

From Kensington to Kevin

It's a long way from a child looking longingly at aircraft in the Science Museum to having a PPL (G) of your own. Sam Palmer tells us how he managed it.

As a boy I had all the usual interests, including one other, a fascination with flying. I read no end of books of daring deeds of man and machine, and constantly visited the Science Museum in Kensington to see the old planes there.

My favourite one of all was a Cierva C30 autogyro. A flying machine that could not stall, was apparently so safe and easy to fly that well over 500 had been built and flown, in over 25 countries from the 1930s to the start of World War II, without a single fatality.

With envy and frustration at not living in the USA, I read DIY articles in *Popular Mechanics* on building gyrocopters from screwed together 2x4 and plywood that even an idiot could fly from their backyard.

As an adult the dreams and the interest grew, but life got real, you know what I mean...

Two years ago, the mortgage paid off and the kids grown up enough to look after themselves, the realization dawned that if I didn't stop dreaming of being 007 and do it for real, I was more likely to kick the bucket from old age, than die in the attempt. After all, you only live once.

OK, so where to start? I think a trip to Henstridge and some lessons with Tony Melody are in order.

Day one. I arrived early on a gloriously hot spring Sunday morning, raring to get going.

I found Tony and the boys slowly getting into gear, drinking coffee and tinkering with the paperwork. After a long fascinating day drinking coffee and watching the boys expertly wheel-balancing their gyros along the runway over and over again, the time finally came for my trial lesson. Strapped into the RAF 2000, Tony talked through the procedures.

This was it, a lifetime of waiting, we were off like a love-sick angel into the sunset.

'You have control,' says Tony, as I grasp the stick even harder. Was that me or the stick shaking? A couple of circuits, moving the stick this way and that and we throttle back to land. The stick gyrates wildly in my hand as the machine is wrestled to the ground, giving me the sensation of stirring porridge in a giant mixing bowl. Tony assures me that it is I that landed the beast. I climb out on wobbly legs, utterly stirred but not shaken in my belief that I have been to heaven.

The following weeks flew by as one lesson after another failed to materialize. There were days when I made the 3h drive down to Somerset on the off chance of a lesson, for nothing to happen at all. What with bad weather days, the gyro undergoing repairs, Tony not being at the airfield and myself not being able to make it. In all, I managed to fit in one more

half-hour lesson as the summer disappeared faster than it has taken to write this.

This flying lark was just not working out. What was I going to do? Perhaps I should buy a single-seat machine and join the other lads at Henstridge and become a wheel-balancing Johnny, condemned by fear never to depart terra firma? Could I really justify buying a machine, am I really this committed or mad? No, two-seat lessons seemed the only way to go, but of course there was the vexed question of what to do when I went solo.

Perhaps three or four weeks in Carlisle with Chris Jones were in order? But it all seemed to be a big leap in time and commitment and frankly I was finding it all very hard to justify to the wife. Perhaps I could find another instructor nearer at hand that could fit me in on a regular basis?

But no such luck. My choice of instructors was limited to two: one without a suitable two-seat machine →



Sam Palmer (PIC) with Kevin Robinson in their jointly owned VPM M16 G-ODPJ, arriving at RNAS Yeovilton

→ to fly, the other with a VPM but without an engine, who would be happy to teach me when the machine was flying again, whenever that might be. He suggested that it might be quicker to go away and get a fixed-wing licence, and then come back to him to do a conversion course.

I decided that doing a fixed-wing course would perhaps indeed be a good way to get started. Finding a microlight school within easy driving distance was no problem, there were so many to choose from. I chose a club flying an EV-97 Eurostar, a three-axis all-metal plane of Czech manufacture, a 1.5h drive away in Cambridge. Arranging lessons could not have been easier, if the weather was OK on the day you wished to fly, you could.

My first few lessons were a revelation. Flying the plane seemed simplicity itself. On the take-off run the plane tracked effortlessly in the direction it was pointing, lifting gently into the air with no hint of torque and plenty of time to set the trim for the correct climb. The controls were so light, the trim so effective that flying straight and level was all too easy, landing seemed as simple as pointing the plane at the runway.

