

Where the Eagles Fly

John Nash is a retired, well sort of retired, fruit farm manager in Kirdford who enjoys scribbling about life on the farm from the now to days gone by.

On my fiftieth birthday my family gave me a surprise gift: a weekend of lessons on hang gliding.

These consisted of throwing myself off a particularly steep part of the South Downs while strapped to a mixture of canvas and aluminium framing. I think the general idea was to get me – as the song goes – up there where the eagle flies.

Alas, no. Each launch inevitably ended in a particularly well established field of nettles and thistles and I quickly realised, as I nursed my rashes, scratches and bruises, that I was never going to be a Cats Eyes Cunningham or Douglas Bader! (For those of you who are of a young persuasion... look them up.)

A decade later came a gift of a balloon ride over the Sussex countryside. This involved just missing chimney pots, tree tops and barbed wire fences, as the pilot practised his emergency landing techniques in fields along the way.

Somehow I got the feeling that a message was being delivered to me in a none too subtle way!

So it should have been no surprise really when my son and his family, this time for my eightieth, attempted once more to get me airborne.

There on the card presented to me by my eager grandsons: a glider flight.

I must confess straight away, I was thrilled.

To be given the chance once more to head for the clouds was a wonderful surprise and I was like a kid with a kite waiting for the wind to blow.

Came the day.

A drive down to the Gliding Club at Parham on a beautiful sunny Sunday morning.

Sign in, receive a short introductory course on what to expect and then down to the far end of the airfield to greet the instructor and his beautiful, sleek and glistening glider.

After a quick walk through the controls and assortment of dials that would be in front of me he helped me to strap on my parachute – yes, you really do wear one!

Then it was climb into the front of this most elegant of machines and with six straps claspings me to the seat, the completely clear cockpit canopy was lowered down over me. The reassuring voice of the pilot seated behind me came loud and clear

via my earphones and he operated the joystick so I could feel the movement myself as I followed him through using the dual controls in front of me. I should add here that one further piece of equipment was handed to me just before I was sealed in: a large paper bag, along with a knowing look from the instructor. I refrained from saying that many years previous on a particularly bumpy ride into Athens I had found to my discomfort that the darn things leak!

We were coupled up to the tow plane in front of us, the line tautened and... we were off. A bumpy start at first as the field rumbled beneath us, then absolute smoothness. Even the tow plane in front of us seemed muted, just a gentle rushing of air

through the small air vent beside my shoulder. As we climbed the wonderful Downs spread out before me. Being in the front seat the view is absolutely magical. Nothing to block your vision from one shoulder to the other. The sea down at Worthing glistened in the distance and we were soon crossing the ridge of the Downs beneath us.

Then the tow was released and we were left alone with just the soft hissing of air over

the wings and the pilot's voice informing me of the various villages and features spread below me.

Then, for ten minutes or so, he took his life in his hands – or rather, *my* hands – and gave the control to me. I can only say that I had the thrill of my life. To have that wonderful machine in my control was magical, even if I knew any problem would have been instantly corrected by the man in the seat behind me. Banking gently over Pulborough and following the glittering Arun as it wriggled its way through the green meadows below was breathtaking and so utterly peaceful. Gliding really is flight in its purest form.

I could waffle on for hours about the rest of the flight and the thrill of the steep approach landing that gliders need to land safely, varying speed with amazingly effective air brakes, but I feel enough is enough, and editor Grahame would have to go and get his scissors out. (*On the contrary, I am enjoying every word having done rather a lot of gliding myself! Ed.*) All I would say is that if you get the chance to go up in a glider, grab it! For a half hour or so you will be Biggles, whatever your age.

P.S. Just noticed the letter 'E' is missing from the serial code on the glider's tail fin!

John Nash

