

Wheels up!



Since 1999, a group of dedicated volunteers have worked hard to establish Wheelies With Wings, a programme using flight training to show people with disabilities what they can achieve. We look at a very different and important aviation endeavour.

IT'S A COLD DAY in Cooma in south-eastern NSW, colder still at my destination, the airport, 15 kilometres further south. The rain was turning to sleet as I arrived and the forecast over the ranges was for snow showers throughout the day.

I had travelled to Cooma and then Temora to participate in a very different aviation event – the graduation of three students from the Wheelies With Wings (WwW) scholarship programme. Wheelies With Wings was established in 1997 to give people with disabilities experience in learning to fly and for the two weeks leading up to my visit, this group of three students had lived through the highs and lows of their first 12 hours of flying training.

“The purpose of Wheelies With Wings is not to teach people to fly,” explains WwW chairman David Clegg, “it’s about putting an emphasis on ‘ability’ and providing people with disabilities the opportunity to see for themselves what they can achieve.”

“All of our participants love the flying. They find it challenging and exhilarating. But at the end of the course the most important thing they take away is that sense of achievement and an understanding of what they can accomplish. They leave the programme thinking that if they can fly an aircraft, they can do anything.”

In Cooma the cloud was hanging low over the airport and there was a sense of frustration in the

Main pic: The face of Wheelies With Wings – Suzi Duncan – preflights the Saratoga.

Below: No limits: the hand control designed by Suzi Duncan for disabled pilots can be fitted to any single-engined Piper aircraft like the Saratoga she is flying here. It can be installed or removed in minutes.



air. This was the last day of training and the three students were keen to finish their flying before heading for Temora in the afternoon. There, a ‘wings’ ceremony had been planned for them to coincide with a fly-in by the Rotary Club of Australia’s Flying Rotarians group.

Wheelies With Wings has traditionally offered scholarships to people with lower-body disabilities such as paraplegia, polio or spina bifida. The key to the WwW scholarship programme enabling people with such disabilities to take control of an aircraft is the modification of the aircraft – typically a Piper Cherokee – to include a hand control, a centrally-mounted lever which enables pilots to operate the rudder by hand.

The hand control was conceived by Suzi Duncan, a commercial pilot and flying instructor based in Melbourne who contracted polio as a child. As a result of her polio, Suzi’s mobility is dependent on a



wheelchair or crutches. I met Suzi in Temora the next day and heard her story, one of extraordinary achievement in aviation and other walks of life.

The inclement weather at Cooma gave me a chance to meet the students and hear their stories and, as I found out, each was very different.

ANNETTE'S STORY

Annette Mawson lives in Melbourne where she works with TAFE. Born with spina bifida, she is confined to a wheelchair. Whilst the WwW scholarship gave Annette her first experience as a pilot, she has had an interest in aviation for some time: "I became interested in flying through my partner and his involvement in the RAAF cadets. I had been to see lots of flying displays but that was the extent of my involvement in aviation. When I saw a story about Wheelies With Wings in a magazine, I applied for a scholarship immediately."

In the two weeks at Cooma, Annette had completed her 12 hours of flying under the WwW scholarship. In that time she experienced the full spectrum of emotions that all new pilots go through in their first few hours of training. >>>

Below: Student Steve Andolfi departs with his instructor for some circuits under grey Cooma skies.



Below: The students and their instructor at the end of their two-week training course in Cooma. Left to right: Matty Brumby, instructor James Perham, Annette Mawson and Steve Andolfi.

"My first time at the controls was nerve-racking," she recounts. "There was so much to pay attention to and I had a crisis of confidence at first. I had very mixed feelings about the whole experience but after about three hours I settled into it. Over the 12 hours we've covered effects of controls, straight and level flight, turns, climb and descent, stalls, circuits and steep turns. It's been pure enjoyment and it's given me a great sense of achievement. There are so many priorities in life but I would love to continue my training and finish my licence.

"The hand-control takes some getting used to and the workload with our right hand is high as we have to use it to control the throttle and rudder simultaneously," Annette says. "I found the throttle in the aircraft needed some attention too, as it requires opposite movements to the hand throttle in my car to produce the same effect. I would have to say that landing is the most challenging aspect of flying for me overall."

STEVE'S STORY

Steve Andolfi's story is a little different to most WwW scholarship recipients in that he has no physical disability. Like Annette, Steve travelled from Melbourne to join the two week training programme in Cooma. When I arrived he was somewhat distracted. Having completed around 10.5 hours of training, Steve was hoping to finish his last hour and a half before he and the others departed

for Temora in the afternoon. With the weather maintaining its unfriendly presence, it seemed unlikely that he would get airborne that day to complete the training.

