

COME FLY WITH ME

Deaf and hard of hearing people can fly “NORDO”, or “no-radio”, in the UK. So why not give it a go, asks **Liz Moscrop.**



John Donovan is proof that hearing loss is no barrier to learning to fly. Though profoundly deaf, he holds a pilot's licence and is keen to encourage other deaf people to take to the skies.

Aged 26, John has been flying for half his life. He says: “It was my Dad's influence that got me started. He learned to fly when he was 40. I was 13 then and went on the odd flight with him and then when I was 15 he told me that if I passed my GCSEs with good marks I could have a gliding course. It was a great incentive.”

John is proud of each milestone he has achieved since, particularly his first solo circuit, and his cross-country flights. One of the tests he had to pass was to stay airborne for over five hours. He did this near Banbury in Oxfordshire and achieved five hours and 33 minutes in the air, equipped with sunglasses, sun cream and a hat.

Glider pilots use thermals – warm currents of rising air – to stay aloft. Their skill lies in “reading” the sky. John says: “In the summer on a good day you can fly from around 11 in the morning until six in the evening.”

Each time he achieves a goal with his flying he sets another target. He says: “Every time you do something

new you get that kick again.” Today he holds a National Private Pilot's Licence and a Silver Badge and is studying for his assistant instructor's licence. There are three levels of gliding instructor's licences in the UK and the British Gliding Association (BGA) agreed that John should skip the first and go straight to the second, so he would not have to keep flying with strangers.

Although he will be able to teach anyone, his particular desire is to teach other deaf people to fly, or to teach instructors how to teach deaf people. John's speech is clear and he can hear well with his hearing aids. He is also a fluent signer who can lipread.

John's usual stamping ground is Oxfordshire, at Shenington or Enstone Gliding Clubs. He offered to take me as his passenger in the front seat of a tandem trainer to show me how a lesson would work (since he is still a student instructor he could not legally teach me). After we'd strapped our parachutes on (a safety precaution which John has never seen used) we were winched into the air by a tow truck. It feels like a steep take off, although is actually only the same angle as an ordinary small aircraft.



MAIN PICTURE. Strapped in and ready to fly: would-be instructor John Donovan.

BELOW. John's cockpit view, with the mirror in place that allows him to read the lips of his instructor, Derek Woodforth.



Once airborne, it is beautifully silent, leaving you free to enjoy the sensation of flight and the views around you. To communicate, John placed a small mirror, like a car's rear view mirror, on the canopy in front of me. He could then see what his "pupil" was saying. Most of my words were along the lines of "Isn't this fantastic?" as the day was clear and the scenery around Shenington stunning. John caught a thermal and climbed us up to 1,300ft. It was a blustery day, and he did not want to drift too far from the field, so we stayed airborne for around ten minutes. John then had to grapple with a strong crosswind on the landing area, but that only added to the fun.

Although he could not give me a lesson, he talked me through all the manoeuvres he performed and clearly has the ability to teach, both on a practical and instinctive level as he can communicate well despite his deafness and has a natural gift for instructing.

John's face lights up when he talks of potential gliding challenges. "There are always more goals, distances and targets." His aims are high – very high. Gliders can climb. NASA has taken a glider up to 80,000ft and there

are stories of pilots in Scotland achieving 40,000ft. He would like to go to New Zealand, "the glider pilot heaven", and achieve longer cross-country distances. John can put in practice for this since he owns a two-seater DG505 semi aerobatic cross-country soaring glider.

John's day job is as a mechanical design engineer and he has taken some of his colleagues flying, and he spends his holidays enjoying his passion. In 2006 and 2007 he went to the US to the annual Deaf Pilots Association (DPA) gathering and met 200 other deaf pilots.

The DPA is keen to promote flying to deaf people. As with many forms of aviation, the US offers great opportunities for pilots. Deaf people can fly anywhere where a radio is not required – which in the US means a lot of sky. There are more than 13,000 airports in the United States, and fewer than 700 of them have control towers which require radio contact with pilots. The rest are uncontrolled and accessible to deaf and hard of hearing pilots. Pilots must follow specific procedures when flying into and out of airports as well as in the sky to ensure safe flying.

Matthew Herrman, a DPA board member, is a certified commercial pilot. His licence means that he can fly a small plane, such as a crop duster or skydiver aircraft, which does not require radio contact. He has flown more than 365 different types of plane.

He says: "The challenges of being a deaf pilot are flying



Flying round the world: the Diamond Twin Star with Johan Hammarström at the controls – the first pilot with a severe hearing impairment to complete a world circumnavigation in a light aircraft.

without radio contact, having to watch air traffic all the time, and meeting people who couldn't believe deaf people can be pilots."

