

Maxing Out

As my feet gently touch the earth I feel as though I am one with the life force of the planet. I hear smell and see things on a scale that most humans will never understand. The faint rustle through the grass greets my senses as the last breaths of the evening sea breeze are pulled inland before being exhaled out again. If only this heightened state would stay with me.

Slowly other noises start to tear down my sanctuary, metal objects zoom and rumble as they carry their load of impatience and despair down streets of blackness. I lose the rhythm of the earth that has stayed with me for the last 7 hrs and rejoin a part of a world that is becoming more alien to me each time I return.

I gently release my grip on the glider and step out of my cocoon. Stretching out I begin to circulate blood back into my toes then legs, taking unsteady steps like that of a new born foal. My wings of autonomy are slowly disassembled. I become that which is born of the land and I am struck by a sudden awareness. This horse needs a drink.

Making my way to the local pub to await my pick up I begin to reflect on what will undoubtedly be one of the most memorable days of my life.

The Day Begins

It's 8:30am on a beautiful Saturday morning. White cotton wool is starting to paint the sky, there is a firm 10 – 15 knots of south easterly freshness transpiring through the tops of the trees and I am heading up Beechmont with one thing in mind. Flying.

It had been three weeks since my last flight in Manilla. I thought briefly of the time there and how I had managed to write off my Xtralite crashing into the side of the mountain whilst launching into rotor. Funny how things like comps can cloud your mind and the need to get into the air outweighs the need to make sensible decisions so that you can stay alive. The need for going further and faster becomes more important than the journey itself and the pure joy of just being able to soar like a bird evaporates into a steam of confusion.

The radio cackles into life and the muffled sound of Jonnys voice plays over the airwaves. "Shit he can't be in the air already" I say out loud pushing the accelerator down on the car, but something seems to be stopping it, stupid floor.

Arriving at launch it would appear that things from mars must be materializing in the sky as all eyes are looking skyward. I pull at the tie downs and get my Max off the car.

"Jonny's going over the back" someone cry's out as I eagerly stuff battens into the sail.

More and more people start to turn up, gliders are brought to life and the hill begins to energize with a chaotic euphoria. Today would be big. I do a final check of the glider before stepping into my harness and like a warrior about to do battle with the evil forces of gravity I don my helmet. The line up is already four deep by the time I lift my wing into position, nevertheless like seagulls flocking to discarded food we launch swiftly hoping to catch the thermal marked out by our winged friends.

My worldly thoughts dissolve replaced by a single focus, to fly. Wing levels, nose down and into wind, feel the energy.

"Clear!"

Four strong strides and I become airborne. My landing gear tucks up into my harness and as I leave the world I was born in I enter the one I was born for.

Making a pass to the left of launch I climb steadily in the 15 knot breeze. On my return pass, 600ft above launch, I can see a gaggle of three others climbing. I arrive about 400ft below them and start to climb in 2's and 3's waiting for the thermal to kick in to something bigger. However it starts to fade and as I am drifting over the back at only 2600ft I decide to leave the lift and punch back out to the front.

Looking down I can see more seagulls taking flight to join in the feeding frenzy. One after the other they launch slowly making their way up to me. I watch intently, hoping to find some strong lift to take me on my journey only to see them climb through me.

Frustration creeps in and I start to loose the feel and listen to the vario as it resonates a sad note. The picturesque view of the mountains and the sea go unnoticed as my grip tightens and I snap my head back and forth looking for another marker. One by one pilot's disappear over the back leaving me cursing my stupid mistake in Manilla leaving me to fly this slow glider.

"If only I had a topless I would kick their butts!" I hear myself thinking aloud.

Feeling like a ground dwelling mutant I head back out the front and contemplate landing when a strange feeling comes over me. It's as though I am being watched, no, studied. Hmm maybe those spectators were looking up at beings from another planet after all. The feeling grows to be so intense that I start to look around everywhere for little silver space ships.

I know what you're thinking at this point and let me assure you that I have never flown under the influence of any drug other than that created by my own body and yet to this day I find it hard to describe the feeling that I felt at that moment.

Where were we? Ah yes, little silver space ships. So there I was frantically searching the skies as this feeling grated at my senses like an itch you can't scratch, stronger and stronger infusing itself into my mind body and soul. When all of a sudden the glider lurched to the right as if rocked by a giant hand, the vario started to scream at me like a thousand crickets chirping at once.

This was no space ship but a rocket ship of wonderfully super heated air and as I shifted all my weight over to the left hand side of the A-frame, I smiled, for finally I had my ticket out of hear.

