

G-AORW

By Tony Eley



Seated one day at the organ,
I was weary and ill at ease,
And my fingers wander'd idly
Over the noisy keys.

I know not what I was playing,
Or what I was dreaming then,
But I struck one chord of music,
Like the sound of a great Amen,
Like the sound of a great Amen

THE LOST CHORD
by Adelaide A. Procter

The Internet's a funny place – you never know where it will lead you – and old pilots, like elephants never forget!!

I was seated one day at my computer- yes probably weary and ill at ease. And my hands weren't exactly idle, but they were wandering over the keys!!

I was half-heartedly writing a story about my early years in the Royal Air Force and I was searching for a photograph of a Jet Provost to illustrate the text when I came across a Website of aviation photographs (Compass Aero Pages)(<http://www.acf.clara.net/>). The index page included not only a description of each aircraft but also listed the registration marks. I scrolled languidly down the page until suddenly a registration mark leapt out and hit me between the eyes.

G-AORW G-AORW G-AORW

GOLF ALPHA OSCAR ROMEO WHISKEY. GOLF ALPHA OSCAR ROMEO WHISKEY.

My brain stood still and without any control I found myself whispering it over and over again

“GOLF ALPHA OSCAR ROMEO WHISKEY”. “GOLF ALPHA OSCAR ROMEO WHISKEY”.

I clicked the hyperlink and there it was, G-AORW the aircraft in which I learnt to fly 37 years ago!!!



Photographs by Compass Aero Pages www.acf.clara.net

Memories came flooding back, and it's true, like elephants, old pilots never forget!

I found myself whispering under my breath again "Golf Alpha Oscar Romeo Wiskey, Golf Alpha Oscar Romeo Wiskey, TTFFMMG, TTFFMMG", and more memories came pouring back.

"TTFFMMG?" – a mnemonic which my instructor drilled into me in the warm summer of 1964 as I sat in the cockpit of G-AORW before taxiing out

Now, even after 37 years it comes straight to the forefront of my mind

"TTFFMMG?" "Trim, Tabs, Fuel, Flaps, Mixture, Magneto, Gear", the checklist before taxiing and repeated again before take-off – It's still there, it's still second nature – my instructor would be proud!!

Beginnings

I was remarkably fortunate. When I was at school, on Friday afternoons, without exception or choice, all pupils were required to take part in the activities of the Combined Cadet Force. Today that seems almost unbelievable – now the pupils have a choice – CCF or community service or any of the myriad other opportunities such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme, but in 1960 the choice like Ford motor cars was black or black

OK – I'll hold up my hands. I enjoyed the Cadet Force and with good reason. Not only did I enjoy it, my time in the Cadet Force has shaped my entire life – and I have enjoyed that too. Read on!!

Back to age 15. In 1961 the CCF at my school was entirely Army orientated. We learnt to march, we did Drill, Drill, Drill and tactics and some field craft and very, very rarely live firing with weapons.

After 18 months we were required to take – and pass the Army Certificate A and Certificate B examinations, the first rung on the ladder to a Field Marshal's baton!! I passed with flying colours. Remember – I enjoyed the CCF.

Now comes the next stroke of good fortune. A new master had joined the staff. His passion was aircraft and the Royal Air Force. He sought and received permission to establish an Air Force section within the school CCF. The proposal intrigued me so I joined the RAF section.

Much less Drill, much less fieldcraft, much more classroom based instruction in the Theory of Flight, Navigation and matters aeronautical, plus visits to Royal Air Force Stations on the days when my colleagues were rushing about on muddy fields re-creating platoon and company manoeuvres based on tactics from the 1940s. I enjoyed the Air Force section even more than the Army CCF. Promotion was faster too!! By the time I left school I had reached the rank of Cadet Under-Officer, sadly a rank which no longer exists, and my final school camp was spent as Camp Adjutant for a series of Cadet camps at Royal Air Force Cranwell.

I had passed all the requisite exams along the way and had also had the good fortune to be accepted at 17 for glider pilot training. The training was in two parts. A number of weekend training sessions together with classroom instruction spread over about 3 months. Those who were successful in part 1 of the course were then invited to Royal Air Force Spitalgate near Grantham for an intensive 4 day course over a Bank Holiday weekend which would, if the weather conditions allowed, lead to

successful qualification as a glider pilot and the award of a Gliding Certificate by The Royal Aero Club. My Certificate no 36986, dated 15 April 1963 and signed by Lord Brabazon of Tara is in front of me as I write.

