



View from the Blanik at Bogong Park – Photo Adam Bland

Mt Beauty Gliding Club, Inc

www.mtbeauty.com/gliding
glide@MtBeauty.com

ALPINE FLYER

June 2007

President – Rod Harris
 Vice President – Mark Bland
 Secretary – Mike Pobjoy
 Airworthiness Officer – Manfred Rueff
 CFI and Treasurer – Ian Cohn

Editor - Ian Cohn

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Hangars

Hangarage for our gliders is regarded as a virtual necessity, and we have had a good run in being able to house our aircraft in the Hangar Syndicate's hangar for many years. However, this era is coming to a close because the Hangar Syndicate has given the Club a notice to vacate the hangar as from the first of April 2008.

This represents both a big challenge, and a big opportunity for the Club to acquire its own hangar facility and your committee is planning for this.

The basic plan is to:-

- Establish the size and form of the required hangar.
- Determine the best option for supply of the hangar components and the associated costings.
- Submit a Planning Permit to Alpine Shire for allocation of a suitable plot of land on the airfield to locate the hangar and any required facilities such as a workshop and winch garage.
- Establish a financial plan to pay for the Hangar.

Details of these plans will be communicated to Club Members as soon as they are substantial.

It is likely that we will want to do much of the hangar erection by volunteer labour, so please register your interest in providing labour for this task when details of the time schedule and the erection plan are available.

The Committee welcomes constructive input to this process by all members. Let's have your ideas. The Committee has appointed **Rod Harris, Mark Bland** and **Mike Pobjoy** to organise the determination of the size and shape of the hangar and the likely cost. **Ian Cohn** and **Rod Harris** have been appointed to negotiate with the Shire and **Ian Cohn** has been tasked with coming up with a financial plan.

Queens Birthday Weekend

Congratulations to Vice President, **Mark Bland**, for organising a successful Queen's Birthday weekend fly-in (out?) at Bogong Park. Quite a few members flew at Bogong Park, although flight times were on the shorter side. Thanks to **Mark and Suzanne** for putting on an excellent BBQ at their place on the Saturday night. Thanks must also go to Bogong Park owner **Glen Mildren** for allowing us to use his strip.

New Members

We welcome five new Social Members to the Club. They are Yvette Eriksen, university student, Tawonga South, Paul Hartley, Physical Education Teacher working at the Bogong Outdoor Education Centre, Keith Pike, cyclist and prominent Tawonga South citizen, Paul Phelan, power pilot and aviation journalist of Tawonga South, and Reg Marron, lawyer and experienced glider pilot of Wangaratta. Welcome to you all. We look forward to your long association with MBGC.

Rod Harris
 President

Operations

Control Checks

Pilots are reminded that the final **C** in the CHAOTIC pre flight check should cover:

Canopy down and locked

Under**C**arriage down and locked, and finally

Full and free movement of **C**ontrols.

This last check is very important because it will detect any obstruction that may have fallen into the control runs during the other pre-flight checks.

Do not neglect this check.

GFA Membership

The Club is not permitted under GFA rules to give instruction to or allow members to fly solo unless they are financial members of the GFA. Members are requested to be fastidious in renewing their GFA membership when due. Failure to do so invalidates all our insurances.

Winch Communications

One of the reasons we adopt standard procedures for communication is to ensure that everyone understands what is going on. This is especially important during the launch. If anything goes wrong and improper radio calls are made, equipment could be damaged and injury to pilots and ground crew could be risked.

So we have to be very particular in sticking to procedures and using standard phrases to ensure that no misunderstandings arise.

With that in mind, firstly, once the cable is hooked on and the glider is pushed back to take the slack out of the cable, the crew should move away quickly from in front of the glider. A hooked on glider should be regarded as dangerous at all times. The wing tip holder must also ensure that there is no person standing within a zone covered by a 45 degree angle forward from the wing tip. This is very important with bystanders, especially children. Bystander photographers also need strict control by the ground crew as they often tend to creep into the hazardous zone. Ground crew need to be assertive in controlling this aspect of the launch.

Secondly, maintain strict standard procedure between the launch point and the winch. As a reminder, the following is our standard launch and radio call procedure:-

1. Winch launches are to proceed only if there are no aircraft (powered or glider) in the circuit area.
2. The winch driver is required to visually confirm that there are no aircraft in the circuit area prior to announcing that the winch is ready for launch. The radio call is **"No aircraft in circuit, winch is ready for launch"**. Since powered aircraft may now do a straight in approach, it is also important to look to the north-west to verify that no aircraft are doing a straight-in approach.

The glider pilot is required to give a standard departure call on 126.7 MHz.

