

SOARING ABOVE ALL DISABILITIES

Adam Hurd looks at the challenges of being a deaf glider pilot and meets an instructor at Dunstable who is forming a team specialising in teaching the deaf

JUMPING into a glider before take-off, you probably don't start your flight by digging around for the rear view mirror. That's unless you're John Donovan, one of the UK's first deaf gliding instructors.

Deafness in gliding isn't wholly uncommon. Not only are there a dozen deaf pilots flying out of the UK, but several like John hold PPLs or are Full Cats.

But for those new to soaring, the first 70 or so flights have an additional challenge to rise above: communication. The good news is that solutions to this are effective, and John told me these solutions are what he and several other Dunstable pilots are starting to raise awareness of.

It's usual for new pilots to learn in tandem seating, but when you rely on lip reading or sign language this means you can't receive any feedback or instructions while you're in the air. You can imagine how big an obstacle this is.

John learned to fly 10 years ago. Now he's the one teaching, he remembers how useful it is to brief and debrief properly: "Briefings aren't as long as they should be. So taking the time to really make sure pilots understand what they're doing or what they've done is hugely useful," he said.

Instructors are taught to brief thoroughly already, but John said: "At gliding clubs an instructor sees people waiting to fly and can get pressurised into getting through lists quickly."

Another belief John holds is the importance of doing the first couple of flights in a motorglider, side by side: "This is really, really important because when you learn something the first ideas always stick. It's important to get things clear at these early stages to avoid bad habits and deaf pilots will learn a lot here, just by observing."

But there are other more imaginative

solutions too. Sat in one of Dunstable's K-21s, John demonstrated how simple ideas like buying a cheap rear view mirror to let pilots see each other can make all the difference: "Part of communication is body language and facial expressions. With the mirror you can pick up a lot more in flight."

And John's not the only deaf pilot keen to make gliding more attractive for others.

Andrew Coats has been deaf since birth and started flying in 1960. Since then, he's enjoyed gliding so much he even built a vintage Weihe in his back garden.

"I think that the sport is great for deaf people," Andrew explained: "It takes you away from the world of disability and you can mix with other club members on an equal basis."

Fifty years on from Andrew's first flight, however, the world of regulations and health requirements can be quite daunting for all disabled pilots.

But, despite this, Andrew said he still enjoys flying and thinks it's a superb sport for deaf people.

"I have had many happy and fulfilling flights over the years, and have enjoyed the camaraderie on the airfield – true I miss out on the club room gossip, but I feel at home on the airfield, and a real part of what is going on."

Another challenge is radio usage.

While most gliding is done outside of controlled airspace, LGC is an exception. Within Luton Class D airspace there are large areas of sky you need constant radio contact to use.

Andrew said: "I was lucky. All those years ago there was very little restricted airspace. You could fly anywhere. You could fly cross-country. Nowadays it's more difficult."

But once again, even with increased radio use, there are ways to cope.

John said: "Not all gliders have radio. If you visit power flying clubs, where radio isn't a legal requirement, they are used quite heavily. What you do is contact them



A cheap rear view mirror can make all the difference to communication (Adam Hurd)

IT TAKES YOU AWAY FROM THE WORLD OF DISABILITY AND YOU CAN MIX WITH OTHER CLUB MEMBERS ON AN EQUAL BASIS



Discussing ways to create a larger deaf community in gliding are (left to right) Rodney Williams (from Camphill) with Dunstable's Yoav Felberbaum, Andrew Coats and John Donovan (Adam Hurd)

beforehand, to say when you'll be coming in and check the facts."

John is developing a network for deaf pilots in the UK. A team for helping deaf pilots, based in Dunstable, is in the making and there have already been get-togethers to share stories and tips and to give air experience flights.

Helping disabled pilots is important to the BGA too, which has good links with groups like Walking on Air and Aerobility.

BGA Chief Executive Pete Stratten said: "We encourage all clubs to get involved with teaching disabled pilots and always provide guidance for our instructors. We see ourselves as an inclusive sport."

Further information and advice on all forms of disabled gliding can be found on the BGA website.

■ **Turn to pages 30 and 31 for more examples of how clubs are helping to ensure that gliding is truly a sport for all.**

> **FEATURE**
SPORT FOR ALL

COMMUNICATION IN A TWO-SEATER FOR DEAF PILOTS

Dunstable's Andrew Coats has developed signals to enable communication between a deaf student and the instructor, such as the signals from the front seat seen here.



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