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Gliding: Not a solitary sport

Contributed by Jill McCaw

GLIDING seems like a solitary sport. Most privately owned gliders are single-seaters. The pilot is up there, alone in the big blue sky, working his way from one lift source to the next, searching for the elusive invisible energy in the air. It is the ideal sport for those who enjoy their own company, relying on themselves and their own skills. But if you assume that gliding means solitary, then you're only partially correct.



Many hands make light work. Putting a glider to bed at the end of the day.

With the rare exception of self-launching gliders, of which yes, there are a fair few around New Zealand, no one can get a glider in the air on their own. The sheer logistics of what is required to go gliding means that many people have to be involved. That's why gliding clubs exist. And of course people that love aircraft enjoy gathering and talking about aircraft. Gliding people are no different. Gliding is actually a very sociable activity.



A timekeeper, two tow pilots, and two keen retrievers, all Club members waiting to help on the airfield

Nearly all gliding activity in New Zealand takes place in clubs and everyone involved in gliding clubs is there voluntarily. All club positions are filled by volunteers and all of these people are necessary to get that solitary pilot into the air.

Who exactly am I talking about? Who is needed to get a glider airborne?

The tow pilot and his aircraft are probably the most obvious example you can think of. Tow pilots are often enthusiastic power pilots gaining more air time. Or they're just a really keen aviation nut, fly gliders themselves and enjoy flying from both ends of the rope. In New Zealand we also use winches to launch gliders, hurling them into the air like a bungy jump in reverse. Winch drivers don't need the expensive training and ratings of the power pilot who flies the plane, but they do still need training. A winch launch happens really fast and there are huge numbers of things that can go wrong. Well trained winch drivers minimise these risks. Who trains the winch drivers? Other experienced winch drivers. Who are these people? Gliding club members.



A first solo brings out many people and buckets of water.

How do you learn to fly a glider behind a tow-plane or a winch and bring it down again in one piece? You need an instructor of course. Who are the instructors? In this country they are voluntary club members. With very few exceptions, no one in this country is paid to instruct. Who trains the instructors? Other voluntary, more experienced instructors. While the system may be voluntary, don't worry, requirements for ratings, practical training and assessment are all first class, audited, and overseen by CAA.

So we've got tow pilots or winch drivers and instructors. That's not all the people we need. There will be a club member who runs your wing, someone taking their turn as the day's duty pilot organising ground marshalling on the airfield, a time keeper,

someone spending their evenings keeping the accounts, still others doing the president, treasurer, and secretary roles of all committees. Then there will be an engineer for the gliders and other equipment, many club members who give up their time to maintain the aircraft and the club's other facilities, hangars and clubrooms, mowing airfields etc. If you've wandered into a gliding club you've entered a community of like-minded individuals all working together so that when they get a chance they can go flying into the wide blue yonder.

New comers will be expected to do their bit too. Time keeping, running wings, hooking gliders onto tow cables, pushing aircraft off the airfield on landing. All of these are jobs a newbie can do with little training. But don't worry, it's not arduous and for some people it is this community involvement that helps make it all worthwhile. There is a great deal of talking involved with hanging around on airfields and helping others while waiting for your turn to fly.

If you like flying and you like talking about flying, a gliding club is a great place to be. Of course, in the evening when the flying is done, then the talking about flying moves to a whole new level around the bar and barbeque. Families are welcome to join in and clubs often have away-camps and events that bring everyone together. Gliding may seem to be something you do by yourself, but that is really a misconception. Gliding is a hugely sociable aviation activity. Go out and give it a go at your local club.

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, visit the Gliding NZ website. www.gliding.co.nz

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