3. The person controlling the launch at the glider position is also required to visually confirm that there are no aircraft in the circuit area prior to announcing that the glider is ready for launch. Since powered aircraft are now permitted to do a straight in approach, it is important to look to the north-west to verify that no aircraft are doing a straight-in approach to Rwy 14. If there is no conflict, the radio call is then **"No aircraft in circuit, glider is ready for launch – (take up slack –) all out, all out"**.
4. After a final check for no circuit traffic, the winch driver is then required to call, **"No aircraft in circuit – commencing launch – (taking up slack) - all out, all out"**.
5. If any situation or doubt arises regarding launch safety before the gliders starts moving, the ground crew must call **"Stop, Stop, Stop"**, and the glider pilot must release the cable.
6. Finally, glider pilots should not cross the runway below 3000 ft (1900 ft above ground) even if they think that the launch area is clear of cables. Also tell your power pilot friends to be aware that winch cables may be up to 2000 ft above the runway and that they should never fly across the runway/winch cable path. They should always fly around the airfield when in circuit and monitor for gliding launch transmissions on 126.7 Mhz.

Cable Break Procedures

Winch drivers and launch controllers are reminded that after a cable break the first action required is to ensure that all broken cable is cleared from the runway. We have a duty of care to other runway users to clear any broken cable from the runway as soon as possible. If a powered aircraft is in circuit immediately after a cable break, and there is cable obstructing the runway, call the aircraft on 126.7 Mhz and instruct it to hold until the cable is cleared.

Ian Cohn
Chief Flying Instructor

Editor's Epistle

Contributions to Alpine Flyer

This is your Newsletter, so let's have your contributions. Send them to the Editor at glide@mtbeauty.com. Photographs, stories of your gliding/aviation experiences, equipment reviews, and "how I learned about flying from that" stories are all welcome. If you can't use email, send contributions to the Editor at Box 486, Mt Beauty, VIC, 3699.

Treasurer's Talk

How to Fund a Hangar?

The treasurer has been tasked by the Committee with formulating a funding plan to pay for our hangar. There is no doubt that we, the members, will have to stump up most of the funds required. Things being looked at are:

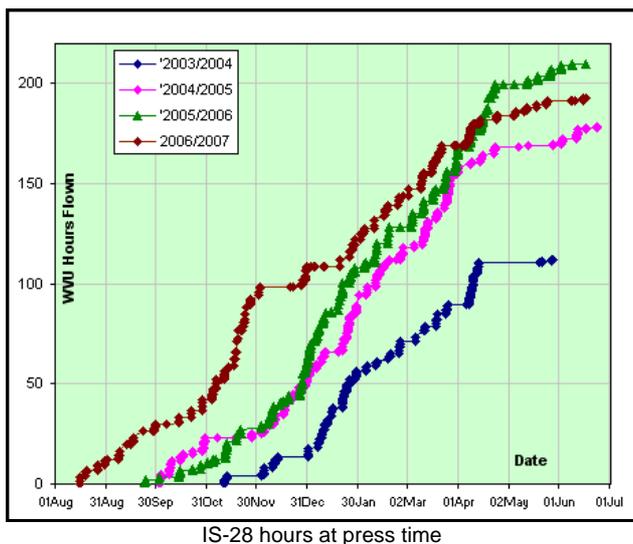
- Voluntary labour to erect the hangar.
- Government sporting grants.
- A tax-deductible donation scheme.
- Voluntary no-interest debentures.
- An interest paying loan scheme from members and others.
- Direct equity in the hangar by club associated syndicates.
- Revision of fees.
- Request to members to keep their accounts in credit by large amounts.

If you have any other reasonable funding ideas that I can work on, please let me know.

Hours and Launches

As the soaring season draws to a close, flight times are decreasing. In April, MBGC aircraft and visitors using the winch flew on 15 days for a total of 97 hours with 134 launches. However, during May we flew on 8 days for a total of 10 hours with 70 launches. In these two months the IS-28 flew 23 hours in 95 flights for an average flight time of 14 minutes.

At press time we had accumulated 193 hours from 353 flights on the IS-28 since the start of this soaring season (210 hours from 413 flights last season at the same date).



Payments

The best way for members to deposit money into their MBGC accounts is via internet banking or by direct credit. This saves the Treasurer a trip to the bank to deposit cheques and cash. When doing this please remember to add your name to the deposit

details so that the Treasurer knows which account to credit with the money.

The Club's bank account details are:- Commonwealth Bank; BSB 063 645 Account number 10038751.

Mt Beauty Foodworks "Spirit of the Community" fund



Mt Beauty Gliding Club points were 2561 as at 16th of June. We received \$33 from the fund early in June.

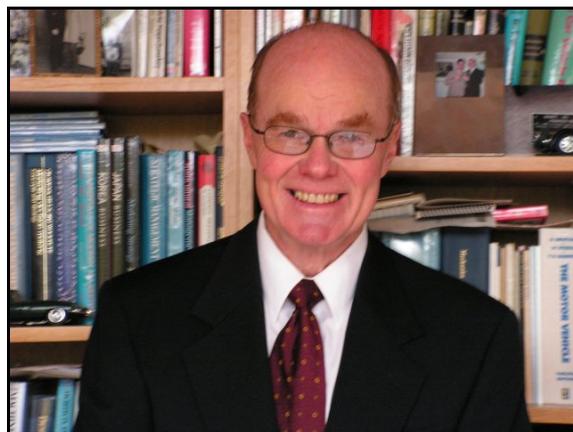
When purchasing any items from the Mt Beauty Foodworks supermarket make sure that you put your points to the Gliding Club – code 1060.

