

Berwick Life

Thursday, 26th April, 2012

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Gliding grandfather is hitting the heights at the age of 74!

Pensioner Alan Gibson has set a new record as the oldest person to fly solo at Borders Gliding Club in Milfield



Ian Smith

At the age of 74 most grandfathers might be expected to settle down to enjoy the quiet life - but not Alan Gibson who has just won his pilot's wings through Borders Gliding Club.

His feat makes him the oldest person to fly solo since the club was formed in 1969, an achievement made all the more remarkable because he was not expecting, nor intending to go solo at his age.

Indeed, he had already promised his wife, Ella, that he would not give her any cause for concern by trying to fly solo and was perfectly happy to continue his dual training flights with his instructor and to enjoy soaring over the Cheviots, Holy Island and the Northumberland coast, as he does most Sundays.

However, when he completed his normal training flight with veteran flying instructor Phil Marks last Sunday, he was asked why he'd never flown solo before.

Alan had no real answer to that and before he could really think about an excuse, his instructor was climbing out of the rear seat, closing the canopy and giving him some last minute advice on what to concentrate on during his first solo-flight.

As soon as he had gone through his normal pre-flight control checks, the tug aircraft was lined up in front of the glider and the tow-rope was hooked on by willing ground crew.

Seconds later the tug was towing his aircraft across the grass field and lifting into the sky above the River Till near Milfield.

After a flawless take-off, Alan released the tow-line at 2,500 ft above Milfield Hill; as the roar of the tug's engine disappeared from in front of him, he found himself soaring alone in complete silence, bathed in the late afternoon sunshine of a perfect Cheviot day.

It was clear that Alan was finding lift up there in the sky, since his aircraft was not coming down - he was holding his own as he made turn after turn at the end of each mile-long run between Milfield Hill and the River Till.

After 20 minutes or so he made the normal radio call to base, saying that he was turning downwind in the circuit for his final landing approach. His landing was as good as it gets, the



Alan Gibson proudly displays his pilot's wings after making his maiden solo flight from Borders Gliding Club.

aircraft barely kissed the grass as it rolled to a gentle stop and he stepped from the cockpit with the biggest grin on his face.

Alan, from Gosforth, said: "It was the most unbelievable experience and I absolutely loved it, although for a while I couldn't believe I'd done it."

"When I was sitting there in the cockpit waiting to fly solo for the first time I was so nervous but I remembered all the training, managed to find a good thermal and spent an amazing 20 minutes or so up there before landing

safely. "I'm so proud to have got my wings and solo licence at last and can't wait to get back up there this weekend for another go."

Alan first came to Borders Gliding Club in 2007 because his 16 year-old grandson, Chris Francis, wanted to learn to fly gliders.

For many months he was only there as a supportive granddad watching Chris train and eventually fly solo but he soon got caught up in the camaraderie of the club, helping to launch

'It was the most unbelievable experience and I absolutely loved it'

Alan Gibson

gliders, towing aircraft across the field with the tractors, packing the aircraft hangar and enjoying lunch in the clubhouse.

He became such a fixture on the airfield that eventually one of the senior instructors, Alastair Fish, asked him why he did not try a few flights himself, while waiting for his grandson to qualify as a pilot.

Alan took up the offer but assumed that, at his age, he should confine himself to always flying with an instructor in the back seat of the aeroplane.

The club's PR officer, Graham White said: "Alan has set a new club record in being the most senior person ever to qualify as a pilot here."

"We have had many youngsters go solo at 16 - and the average person probably learns to fly in their forties or fifties - but for a senior citizen of 74 to go solo in such style - that is a first for us!"

He added: "The really nice thing is that he will be able to walk into any social gathering wearing his silver wings pin, and when other pensioners ask

him: 'what are those wings for?', he will be able to say, 'oh I just qualified as a glider pilot - it was great fun.'"

It means Alan, who served in the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers and spent 40 years working with Newcastle City Council as a road safety officer and HGV and motorbike driving instructor can now add qualified glider pilot to his CV.

For information about air experience flights, flight training and membership, please visit www.bordersgliding.com

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