

ALISTER'S 300km GOLD DISTANCE

Feshie – Killin – Carrbridge – Aberfeldy - Feshie

I write this in the hope of helping other pilots expand their horizons and achieve their own badge flights. The tips in bold have been gleaned from various sources and are not comprehensive but all were reinforced on the flight. It really all starts long before leaving the ground.

Lesson 1 : Planning and preparation are all-important.

In this I have much to thank Nick for – he has a wealth of experience in choosing a suitable task and giving invaluable tips ! On the day, I had in mind Roy Bridge and in general keeping along the line of the Loch Laggan hills. However, a front to the west suggested staying further east and Killin, Carrbridge and Aberfeldy were chosen. A remote start at the Duke of Gordon's monument got the distance over the magic 300k. This route was also familiar from my last attempt when I landed at Fortingall. Apologies here for the lack of photos as I forgot my camera (what did I just say about preparation ?) . Actually, the distraction of taking photos was perhaps best done without. Conditions at the start seemed good but were actually not that good as I found myself struggling over Glen Feshie Lodge and down to 1800'. Perhaps a bit of over-eagerness to get off on track was to blame.

Lesson 2 : Get to a good height ASAP, stay high and don't go for the TP too soon.

At this moment a little voice began saying 'why not just do a nice comfortable bit of local soaring and enjoy yourself ! It's not really an ideal day for a 300'.

Lesson 3 : You can always find some reason to talk yourself out of your task !

However the thought of Nick's probable reaction to this plus a little determination of my own spurred me on and eventually I got to cloudbase (about 4000') and was able to see where I was to go and have height enough to fly over high ground. The view ahead was -well – a bit daunting. The furthest feature I could see was Ben Lawers on the horizon and, before that, an apparently unbroken sea of high ground. It was, of course, to Ben Lawers that I had to go ! The temptation was to head for the 'safety' of the Spey Valley.

Lesson 4 : The best thermals are over the high ground, not in the valleys.

I was also aware of the landable areas I couldn't actually see – Blair Atholl, Kinloch Rannoch and Fortingall (pre-flight planning again). The leg to Killin wasn't as forbidding as it might seem ! Conditions also began to improve (as expected) and my attention started to shift from how far I was from home to the next cloud to make for. If you can stay up near home, I asked, why not far away from home ? It's the same ! Doubtless I wasted time circling where I should not have or not circling where I should but I began making steady progress and felt comfortable. Soon I was passing by Schiehallion (awesome!) and heading for the east side of Ben Lawers . I elected to do this partly to lay the old Fortingall ghosts and also to have a good look at Lawers , and it didn't disappoint ! The lower slopes were teeming with paragliders.

Killin soon succumbed to the powers of the Vega which took a probably unnecessary but safe wide arc round it. The longest leg now loomed but all went well – no uncomfortable moments yet. Incidentally, I was using the GPS to get my direction right but not relying totally on it in case of it packing up. Don't fool yourself that you would navigate easily without it , even in good visibility. Coming north especially it's quite hard to distinguish one hill from another among the mass of high ground and valleys won't be visible unless you're close to them. I noticed the paras were now above the Lawers summit. Passing Feshie I flew straight to the Monadhliaths where the lift looked good, ignoring our own gliders sweating it out in local thermals. The voice of none other than John Williams announced over the radio the gloomy news that the Spey Valley thermals were not good - but the Monadhliath ones were fine (see lesson 4).

Lesson 5 : Deviations to good lift are better than struggling in poor conditions on track.

A wide arc again round Carrbridge and over home ground again towards Aberfeldy. Was I dangerously tired or dehydrated ? A drink and chocolate bar put me in good stead and I didn't think I was too tired. Aberfeldy duly succumbed to DXG but, at this point, things began to get, if not quite pear-shaped, then a little tricky ! Problem was that the sky to the immediate north looked a bit uncooperative while south (the wrong way) was a nice-looking black cloud. I chose the latter and found it to be just that – nice looking but not doing much !

Go for the sunny area of ground to the NE, I thought. Forget about the track – concentrate on getting a climb (down to 2200ft here) – bound to be something over the sunny ground. I rather struggled for some time in weak lift but in sun and tried to ignore Roy Wilson and Nick rejoicing in a 7 knotter a few miles south (Roy found it !). Do I go over there ? No, stick with what I've got. The old brain eventually twigged that Ben a'Ghlo was close enough and had a nice big south-facing slope with a cloud above and I had enough

height to go over there and still make Aberfeldy if the worst happened. The slopes of a' Ghlo duly obliged in ample measure and I was soon back to 5000ft+. This had been a sticky period but a good learning experience. Even so, I never felt at any point on the flight that I was pushing my luck too far and risking finding myself in an impossible corner.

Lesson 6 : Keep the sun/terrain firmly in mind when hunting a thermal.

Setting course for home and anticipating that dinner at the Rowan Tree (instead of fish and chips at Aberfeldy) was on after all, I arrived at Feshie with an embarrassing amount of height to spare and even remembered to lower the wheel ! Doubts about the EW having recorded were quickly dispelled as Nick, who got home first (but only because Roy found that thermal - only joking, Nick !) downloaded the data. It was good and the task was done at last ! I had wondered if it would ever be achieved !!!



Lesson 7: Be optimistic – the day will come and you will achieve it !

Alister Morrison.

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