

## **Learning to Fly: Episode 1**

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Be careful what you wish for *they* warn, you might just get what you want. So it was I found myself floating 500m about earth, held aloft by an expensive piece of fabric, attached to a few multi-coloured strings. No motor, no reserve - just me in a harness and the wind in my face.

A constant hiker and runner on the Cape's majestic mountains, I often watched these mad defiers of gravity as they launch from cliff edges and soar aloft with effortless ease. I often thought, while watching in admiration, it was something I'd like to do; how cool it must be to glide like an eagle, to go as far as a human can without an engine.

But it was about as high on my priority list as hunting lion with Kenya's Masai, moreover, it can come pricey; especially when it comes to buying gear. It didn't make sense to complete a flying course and then not be able to fly for lack of wings. Luckily my younger brother shares no such sensible logic and I soon received a call from him, "Come fly, its amazing."

"What do you mean?" I asked, "Have you flown already. By yourself?" "Of course" he said. It was a question I was to hear a lot in the future; anyway that was all the encouragement I needed. I signed up.

### **The beginning**

Birdmen Paragliding is among the most respected gliding schools in the country and Barry Pederson, pilot, instructor, tandem pilot, para-motorist with nerves of steel (trust me you need them in his line of work) was my instructor.

Off to Dolphin Beach, Table View for some ground handling.

Before you learn to fly you need to learn to take off - not as easy as pushing a throttle and gaining maximum speed until lift-off. No, this requires a multitude of skills needed to handle varying weather conditions.

After a few sessions of ground handling and a few theory lectures, I was declared ready for flight. Haystacks, the then popular training site for students was not quite the gentle sand dune I had imagined, but a rather daunting looking hill high enough to gain some flight and high enough to injure a falling body; this, remember, is all pre-first flight.

### **The Bounce**

In spite of reading the theory of flying and having it explained, (a glider works similar to an aircraft wing, except here you rely on forward motion and the wind to get you airborne) what you must avoid, no matter how tempting or seemingly obvious it is, is to jump on take off. The idea is to inflate your glider, run into the wind and you will lift off. No, I had to jump. The result been I was airborne for about 10 seconds and then slammed into the ground, only to become airborne once more before been unceremoniously dumped on my ass in the bushes. Thinking not for the first time that maybe this wasn't for me, as all around me students successfully launched themselves to land on the green farm fields below. But I am nothing if not a quick or at least determined learner, especially when it comes to learning from the hard knocks. Next effort I trusted the rules of flying and paragliding and successfully lifted off, I flew around the hill and landed nearby. First flight (or at least hop) completed, I might just continue this after all.

### **My first real flight**

Two quite pleasant hops later and Barry suggests we go to Meerendal. Now I'm anticipating a few glasses of cold beer or some of the wine farm's excellent wines, but we were driven to the top of a hill on the property to be greeted with stunning views of Table Bay and Table Mountain in the distance. "Lay out your gliders he told us, conditions are good." Before I knew it I'm no longer watching the other gliders in awe but am sitting comfortably in my harness hundreds of metres above the ground, fresh air rushing past my face as I marvel at the real bird's eye view and the fact that I am actually flying.

I am Icarus, I am the Bird Man of Bantry Bay, the Biggles of my era, a veritable Red Baron (without machine guns or engine). I am free... oops

Paragliding is a big confidence sport and I know it may be a while before I'm completely comfortable up there, but that's part of the challenge. That's what I came to realise soon enough. Paragliding can be simple, but there is a lot to learn and I was clearly no natural pilot.

I was awkward in the air, rather like a fledgling flapping, but going nowhere, not confident on take off, nor in the clipping on of the glider to the harness – reliant on my instructor to make sure. I also was not flying regularly.

This course is not a fortnight's jaunt for a licence. It is an ongoing slog whereby you need at least 35 flights to qualify and then only if your instructor thinks its okay. In my case certainly, it will take 50 or more flights to qualify, but I was in no rush.

### **Porterville**

So six short flights under my harness and its Gatskop time, one of many gatherings of pilots from all over the Western Cape, for a weekend of competitive and social flying.