Just as I was beginning to see that this could all get a little bit boring, my saviour came along in the shape of Kevin Robinson, at RAF Benson. Kevin had just completed his gyroplane instructor (AFI) training and was looking for a committed (I should be) gyronut to teach from start to finish. I quit the fixed-wing flying taxi lessons and waited patiently for a few more weeks to pass as Kevin sorted out acquiring a suitable two-seat machine for training on. (A VPM very kindly loaned from Tony Wilks).

It was on a cold November day when I turned up at the imposing military base in the depths of Oxfordshire, where Kevin worked as a police sergeant in helicopter support, that finally I was to have my first proper lesson.

With Kevin in the back and myself strapped firmly in the front of the VPM, he put me through my paces. Taxiing the miles to the runway, the gyro weaved drunkenly from side to side, as I tried desperately to remember which legs to push. Kevin in the back was barking out orders to keep the stick forward as my puny muscles wilted with the exertion.

On take-off the gyro carried down the runway in anything but the direction it was pointing – I was arm wrestling the stick to the left to control the torque as the gyro tore into the air. Picturing where to land was akin to imagining being a flying brick being dropped at speed from 500ft, as one pulled back on the stick desperately to brake the fall. This gyro flying was hard work; fixed-wing flying was nothing compared to this. This was fun.



The C30: one of the dream machines that inspired Sam as a kid

For Christmas my children thoughtfully gave me a present of a set of dumb-bells to strengthen my nowadays underused right arm.

Over the following months Kevin drilled me in the finer techniques of flying, such as landing. Apparently the best way to describe landing a gyroplane is to imagine a large hawk landing on a fence post. The nose is kept down until reasonably close to the ground and then brought up gradually, trying to time the drag build-up with the rate of closure with the ground. Needless to say my landings were more akin to Eddie the Eagle's.

With the lessons growing in number and my bank balance diminishing, there came the fantastic opportunity to purchase with Kevin the gyro from Tony. What with no hangarage or landing fees at Benson, was this the answer to my solo future?

So with the blessing of the wife (and my promise of undying love and a holiday on a health farm), I emptied the remainder of my bank balance and became the proud part-owner of G-ODPJ. A gyro that by now had become a tried and trusted friend, having survived my every attempt to trash it. Including taking off at various times with the pre-rotator engaged, the choke on or the rotor brake on.

My inability to follow a checklist (due to advancing senility?) was a real problem. Every week was an adventure. If something could go wrong then it did. Practice engine failures turned into the real event. A flapping radiator hose that burnt through on touching the exhaust, losing the coolant and forcing us to abandon the gyro at Abingdon army camp for the night. For Kevin and myself this was all a steep learning curve.

Oh yes! There was the other incident (you have probably heard of it by now, as Kevin's been telling everyone). It just so happened I was getting bored hanging around on my own as Kevin flew off for a lesson with a fellow student. I decided that it might be instructive to stroll over to the flight line and watch the take-off. It was only as I ambled across the grass did it slowly dawn on me that the runway was so much further than I thought and that wandering around in the open on a highly sensitive military base was perhaps not such a good idea.

As I hurried back, a jeep sped towards me. Out jumped two squaddies, my protestations that I was not a terrorist in disguise fell on deaf ears as I was promptly driven off at gunpoint for interrogation. Needless to say it all ended OK, with me being told off for leaving my pass in the car and Kevin getting a bollocking for allowing his student to be so stupid.

One of the things I found difficult to do, when practising and concentrating hard on flying, was being visually aware of my surroundings. On more than one occasion while flying and on the lookout for an airfield, I have heard Kevin barking in my ears to look down or left or right, only to find I had been flying over it all along.

The day dawned 14 months on from the start of training with Kevin, that the gods Kevin, Tony Melody, weather, the gyro and myself finally got together for my day to go solo.

After a quick flight with Tony to check me out it was time to go it alone. I strapped the ballast and myself in the front of the gyro, trying not to be nervous as I imagined that my guardian angel (Kevin) was sitting in the back barking his orders at me to keep the stick back/forwards, and remember my checks etc.