For as long as he could remember Steve had been interested in aviation and had always held an ambition to gain his pilot's licence. In 1992 Steve was involved in a road accident that left him with a brain injury. "For many years after the accident I was deeply depressed that I couldn't fly. I had joined the RAAF cadets at 13 and I was expecting that I would get my licence at some stage," he recalls. "It was what I most wanted to do in life."

In 2005 Steve's recreation therapist told him about Wheelies With Wings and suggested he apply for a scholarship. "I got the scholarship in late 2005 and the last eight months of my life have been much more positive. I've been really looking forward to being here and doing the course."

It seemed cruel then, that the weather had put on such a performance and was intent on denying him the final stage of his training. However after an hour or so, the sky lightened a little and the cloud seemed to be lifting. After surveying the conditions, instructor James Perham was willing to give it a go and he and Steve headed out to the ramp. After just two circuits more showers blew in from the south, forcing them to make a full-stop landing and taxi back to the terminal.

For someone with a brain injury, learning to fly presents a set of challenges beyond those faced by most trainee pilots. It was fascinating to listen to Steve's account of his first few hours in the air.

"The most challenging aspect of the training has been getting the information in my head in proper order," he says. "My radio calls are fine and in flight, I can feel what the aircraft is doing. The difficulty for me is sorting out the thought processes required to initiate control inputs and respond to what the aircraft is doing. Landing is definitely the most difficult phase of flying for me, particularly with a crosswind."

Despite these challenges, Steve is intent on taking his training further: "I know the medicals and the training will be very stringent but I would love to finish my training. This programme has given me a taste of something I've always wanted to do and I want more. As soon as I get home I'll lodge an application for my student licence and make it happen."

MATTY'S STORY

Matthew (Matty) Brumby had travelled to Cooma from his home in Wellington NSW to join the WwW programme. Like Steve, he was accepted onto the programme in late 2005 and had looked forward to the course for some months before arriving.

In his late teenage years Matty joined the Royal Australian Navy. During his first posting at sea on HMAS Newcastle he was assigned to work on the flight deck with the ship's helicopters, prompting an interest in aviation. Back on land he began training to become a clearance diver but, unbeknown to him, a cyst was developing on his lower spinal chord.

"I was riding my motorbike one day back in 2000 and just blacked out. I woke up in hospital after the accident and had no idea what had happened. I only





Above: The cockpit of the Piper Cherokee 140 used to train WwW's students, showing the hand control installed.

knew I couldn't use my legs," he says. The accident left Matty with paraplegia and he is mobile with the aid of a wheelchair. Today he is the NSW Central West Peer Support Officer for Spinal Chord Injuries Australia.

For several years following his accident Matty worked on farms where he operated equipment including tractors and harvesters: "Most of the farm machinery I worked on had hand controls of some sort so I was pretty comfortable with the idea of using one in an aircraft. My navy experience also helped in aspects of the training such as the radio work, following commands and instructions and focussing on accuracy in my flying. We spent the first day of the programme on familiarisation tasks, learning about the aircraft and the training we were going to do. I was both excited and nervous about the training but I had a good feeling about it.

"The flying over the last two weeks has been fantastic", Matty says. "Landing has been the most challenging part of the training. My disability means that using the hand control to operate the rudder and keep the aircraft in balance is hard work and landing is an intense experience. Steep turns were exhilarating when the g-forces push you down into your seat. The whole experience has been amazing and I'm determined to continue with it and get my licence."

AN INSTRUCTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

As a flying instructor with Canberra-based Brindabella Airlines, James Perham is WwW's instructor and is as positive about the whole experience as the students. "Getting into and out of the aircraft can be tricky and the throttle and hand control can be hard

to use simultaneously," he notes, "but once they're flying, they do it as well as any other students.

"We do have to be careful about what we do and how long we spend in the air on each flight. Disabilities can cause physical tiredness in the students and we have to be careful not to push the training too hard in each session."

In conversation, James reflected on his own experience over the two-week course: "I have learned a great deal from the students, mainly about their capabilities and determination. Overall it's been a great experience. Cooma Airport management has given us free use of the airport, we have the aircraft at our disposal and I am in the company of three very keen students."

VISIONS OF A HIGH ACHIEVER

By early afternoon there had been little improvement in the weather over Cooma and it was time for the students to pack up and head for Temora for their 'wings' celebration the next night.

Further west and a day later the skies were sunny and clear and it was a good 10 degrees warmer. On arrival the WwW students joined the Rotarians on a tour of the Temora Aviation Museum. I went to the airport too, but not to take the tour. Instead I was to join Wheelies With Wings board member Ian Richards in a meeting with Suzi Duncan who was flying up from Melbourne to attend the ceremony as guest speaker.

As the founder of Wheelies With Wings, Suzi is an inspiring person. Having contracted polio as an infant she became paralysed from the neck down. "My mother was determined that I was going to >>>