

First Feshie Five-hundred (in thermal that is!)

by Nick Norman

The secret of a successful badge flight, I always say, is in the preparation. So it was inevitable that I should be caught out by the arrival of a promising day so soon after the lifting of the cross-country ban in early May. Neither the glider nor the kit had seen the light of day since last summer. I knew that the camera battery, one of those fancy and expensive lithium jobs, would be nearly flat and would doubtless give up the ghost halfway round the task. As we don't have an IGC-approved logger this would be disastrous, but the gods were surely smiling on me because on arrival at the tiny local store, the proprietor assured me that he had just about any type I cared to mention. And he did!

Racing back to the airfield I could see that thermals were already forming even though it was only 11 am. It only took 20 minutes to rig and run a quick task off on the computer. Probably a 300 day but that elusive 500 would only get done if I was suitably bold. So with all of 5 minutes task planning I was in the glider and getting the first launch of the day whilst the other club pilots potted about with their preparations. Releasing at 2000ft in a nice thermal down track was my first mistake - I should have asked the tug pilot to drop me off over the airfield at 3280ft. Now I had to waste time climbing high enough to return to the site and start properly! However once this was accomplished I started to relax a little as I set off on what was looking a very promising task.

It's nice to have reached the point in my gliding career where the stress of deliberately flying out of gliding range of the airfield over unlandable terrain is less than that incurred whilst preparing to get airborne. The first leg took me past the end of Glen Feshie and into the "A9 valley" at Blair Atholl. Conditions were not strong, but lift was frequent and not much circling was required. This allowed me to satisfy both the conflicting secrets of successful cross-country flying in Scotland - "Stay High" and "Reject Weak Lift".

The leg to Crianlarich was pretty uneventful and I was pleasantly surprised by the landing opportunities around the otherwise forbidding Loch Rannoch, and in several of the narrow glens on the way. Well, the fields looked fine from 4000ft anyway! I had plenty of time to scan the fantastic views, with wild Rannoch moor to my right and the snow capped black rocks of Ben Lawers, whose summit of 3500ft was not far below me, towering over the tranquil waters of Loch Tay to my left. All a pretty normal part of the scenery round here but still impressive after 20 years in Scotland!



On reaching Crianlarich I entered Dufftown, the next turning point, into the GPS and was a little daunted to see that the distance to it was 82nm. Much too far for a glider! However I was on schedule so still fairly confident of success, until I noticed that the sea air had already filled the vast flat expanse of the Forth-Clyde valley to the South. It was only 1pm and I then realised my second mistake, which was to have made Aberfoyle the third TP instead of the first. It was at the foot of the Trossachs, the long line of hills that was the only thing keeping the sea air at bay. By 4 o'clock, the time I was due to be back at Aberfoyle, surely the sea air would have won the battle and put my last TP out of reach.

Cursing, I continued anyway thinking that at least I had had a nice flight down to Crianlarich, a first visit for me. Trying not to think about that sea air I carried on towards the Cairngorms, an easy navigational task even without the GPS, as they are the largest and snowiest things in sight. By the time I was approaching abeam Feshie, I had just about convinced myself that all was going to be fine when I heard over the radio someone landing out at Nethy Bridge. The comment on the radio was something like "Don't go down the Spey beyond Nethy because its all blue and dead". "That's it then", I thought. Nethy Bridge was but a fraction of the distance down the Spey that I had to go to reach Dufftown.

Never mind, it had been a nice flight whilst it lasted. I supposed that I might as well carry on to the end of the cumulus and if I stay well over the high ground I might manage to get a bit further than Nethy. This would take me over Ben Macdhui which had a temporary danger area notified as being active, so I called Lossie Radar to establish what activity there was. "Oh no, there's no activity today - it's a Sunday" the nice lady said. It was all I could do not to respond with "Well why the f!%\$ is it notified as being active then!" but

uncharacteristically managed to hold my tongue. I pressed on expecting at any moment to reach the edge of the thermal activity, but surprisingly a narrow archipelago of cumulus stretched on, protected from the sea air by the Cromdale hills, until I was within striking distance of Dufftown.

So it was possible after all! Climbing to cloudbase in the last and rather weak cumulus I tiptoed off with zero macready and had rounded the turning point and was back in the weak lift at the first Cu, still at about 2500ft. Spirits raised, I was soon romping back down towards my final turning point at 85 knots in good conditions.