It was an interesting 4 days at RAF Spitalgate. Not least because in those days Royal Air Force Spitalgate was the home of the Training Unit for all of the Women's Royal Air Force!!!

The weather smiled on us. Training went well. The aircraft used back in 1963 was the Slingsby T21, a solid workhorse glider nothing like today's light weight high performance gliders. It flew like a slightly aerodynamic brick!

But it was good for students. Launched by a cable pulled by a high powered winch, you were lucky to get an altitude of 1000ft on a launch which gave just enough time for a single circuit and landing

A typical training sortie would run –



Hook on the cable. Ensure the launch area is clear. Ask one of the ground crew to raise the aircraft wings to the level position. Re-check the launch area.

Contact the launch controller. Radio! What radio? This was 1963. SHOUT at the launch controller

“Take up the slack”. He would then signal to the winch driver at the other end of the airfield who would engage the winch – slowly – take up the slack in the cable and when the cable was taut, engage full speed on the winch and pull the glider across the airfield.

As the speed increased the glider reached take off speed and rose swiftly into the sky

At 1000ft, drop the nose of the aircraft, pull the cable release handle, watch the cable on it's small parachute drop away from the aircraft and make a gentle 90 degree turn to the right.

Two important points here. First, at Spitalgate there was a 700 ft communications tower about 400 metres directly ahead of the launch area, so you really did need 1000ft of altitude before you dropped the cable (either that or a very rapid 90 degree turn) and second you really do need to make absolutely certain that the cable has separated from the aircraft before turning. Trying to fly whilst still attached to the winch is considered poor form – and very brief.

But the training went well. I had it down to a fine art. Practice, practice, practice

Launch, nose down, drop cable, check separation, 90 degree right, lose 200 feet, 90 right at airfield boundary, run downwind, lose 400ft, check landing area for obstructions, cross downwind airfield boundary, 90 degree turn right, lose 200 feet, turn 90 degrees right, check landing area for obstruction, centre aircraft on landing area, lose 200 ft and land, light as thistledown at the appointed place. Easy

My instructor climbed swiftly from the aircraft. “ Just time for you do your first solo”, he said, looking over his shoulder, “Take it nice and steady, you've done the last four all on your own. You don't need me, and we can just get it in before it gets dark!” And he was gone.

I looked over his shoulder. It certainly was getting dark!

I turned my mind to the matter in hand. The cable was already attached. I raised my hand to the winch controller and gave him a thumbs up

“ Take up the slack!!!” I gave him a second thumbs up and I was away

Launch, nose down, drop cable, check separation, 90 degree right, lose 200 feet, -

HANG ON A MINUTE!!!! Lose 200 ft – lose 200 ft!!! I recheck the altimeter. It should now read 800ft but quite clearly it now read 1400ft. I check the climb and decent indicator (up and down for civilians) – for the first time in my life in a T21 I am going up!!!



THIS IS NO TIME TO PANIC!!! Extend the leg until I lose some height. Good plan, but then I shall be well outside the airfield. OK, extend it a bit and see how we go. I fly about 500 metres beyond the airfield boundary. Re-check the instruments – still going UP, 1800ft. Turn downwind. Still going UP.

Cross the downwind boundary. Check the landing zone – clear (but a heck of a long way below), turn right 2000 ft, BUT beginning to descend. Turn right line up with landing zone and LOSE 2000ft instead of 200, not likely.

I fly up the airfield. At least I am descending now. I pass the point where I dropped the cable, still descending now 1500ft. I extend the forward run and then turn right still descending, down to 1000ft extend the downwind leg a bit (I really don't want to be too far downwind of the downwind boundary) and turn right again.

Now I'm crosswind at 500 ft and about 500 metres beyond the downwind boundary (I do hope I've got this right!).

Centre the aircraft on the landing area, check altitude, 300ft, turn 90 degrees right, check landing area for obstruction, centre aircraft on landing area, lose 300 ft and land, light as thistledown at the appointed place. Easy

Well – easy with hindsight.

The cause – a cold front came through just as I dropped the cable and up I went!

An error by my instructor? Probably. The front was moving much faster than anticipated. But the training had been thorough. I did know what to do – much more to the point I remembered what to do! I qualified.

Powered Flight

Which brings me back to G-AORW. My first solo did not put me off! I must be mad! August 1964 saw me sitting in another aircraft with another instructor. It had been an interesting year.

November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas. Everyone remembers what they were doing the night President Kennedy was killed. It was my first date with my wife – which has little to do with this story except to remark that 1963 to 1964 was an important time in my life!