There is no reason why a hearing instructor cannot teach a deaf pilot to fly. The DPA website details how one pilot learned by reading his instructor's lips, using flashcards and communicating by written notes. That applied both on the ground and in the air. John believes this is achievable in the UK. He is a fluent signer and says: "I can bridge that gap between hearing instructors who cannot sign and people who only sign."

INFORMATION

The DPA website is a great resource to learn more about flying. The newsletters are packed with information and useful tips. In the Fall 2006 issue, instructor Mel Futrell writes: "I am frequently asked by deaf people and hearing pilots alike, 'How can a deaf person fly without being able to use the radio?'."

"This is an understandable question on the part of the non-pilot who is not aware of flight rules and the role of radio communications in aviation. But for the hearing aviator, familiar with Visual Flight Rules, uncontrolled airports and lost communication procedures, this is a less tolerable transgression. I know people who fly old vintage aircraft that are not equipped with radios (or electrical systems for that matter). Pilots do not seem to ask them how they fly without being able to use the radio. Why does their understanding fall short of the

individual, when it is so readily afforded to the machine? The answer may lie in taking the social stigma out and putting procedure in its place.

"I was once browsing through an aviation forum and came across an avid discussion about the do's and don'ts of flying NORDO [short for "No Radio"]. A submission by Henry Kisor [the deaf American author and flying enthusiast featured in Hearing Concern's *Fanfare* magazine, Spring 2008] caught my eye, and my consideration. 'I'm permanent NORDO,' he said. So: 'They're just Permanent NORDO' is my now patient response to these aviator queries."

The rule in the UK is that if you can hear with aids and prove that you can communicate, the civil aviation authority (CAA) will accept that you could pass their medical so long as you carry a spare set of aids in the cockpit, akin to pilots who wear glasses. If you cannot hear with hearing equipment and cannot use the radio you can still pass a less onerous medical. John says: "You need prior permission to land at airfields in the UK, and technically you should be able to phone in advance and say you have no radio. I can also tell people that I cannot hear very well and make blind calls."

He would not fly solo in "controlled" airspace as he finds the radio too difficult. John often flies long cross-country flights with another hearing pilot and shares the workload, so his co-pilot does the radio calls. He has been on many enjoyable trips this way, including to France.

Johan Hammarström
(right) and co-pilot
Henrik Ejderholm.



France is home to Henri Corderoy du Tiers, president of the French Deaf Aero Club. An active campaigner for deaf pilots, Henri is the European representative to the International Deaf Pilots Association (IDPA) and the International Aircraft Owner and Pilots Association (IAOPA).

He is a private pilot with more than 730 flight hours and an ultralight motorised pilot. He has held an airspeed world record in the light twin-engine aircraft category as a co-pilot, flying a Cessna C310 from Mayotte, Comores to Mombassa, Kenya. In 1988 he filed a lawsuit against the French Medical Advisory Board for taking away his flying licence because of his deafness.

Elsewhere in Europe, Sweden produced the World Flight for Hearing in 2006. This was a unique round the world flight in a light aircraft undertaken by Johan Hammarström, then aged 28 with 1,000 hours in his logbook. Johan, along with Henrik Ejderholm and Martin Håkansson was the first pilot with a severe hearing impairment to complete a world circumnavigation in a light aircraft.

Flying the Diamond Twin Star (DA42) he posted his adventures on his "Expedition Blogs" online. The team set out in March 2006 from Sweden and finished a few months later in August.

The DPA points out that since aviation started, deaf and hard of hearing people have flown aircraft solo. Cal Rodgers was the first deaf pilot, who flew from New York to California in 1911. The Wright brothers trained

him. The world's first deaf female pilot was Nellie Zabel Willhite from Yankton, South Dakota, who got her licence in 1928.

Back here, John Donovan is keen to hear from deaf people who would like to try gliding. He says: "I want to set up a group for deaf pilots in the UK." He has contacted the British Disabled Flying Association, which will put him in touch with other deaf aviators and invites any deaf people who are interested in learning to fly to contact him on jtdono@googlemail.com

❖ *Liz Moscrop is the author of "The 100 Greatest Women in Aviation" – inspirational stories of people who have flown against all odds. Published by www.aerocomm.aero, it costs £19.99 including P&P but if you mention this article when ordering the price will be £15.*

❖ *Especial thanks also to Alan Peaford, flying fanatic and all round good egg, who helped to get this feature off the ground (apeaford@aerocomm.co.uk).*

USEFUL WEBSITES:

- ❖ www.worldflightforhearing.com
- ❖ <http://deafaviator.blogspot.com/2007/11/welcome-deaf-pilots.html>
- ❖ www.volez.com/aeroclub-sourds/GB/index.html
- ❖ www.deafpilots.com