Porterville also just happens to be 700m above sea level and 450m above landing, way higher than I had flown before. Personally I have more problems with my dodgy technique than worrying about heights. Besides, as paragliders like to say, you want the height, it gives you more time to sort out a problem should it arise. Encouraging stuff and easy for them to say - they carry reserve chutes; no such luxury for students. The logic; Students fly only in gentle weather and shouldn't require a reserve; students might also be prone to throwing the reserve unnecessarily doing more harm than good. Solution: buy your own.

Of course the whole point of paragliding is to fly for as long as possible, to soar along a ridge through a gentle lift band, or join the eagles spiraling upwards in a thermal. Crossing from one mountain range to the next, hopping from one thermal to another, in an endless quest for height.

The possibilities are endless but I in the meantime would just be happy to "foefie" (fly straight down to landing) down to the turkey patch. (A landing area for birds that don't fly). Yes, this flying is for the birds and for those humans who wish to emulate them, paragliding comes pretty close.

With all this going through my mind, it's now time to launch. We had waited two hours for the wind to shift favourably and by that time, it appeared every paraglider and their dog had lined up behind me on take off (students generally launch first when conditions are lighter and the skies not so busy) kind of like teeing off on the first golf hole in front of a packed gallery.

The real pilots were waiting for the 'conditions to be right'. Finally I get the all clear and get airborne without publicly humiliating myself. I fly out and immediately hit some lift which my brother on take off assured me drew a gasp from the crowd who noticing the lift suddenly got eager to get airborne. I floated high above the endless fields of the farmlands, all too soon losing height (unlike those real pilots now circling high above) and landing in the turkey patch. Rather chuffed with my 'little foefie I returned to takeoff and with conditions getting considerably stronger, my flying was done – time to watch the pros in action.

Now flying is one thing and launching is another. Many licensed pilots neglect their ground handling and students who generally practice more can often show them up at take off. Today was a fine case in point, with a tricky cross wind gusting through, these pros were getting blown into the bushes, left, right and centre, some falling flat on their face. I quickly decided never to be concerned about the crowd at take off; this is not about ego but about learning to fly.

With just 12 flights to my name after nearly six months of on and off flying, I was feeling a bit despondent. I hadn't made too much progress, I wasn't flying enough, I couldn't get any momentum and my confidence was lagging. A change of attitude was needed. We decided to start flying as often as possible and to start doing the necessary ground handling.

### **Flying into a tree**

Armed with a fresh determination we vowed to follow the winds wherever they may take us. On one particular Saturday we literally covered the Peninsula in search of some airtime, but were greeted with no wind or wind unsuitable for low airtime pilots. Nothing worse than being grounded while other students (need I say better flyers than I) soar the skies. We landed up doing some ground handling that evening at Dolphin Beach and hoped for better the next day.

8.00am the next morning we were at the top of the Franschoek Pass looking down at the stunning Pear Valley, as the early morning late summer sun lazily lit up the valley. It was still chilly at take-off but the conditions were perfect, I mess up my first attempt at launching and try again. I am up and flying. My instructor sends me along the west ridge, I am feeling comfortable and confident and enjoying the flight, the

views are spectacular and I spot Jean, another student flying up above me. I thought about trying to join him. On my second return back to the area of take-off I notice I am losing some height, now I'm not sure if I was caught up in the rapture of flight, too focused on awaiting instructions rather than flying myself. I'm not sure what it was but it's pretty damned obvious what to do.

If you are flying too close to the cliff or slopes, move out into open air. You don't need to be a combat pilot to know that. No not me, I keep on flying until I realise too late I am going to fly into something. Even then I could have slowed my glider down for a far gentler landing, but no ... I ended with instant "Protea colours" stuck in every inch of my aching body.

Remarkably, considering my inept flying, I emerged unscathed. Ninety minutes later I managed finally to extricate my glider from the bush and face my fellow gliders. The story already part of my history, the lesson was I had got off lightly for a silly mistake. I now take much more control and rely less on the instructions. Trust me though as a student it's great to know your instructor is there to get you out of a tight spot but it is only you flying that wing. The tree survived with a few broken limbs, I survived with a wounded ego.

I have since flown the thermals in Porterville, ridge-soared in Hermanus and cruised the mountains of Sir Lowry's Pass and now sit on a much more comfortable 23 flights. My confidence is higher, my technique better, and my ground handling is improving all the time. My learning curve is still steep but I can now start thinking more about the actual flying, staying in the air, finding the lift, pulling big ears; becoming a pilot.