I had just learnt to fly gliders, met my wife (although we were at nursery school together over 12 years earlier), got a place at Medical School and been awarded a Flying Scholarship by the Royal Air Force. Yes, it had been a busy year!

August 4th 1964 sitting in G-AORW at five minutes to four in the afternoon and my first flight as a pilot under instruction. We had done the classroom work, Theory of Flight, Navigation, RT procedures, parachute instruction, and safety instructions. I remember safety instruction.

To this day I still don't know if it was for real or a wind up, but part of the safety brief went like this :-

“ If the worst comes to the worst and there is no other way of getting back on to the ground, if the throttle is stuck and you are trapped in the cockpit, try this technique!”

“Strap yourself in good and tight!”

“Pick two good solid oak trees about twelve foot apart and fly between them as slowly as you can and about eight feet off the ground!” When the wings hit the trees they will crumple and bend behind you. The aircraft will stop!!”.

“The force of stopping so suddenly will pull the engine off it's mountings, the propeller which will still be spinning will pull the engine and the forward bulkhead off the fuselage and you can unstrap yourself and step through the hole in the front of the aircraft!”

I still don't know if it was a wind up – but the theory sounds good. I never needed to test the theory - and since the aircraft is still flying 37 years later I assume no-one else has either!!

Seven days later, on 11 August 1964 and after just six hours and thirty minutes of dual instruction I flew solo for the first time – my log book is in front of me!

It was a memorable summer. I flew every day through August and September and qualified as a pilot of single engined light aircraft on 30 September 1964. I think the Air Force had plans for me to become a pilot, but on 1 October 1964 I began my training as a doctor! But my love affair with the Royal Air Force continued

My flying training must have gone smoothly because I can only remember a couple of incidents during the entire period

The first came soon after my first solo. Having demonstrated that I was capable of getting the aircraft into the air and back onto the ground the next few days were spent perfecting the technique. The idea is to take off and land without loosening any further fillings in your teeth and I was really getting quite good at it.

Burnaston, near Derby (now a Toyota car plant) was a quiet airfield in 1964. One training aircraft, G-AORW and a very small new airline (– in those days I think called Derby Aviation, now British Midland International) flying just one flight a day to Holland in a DC3, the world famous Dakota aircraft.

I was perfecting my take off and landing technique. Take off, fly round the airfield, call the tower, “Golf Alpha Oscar Romeo Whiskey – on finals”, get a “Golf Alpha Oscar Romeo Whiskey – clear” from the tower, land and take off and repeat it again and again and again.

It probably got a bit boring – no – it did get a bit boring but that's no excuse

I called the tower “Golf Alpha Oscar Romeo Whiskey – on finals”.

I'm sure he said “Clear”, and I lined the aircraft up for the grass (did I forget to say it was grass – no runway)

The aircraft slowly settled toward the field. The controller was surprisingly calm, “Golf Alpha Oscar Romeo Whiskey – do you see the DC3 below you”, he said.



I poured on power – pulled back the stick and went round again – what sort of damnfool question is that, “Do you see the DC3 below you!!” Would I really be trying to land piggyback!!!

I have to say it was not all my fault. The DC3 pilot flew in every day. No air traffic congestion in those days. Take off from Amsterdam – fly straight towards Derby, start letting down at Skegness - and call finals at Skegness, - do a straight in approach and land 30 minutes later.

In my defence – HE DIDN'T SEE ME EITHER!!

The second memory is my long cross-country. My recollection is that before you could be granted your licence you had to complete one long cross country flight – presumably to confirm that the theoretical navigation which you had demonstrated in the exam could be translated into navigation on the ground, and that at least one of the airfields which you visited had be one you had not visited before.

My instructor chose two airfields entirely unknown to me. I remember them both.

The navigation was fine. I like navigation!!

I approached Kiddlington airfield in Oxfordshire. I made an impeccable approach. The aircraft came in straight and level, the power dropping beautifully and the wheels kissed the grass. Sadly the airfield at Kiddlington is not level but has a pronounced slope and I was approaching uphill.

We bounced! And bounced! And bounced. Yes I remember Kiddlington.

The second leg took me from Oxford to Wolverhampton and the airfield at Halfpenny Green. A beautiful, small airfield and flat!! Flat but small and surrounded by houses! I came in too high and perhaps a little too fast, but I had learnt something since the spring of 1963

Stick over, rudder over, side slip, lose height, straighten up and land – only a little bit too fast – but gentle braking got us stopped before the boundary fence!!

I remember Halfpenny Green!!