Passing out drinks: (l-r) Kevin Robinson, Sam Palmer, Tony Melody

I flew my three circuits as told to and an extra one for good measure, as I had lost count in the excitement. I can honestly say I found the experience exhilarating and not at all hard. I had been trained well.

During the following weeks Kevin flew with me to distant airfields to practise cross-country navigation and also for good measure night flying when coming back late after one too many cups of tea at a far-off strip (thank God for runway landing lights).

We also practised our low-flying skills while flying into a nasty bank of very low-level rain clouds, prompting weeks of speculation on <www.pprune.org/forums/show-

thread.php?t=252101> of the identity of the UFO that was spotted flying out of the murk near Aylesbury. They never did guess. My cross-country solo trips to Terwestone and Enstone went well, apart from a great fear of getting lost and a small hitch of not being able to see the screen on the radio when coming back in failing light from Enstone, which had me circling for some time twiddling the knob not knowing if I had Benson zone, tower or ground selected.

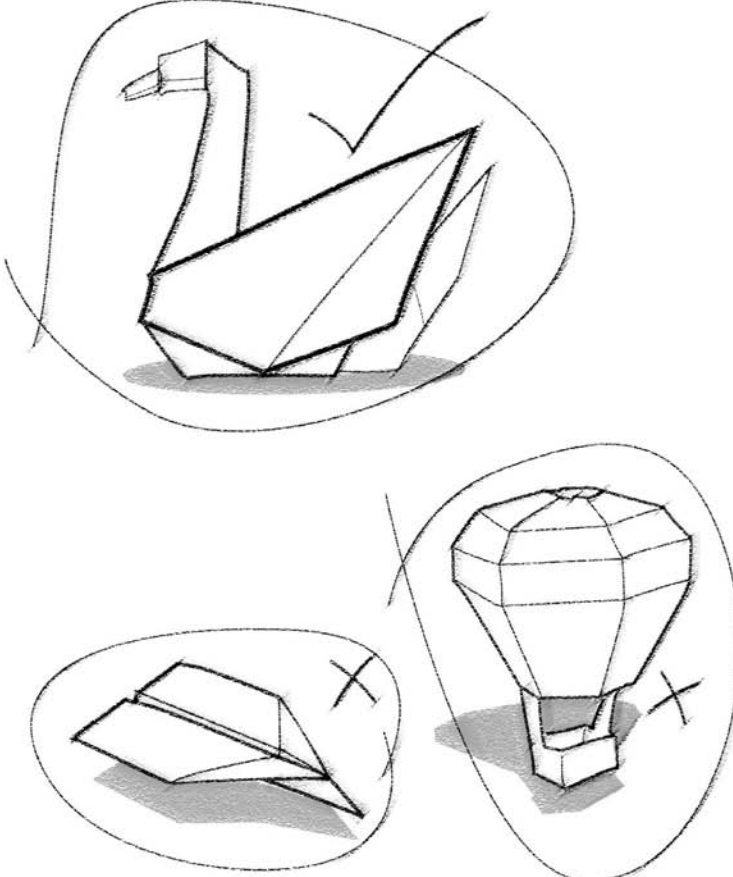
Finally I gave up and called blind for a downwind join. Luckily Kevin, who at this stage was beginning to think me lost, had gone to the tower and had the insight (he knows me well) to suggest that they listen in for me on all the three frequencies, and sure enough, there I was, forlornly calling my downwind call over and over again into the ether.

We moved the radio to a more visible position after that. Having to use the RT at Benson while having so much going on when learning is hard on the concentration, but puts one in good stead when finally on one's own in the big blue yonder.

In no time at all I had completed all my required solo hours and the big day finally arrived when Tony Melody once more dutifully turned up at Benson to put me through my paces for my GFT. Tony was so laid back that the test was a pleasure and a simple formality. A quick hand shake all round and I had passed my PPL (G) with flying colours.

In all it had taken me 72h over a period of 18 months, cost me a small fortune and had been worth every penny. I have made many friends in the process and cannot thank Kevin enough for all his hard work and for putting up with me for so long. His voice in my head will always be a constant companion looking out for me on my travels to come.

GF



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