

“Turned a Whiter Shade of Pale!” - Jim

Kenley Aerodrome, Surrey, summer of 1967.

RAF Kenley had been one of the home defence airfields for London, and had seen heavy action in the Battle of Britain. An airfield full of history, but at the time of this episode, a focus for the Air Training Corps, or the Air Cadets, as they are now known.

574 Sqn ATC was based at Caterham School, and my brother and I were both active members of the Squadron, through which, we had learned to drill (not very well), to shoot 0.22 and 0.303 rifles at targets (quite well) and to compete successfully at both swimming and cross-country running. We were now embarked on learning to fly gliders, which at 16 and still at school, was a thrill.

The gliders we flew were either the Slingsby T21 Sedbergh, or the Slingsby T31 Cadet Mk 3, otherwise known as a Tandem Tutor. These gliders were launched on a cable, using a powerful winch, which would generally deliver a launch height of about 800 ft above the upwind end of the airfield. It must be stressed that this was not the high-tech, carbon fibre, digitally instrumented gliding of today.



Both the Sedbergh and the Cadet had open cockpits and strut-braced high wings. They were made of wood, covered with silver-doped fabric and had a strong tendency to sink rather than to soar. As a result, the flying would perhaps consist of four 5-minute single circuits spread out through the whole of the day, with the rest of the day spent manoeuvring gliders around, helping to retrieve them, or signalling to the winch driver using a large DayGlo bat to indicate that the glider was ready to launch.

But one should not get the wrong impression. The pace of the flying might not have been

great, but this was the very first opportunity to control an aircraft in the air. To sit in the cockpit, giving the command ‘Take up Slack’, and waiting with tension increasing, just like the tension in the cable as the winch slowly straightened it out. Then ‘All Out !’ and the glider would leap forward, becoming airborne almost instantly. This was indeed a thrill.

The climb on the winch was steep, and airspeed was kept quite low, at perhaps 45 kt. The cable had a 1000lb weak link, which actually meant plenty of tension was available to provide the necessary climb rate. As one neared the top of the climb, the glider would flatten out – this was the time to lower the nose to take tension off the cable, and pull the release, and float quietly off the top of the launch into what would almost invariably be a simple circuit back to land.



The two types of glider were similar in having low performance, but were actually somewhat different to fly. The Sedbergh had side-by-side seating, and was affectionately known as ‘the Barge’. It really was capable of flight at extraordinarily low speeds. I distinctly remember floating along in one in later years, working the ridge at Nympsfield at an indicated airspeed of less than 30 kts. This was achieved by a magnificently thick and quite highly cambered wing, which delivered the extraordinary low-speed performance, but at the expense of high drag.

The Cadet was angular where the Sedbergh was curvaceous. It had tandem seats (with the instructor behind the student), a much thinner wing, braced by twin parallel struts each side, these in-turn being braced by wires. Compared to the Sedbergh, it seemed to me to have little to offer in the way of advantage. True, it did tend to fly a little faster, probably because of a smaller wing area, but with extra

struts and wires, and a more angular fuselage, it certainly came down just as fast. Additionally, it was a noisier aircraft, partly because of the wind noise from the wire bracing, but also because the instructor tended to shout - a lot. Another abiding memory is just how painful ice crystals can be when striking one's unprotected face in the open cockpit of one of these gliders.

With the hindsight of later years as a pilot of that particularly well-harmonised aeroplane, the Chipmunk, the flying qualities were fairly peculiar. Apart from the high drag, which meant that all the flights were short, both of the gliders had fairly simple ailerons; high rolling inertia due to the large wings; and (by powered aircraft standards) relatively ineffective rudders, due to low speed and the absence of propwash.

Turning the aircraft 90 degrees to proceed round the circuit would involve simultaneously applying a fair amount of aileron, accompanied by a very big push on the rudder, and a lowering of the nose to maintain airspeed. What was happening was very significant aileron drag, which had to be overcome by coarse use of the rudder. The nose had to be lowered as the additional aileron and rudder drag could slow the aircraft noticeably in the turn.

Once late downwind, the aircraft would be turned crosswind on to base leg, and then into wind for the finals. Paradoxically, I remember the final approach as being the highest speed segment of the flight. The airbrakes would be opened, and the nose pushed firmly down to achieve an approach speed which was significantly higher than any other point of the flight (60 kt).

After landing, one would be picked up by a Land Rover towing a Trailer onto which the glider could be mounted for the short trip back to the launch point.

The day of this anecdote was, as it happened, the day of my first solo. Really, it was the ideal day for flying. A clear, sunny summer day, with light winds, and just a scattering of puffy cumulus to indicate that in higher performance gliders, it would be a good day for soaring.

In the event, I was sent off with strict instructions to simply fly round the circuit and land. And to watch out for the climb rate, which would be higher because the glider was lighter. Since this was the Cadet, with its tandem seating, there wouldn't be any noticeable change in drag.

The flight went fine. Probably the scariest part was giving the 'All Out!' command. Once that was given, everything happened quickly, and pretty much automatically. Up the climb, speed was good. Don't forget to lower the nose – pull the release, pick up the flying attitude and take stock. All quiet – no instructor shouting from the back; height a little more than usual because of the lighter weight.



Turn cross-wind, extending slightly because of the extra height. Down the downwind leg – no real checks. The normal power ones would be 'Brakes off – no brakes'; Undercarriage down – no undercarriage, just a fixed skid'; 'Mixture rich, Magnetos both, Carb Heat to hot – no engine'; 'Fuel on and sufficient – no fuel'; 'Hatches and Harness – no canopy, just check the straps'. Then, probably the only critical decision, pick the right point to turn base leg, and turn smoothly on to finals. Airbrakes out, nose down to pick up the approach speed, flare, hold, and bump, we're down.

After landing, hold the aircraft wings level with the ailerons until the pick-up trailer arrives, and then back to the launch point.

After my first solo, I relaxed on the grass in the sunshine, listening to a transistor radio playing in the background. But then I realised something unusual was happening. Everyone was standing up to watch the Sedbergh going up on the launch. When I asked what was up, I understood why everyone was watching.

Unbelievably, an attempt was to be made to see if it was possible to loop the Sedbergh, not just once, but three times from a maximum effort 1000 ft launch. And not solo, with a cadet on board as well as the instructor. The Barge floated sedately off the top of the wire, immediately turned downwind, and then the nose went right down – and up she sailed for the first loop. Over the top, steeply down to pick up speed for the next – up and over again. Now noticeably lower, down with the nose, pick up speed, up and up and stopping, rotating round into a stall turn, vertical for a moment, then a quick aileron turn onto base leg, short finals, and overhead to land.

A few moments of calm, as the glider was picked up on the trailer and brought back. In the quiet, I noticed the radio playing a new, immediately striking, number. As the shaken cadet emerged from the Land Rover, I heard, for the very first time, the inimitable Procol Harum words 'that her face at first just ghostly, turned a whiter shade of pale'.

Absolutely the perfect end to a perfect day.

Post Script: My first solo was on 11 May 1967, the day before Whiter Shade of Pale was released in the shops. I had heard a pre-release promo played on the radio – possibly the first time the record was aired.