I should have been worrying about that sea air at Aberfoyle, but there was a much more pressing concern now - coming from my bladder. I have never been very good at bodily functions in a glider and the time taken can cost a lot of average kphs. I decided I had to wait for the sort of cloud that would lift the glider without my intervention, and as luck would have it, there was a huge black one over Ben Lawers. The glider took full advantage of its new-found freedom now that its pilot was busy with other things, cavorting happily from side to side and varying its speed from stall to VNE, with just the occasional prod from its distracted erstwhile master to stop it from self-destructing. He had just found out that the rubber attachments that had been lying in the cockpit side pocket had reached an advanced stage of rot. Oh well, just another piece of poor preparation! In fact the reader will be relieved to know that not a drop was spilt, although not as relieved as I was, not the least because not only was I now in control of the glider again, but also because it had obligingly climbed 1000' all on its own and seemed to have an air of "who needs a pilot anyway?" about it.

Approaching Aberfoyle I could see it was not going to be easy. Whilst there were a few sick and feeble cumuli still hanging on, they were few, far between and well below the ones further inland. It would be no problem reaching Aberfoyle, but to stay in the air I had to get back well into the hills to get to the lift. The terrain there is high and unlandable, and I knew it would not take much loss of height before it was out of reach, so I scratched the last foot of weak lift out of the last cloud and set off at best glide. Again the gods were smiling as the air was quite buoyant and I lost little height, getting back to the first cloud again at well above ground level. However the lift was barely workable and after several turns in up, boredom took hold and I pushed on to the next cloud. This was similar, giving the same ½ up and when I looked back, the previous cloud had gone! I really had to press on because that sea air was hot (or should that be cold?) on my tail. Arriving at the next cloud and looking back, there was nothing to be seen! Desperate action was required.

I flew directly North into the high ground and well off track. Under me, and really very close, was a particularly unlandable bit of terrain, the only soft bit being the waters of Loch Katrine. If I pressed on to the first reasonable looking cloud, I might or might not make it before the ground came up to meet me and would certainly be out of gliding range of landability. If I turned back to the lower ground now I would certainly be landing out within minutes. No choice really - press on!

After 30 minutes or so of scratching around in straggly lift there is nothing nicer than hitting that long and strong kick of a real thermal, and I was fortunately treated to this just moments before I would have finally given up and made that soft but wet landing on Loch Katrine. Despair vanishing in an instant, I was soon on my way again and suddenly starting to feel confident of success. With "the end in sight" relaxation also came a realisation that I was tired. Really very tired and fatigued to the point of dysfunctionality. So dysfunctional that when Jack Stephen called me up on the radio and said "There is a large area of dead spread out in the A9 valley" I politely acknowledged his kind transmission but thought "There's a huge black cloud over Ben Lawers that even my Ventus, with only 20 minutes solo time under its belt, managed to climb 1000' in" not realising that although that was the case an hour ago, it was probably not so now. Fortunately it was not long before I realised the problem, and was still near cloud base.

The ground ahead was dark as far as the eye could see, and my last vestiges of sentience made me twiddle that macready knob down to zero straight away. From the middle of Loch Tay to the hills on the far side of the A9 there was nothing but overcast Stratus. "Ah well, just when you thought you'd cracked it....might as well trundle on a bit to minimise the retrieve." But in the distance there was a tiny patch of weak sunlight, no bigger than a field, near the shores of Loch Rannoch. This was surely my only chance. Changing course to fly towards it, I held my breath. Nothing...Nothing...Nothing...then a feeble bleeping from the vario! I was delighted to see ½ up and circled gratefully at minimum sink.

I am not very good in weak lift - boredom usually sets in after a while and I will press on somewhere else, usually to my detriment. But this time I was too tired to do anything except cling on for dear life, and after some time I was rewarded by a gradual increase in climb rate to a glorious 2 knots. Eventually I had marginal final glide home, or at least I would have had were it not for the large lumps of granite in the way. I

could however see that several miles further down track, over the mountain tops, the Stratus broke up and there were lively looking cumulus within reach.

After that it was quite easy. The first Cu scoffed at my desperation, giving me the best climb rate of the day (even though it was by now 6 o'clock in the evening) and I hung on until ridiculously high. I was just too tired to contemplate the possibility of any more difficulties. So it was a 5 knot final glide, increasing to Vne in the last few miles, and still arriving much too high. But who was complaining? Certainly not I, because that morning I had only really set the task out of fancy and not out of any belief that it was achievable.

I learned that although good preparation is a great help, luck is the predominant factor because on the right day a 500 is quite easy, and on the wrong day it's just impossible. There is no middle ground.