

How I inadvertently did two training 300ks in a day

by Nick (*written in 2002*)

"I am going back into the ASW20 syndicate and need to practice use of flaps" said Ray Lambert one morning. The SGA ASH25 was parked rigged overnight and so by 10 o'clock we were sitting in it at the end of the runway awaiting the tug and planning our local training sortie. Duty instructor Alister Robertson appeared with a "Well what are you declaring then?" sort of comment. Up to then I had not really looked at the sky, it being a bit early for me to be functioning properly, but I could immediately see his point. "How about Crianlarich, Grantown, Dalwhinnie" I said off the cuff, thinking this would be around the magic 300k. My guess turned out to be not bad as it was in fact 297.8k

Within moments we were off, Ray flying and me trying to program something into the rather complicated S-NAV. So much for flight planning, map marking etc. One of the joys of cross-country flying in this part of Scotland is that I know that there is no controlled airspace, no danger areas, ATZs or parachute zones anywhere within the task area.

It was clearly a good day! Having climbed rapidly off tow to 4000ft we turned back to the airfield, descending to 3000ft for our start and then headed straight off for a wave cruise climb on track. The on-track wave slot was huge and visibility was infinite, so we had fantastic views of my favourite area around lochs Erich, Rannoch and Tay. The 90km first leg to Crianlarich only crosses 5 roads of any description, only 3 of which are public. It really is a wilderness area which, whilst desolate and hostile in the winter, looks fantastic in the sunshine from 7000ft. Wind was

surprisingly light, being only 20kt or so at our cruising altitude and the ASH was romping along at 90kt still climbing. Apart from looking at the view, I was paying little attention to the flight because Ray was doing a fine job. Its rather nice to be able to sit in the back eating sandwiches and Mars bars with an "autopilot" up front doing the hard work for a change.

We normally conduct much of the cross-country training in the ASH by having P1 doing most or all of the flying – not because we are selfish but because this really is the best way for P2 to learn. We may give P2 control when things are looking good but when things look poor ahead, we will recognise this early and take control, bearing in mind the unlandability of most of the terrain. This translates in P2's mind to "When I'm flying it things are going really well, but as soon as the instructor takes over we are falling out of the sky" which does nothing for our egos! I suppose that's all part of an instructor's hard life. We get our revenge when, having spent the day telling them not to waste time circling in 3 knots because the next one is 6 knots, they go off in their own gliders the next day and promptly land out because there were no 6 knot thermals!

Approaching Crianlarich I noticed that things were not looking too good – we had been out of lift for some time and were at cloud top height. Ray was asking what to do as there were no obvious slots ahead – although of course you can't see them anyway at cloud top height. My guiding principle for cross-country flying is "If in doubt – press on!" which will no doubt elicit a call from the BGA safety committee,

but I have so often found that when things are looking impossible ahead, perseverance shows that they are not. This was therefore my response, with the addition of “I have control” as we entered cloud. I had already observed that cloudbase was well above the highest terrain – around 3800ft in the vicinity, and we were below freezing level. After a short white-out we emerged into another hole, and soon rounded the turnpoint, passing through more cloud on the way back into lift.

Afterwards Ray said that he would have turned back in his own glider, so what made the task possible was my ability to cloud fly, a skill I acquired years ago as part of my job as a North Sea helicopter pilot. Its just another of the innumerable skills required to make the best of the soaring day. Its the fact that these skills are never perfected that keeps my interest.

After the slight difficulty at Crianlarich, the rest was easy and by one-thirty we had landed, having achieved about 102kph, my personal best for a 300, and Ray’s first. Lunch was calling, but after a sandwich and coffee it was still only 2pm so time for more fun.

“We might as well do it again” I said, collaring our CFI Andy Carter, who had expressed an interest in flying the ASH. Andy has all 3 diamonds but recently his CFI duties seem to have kept him from flying cross-country. An injection of enthusiasm was required so he was bundled into the ASH and we re-declared the same task. Well, by now I knew the way! The lift was still strong and we were soon on task, and with Andy doing all the flying, I was having an easy day.

The trip was pretty similar with the same sticky point at Crianlarich, but this time as we rounded a cloud to get sight of the turning point, the vario

unexpectedly got very excited and we climbed rapidly to 10,000ft. A fantastic view out over the west coast of Scotland unfolded, with Loch Lomond and a snow-capped Ben Lui in the foreground, and Loch Awe and innumerable sea lochs and mountains in the distance. I have been gliding in Scotland for over 20 years now but these views are still awe-inspiring, and this one was a first for me, having only been to Crianlarich in thermal before.

Tracking back to our second turning point found us near Feshie and getting low – the wave was disorganised and we were starting to struggle. “I have control” and of course immediately things got worse – never mind, I struggled for a while and eventually got round the last turning point well above fast final glide for home, though barely above the terrain. This one was a bit slower at about 95kph – Andy will no doubt tell you this was because I took control, but I can take it!

We retired to the bar with me feeling that I had done the day justice, but in fact the ASH went on to do another 168km out and return that evening with another crew, thereby clocking up over 750km, albeit with far too many tuning points to count.

There is no doubt that the availability of the SGA ASH has made a big difference to the cross-country ethos at our club. We have only around 40 members but virtually all the post-bronze pilots fly cross-country, despite the fact that the terrain puts off all but the hardest visiting flat-landers. Most just come to Scotland, go up to 20-something thousand feet and when you say “where did you go?”, they look blankly at you as if you must be mad to suggest that they should leave the safety of overhead the airfield. But Scotland has a lot more to offer than that, provided it isn’t raining!