to attempt to push forward into wave. The air pressure decreases and my ears pop. There's another side effect of that pressure drop and even though I'm trying to describe this flight using all my senses, I'll leave you to imagine how that might smell. Some pilots suffer more from this gas expansion than others.

After a bit of struggle and probably a lot of luck I'm at 12,000 feet, oxygen mask clamped tight to my face and all I can smell now is rubber. The oxygen is dry and my mouth is already dry and tacky but I don't mind - I feel very happy. A lenticular rises above me. The cloud is massive and looks solid, reaching high into the stratosphere. Lake Ohau shrinks below me like I'm in an elevator. How high can I go? It's cold up here and going to get colder, but I'm flying in the sun and it's fine for now. There are some small cracks on the canopy catching the light. My yaw string is straight and my speed is steady, around 70 knots. I'm going up well and not getting pushed back into that huge cloud. My parachute harness is cutting into my thighs but I'm otherwise comfortable, my body cradled in the seat. I'm exhilarated - this is so much fun.

I'm suddenly concerned. Am I too happy? I check my oxygen system. Yes, it's all working fine. I'm just happy for the right reasons. I got into wave, on my own.

15,000 feet is high enough for me. It's the highest I've ever been alone. After half an hour of soaking in the view: mountains, lakes and clear air from coast to coast; I point my nose for home. I need to open my airbrakes to come down and the change in temperature is welcome as I descend. I hadn't realised just how cold I had been.

Pulling my speed back to 50 knots for landing is quite difficult. I check the wind sock and surprisingly there is hardly any wind on the ground. I change the radio back to 119.10 for my downwind call, run through my checks and settle myself down as I get my circuit sorted. There's a glider landing ahead of me so I call number two and that I'll go long. Omarama is a huge airfield and there is plenty of room. I change my aiming point, turn finals and close my brakes slightly to float over the landing glider, open them again, check my speed, watch my angle, more brake, ease off on the brake... hold and... flare. My wheel touches; I hold the wings steady, pull back fully on the brake to engage the wheel brake while taxiing to the side of the strip. The glider slows, the wing finally drops and we stop.

I sit for a moment, just enjoying the feeling of a successful flight. Then I pop the canopy, undo my straps, turn off the master and climb out. Back to the real world. Where did I leave my car?

I'm Jill McCaw and I'm editor and publisher of SoaringNZ, the official journal of Gliding NZ. For subscriptions and details on your local gliding club see the GNZ website www.gliding.co.nz



Above: Lake Pukaki from 15,000 feet. Below: Brakes out to descend.