Cloud base was the next stop and at 1000ft per minute it did not take long to arrive. The dome of the cloud was looming and I made my exit before getting to close. Scanning the horizon I saw that there were a bunch of white sails cruising like sharks along the ridge at Hinchcliffes. I was at 4500ft when I left Beechmont and I decided to not waste any time and headed for the gathering mass at Hinchey's. I pulled in on the bar and decided that I could afford to loose height in order to make up some time and besides those on the ridge were bound to find something just in time for me to jump on in.

The 20 knot wind behind me took me swiftly across the valley and even though I was getting drilled in 700ft down I could see some gliders slowly climbing out just in front and below me.

"Too easy!" I thought as I swooped down to join them.

I started to think of my next move from hear and if I was going to be able to make Boonah today. As I was about to join in on the thermal the glider lurched forward and down throwing me off course and I had to abort and turn around for another go. I made a slow arc as two pilots climbed up at the same height and waited for them to pass. Getting in underneath them I managed to find some resemblances of a core but this baby was going to be one rough ride.

Shannon, one of the pilots who were above me seemed to be screaming up and I started to become unnerved again.

"Shannon you copy"

"Shannon you copy" I repeated trying to get an answer, why he was able to fly better than me in this broken, surging lift.

"Yeah Monks" came the reply.

"How the hell are you climbing so well this is as rough as guts for me?" I replied

"Yeah it's a bit gnarly gets better up higher though"

Unfortunately I was being hammered and I felt like I was riding in an elevator under the control of a baby. Frustration engulfed me once again and I started to get annoyed.

"What is wrong with me?" I questioned myself.

"Have I forgotten how to fly?"

I was drifting rapidly over the plateau of Hinchey's and getting to the point of no return for punching back to the bomb out, when that feeling of being watched came back to me like a sickening blow to the stomach. Time seemed to slow, for how long I could not tell, seconds maybe minutes. The only sound I could hear was the sound of my own laboured breathing. I began to search all around for something I was sure was there.

Suddenly I saw what had been watching me. There beside me at an arms length flew the most amazing eagle I have ever seen. Its perfectly coloured wing tips moved ever so slightly feeling any slight change in the air and as I looked into the blackness of its eye I began to drown in a sea of emotions. Guilt swept through me and my eyes began to water. I felt a need to be on the ground like never before as unworthiness washed over me and still I could not divert my eyes from peering into the blackness of truth.

Like I said I don't know how long it lasted, but when the messenger peeled off from under my wing and disappeared I knew the question I should have asked myself.

It was not a matter of me forgetting how to fly but rather a matter of forgetting why. Not the physics of flying but simply the spirit of it. The happiness of just leaving the ground I had lost. How could I take something so pure that gave me so much joy and twist it to something that became a frustration?

"Never again!" I vowed out aloud.

I regained my bearings and thought to go and land at Hinchey's bomb out were I would re-evaluate my priorities. On the way I hit a

little bubble and decided to have a play for a bit of fun after all I had already resigned to landing. I felt the glider breathe through my hands telling me everything that was happening in the surrounding air whispering to me what it wanted. I can only describe it to be not unlike the feeling of hunger when your stomach says feed me. My senses seemed to take hold of what was important and fear was no longer apart of me. Fear of landing, fear of failure, fear of not going far, or high. It no longer existed within me.

I started to feel coolness and realised that I was approaching base again which had now lifted to around 6000ft. So much for landing I thought. I decided to go over Witherin and perhaps land in the Kerry. I just needed to think about what had just happened and digest my new found happiness.

"Fatboy copy Monks over" I blurted on the two way.

"Yeah Monks I am on the deck in the Kerry near the chicken sheds"

"Ok I might come down and join you" I replied.

"Cool mate it's about 5 – 10 se on the deck." He said very enthusiastically.

Wow this was awesome, flying around without a care in the world. I made it out to Shannon at 5000ft and started to do a few wing overs. I was just so happy to be in the air. After some fun I looked down and realised that I hadn't lost much height I looked at the vario which was now reading 5500ft. And the vario was ticking slowly at 300ft up. I looked around and noticed I was on the edge of a massive cloud street that stretched out past Beaudesert and off into the distance.

"Um Shannon you copy Monks over" I asked slowly.

"Yeah mate where are you" Came the reply.

"Well I might just go and check out this cloud street and see what it does"

"Ok mate have fun" he replied a little less enthusiastically.

So off I set again pulling the bar in to remain underneath the cloud street keeping a constant reading of 5600ft on the altimeter. The wind across the ground must have picked up too around 20knts as the max was starting to average 75kms an hour ground speed and Beaudesert was coming up fast.

"Hey Monks are you coming down here to land or what" Shannon blurted on the radio.

As I approached Beaudesert and stared out at what seemed an endless cloud street I gave the only reply a pilot could give.

“Sorry mate I am going flying”

To Be Continued.....