Ian Cohn - Treasurer.

Members and Friends News.

He's A Jolly Good Fellow

Social Member, **John Lyons**, has recently been elected to be a Fellow of the US based Society of Automotive Engineers. John is an Automotive Consulting Engineer based in Tawonga. Congratulations John.



John Lyons, Fellow of the Society of Automotive Engineers.

New House

Real Estate magnate and immediate Past President, **Andrew Evans** and wife **Kerrie**, have moved into a palatial residence in Albury. When's the house warming party Andrew?

Canberra News

Phil O'Bryan reports that he is still keeping the Nation's Capital running almost single handed. He also reports that he has been doing his best to save the planet by cycling to/from work. A couple of months ago, however, this led to him closely inspecting, and, indeed, putting a dent in one of Canberra's most expensive roads. He has recovered from this close encounter of the most unfortunate kind and was sighted at the Mt Beauty Bakery over the Queen's Birthday holiday weekend practicing his CHAOTIC and FUST checks.

Phill Glasson, our Ground maintenance coordinator, reports he is planning a move to Canberra seeking gainful employment in the computer field, although details are a bit sketchy at this stage. So, it looks like we may need a volunteer to take over as Ground

maintenance coordinator. Any volunteers should contact Rod Harris or Mark Bland.

Television Star

Social Member, **Paul Phelan**, recently starred in the ABC Television series "Air Australia" commenting on the Australian Airline Industry in the 1980s and 1990s.

Yvette and Paul Join

Yvette Eriksen has joined MBGC after experiencing a good flight with **Mark Bland** at Easter where they soared up to Mt Bogong. Yvette also convinced partner **Paul Hartley** to join as well and both are now enthusiastic trainees.



Yvette about to launch with Instructor Mark Bland.

Birthday Boy

President, **Rod Harris**, recently celebrated his 60th Birthday. Quite a milestone. Congratulations Rod.

Whirligig Pilot Back in Town Briefly

Social Member, **Ian Douglas**, has recently been back visiting in Albury on a whirlwind visit for his Dad's eightieth birthday (congratulations and happy birthday Dad) and reports that he is building up his helicopter hours flying around Alice Springs and Uluru in the Northern Territory. No word yet, however, on whether he can thermal his helicopter with the engine shut down.

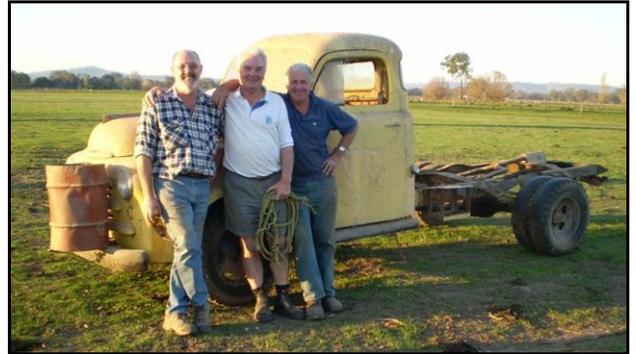
Maintenance Matters

Winch Engine

Phill Glasson, our Ground maintenance coordinator, has been active in planning the upgrade of our winch engine. He located a suitable Ford 350 V8 engine sitting in an old winch that had been used by the now defunct Albury-Wodonga Gliding Cub at Bogong Park just west of Wodonga, and ownership of which had passed to the owner of Bogong Park property. The owner, **Glen**, gave permission to remove the engine so long as the winch body, an old DeSoto truck, was also removed.

Seeing an opportunity, Phill advertised the truck body on Ebay and it was sold off for a good sum. **Phill, Mark, Mike and friend of MBGC, Max Thompson** from Wagga, removed the winch engine and transmission. Another good friend of MBGC, **Ivan**

Clarke, has offered to calibrate and overhaul the engine. The new winch engine and automatic transmission is planned to be fitted to our winch in time for the start of the next soaring season.



Phill, Mike, and Max with the DeSoto Truck. Photo Mark Bland

A jolly good show all round. Thanks Chaps.

Aircraft Maintenance

The end of the soaring season is coming up and we have to plan for the annual inspection on the IS-28. Current plans are to disassemble the IS-28 on Saturday the 30th of June or Sunday 1st of July. So we will be looking for muscle bound wing lifters on this day. Please liaise with Mark Bland if you can help out on this day.

MBGC Current Fees and Charges

Member Category	Full	Assoc-iate	Social	GFA Visitor
Debuture	\$500	\$250	Nil	Nil
Joining Fee	\$100	\$50	Nil	Nil
Annual Fee	\$100	\$50	\$25	Nil
Winch Launch	\$10	\$13	\$13 ¹	\$15
IS-28 Flt Fee Per Minute	\$0.40	\$0.50	\$0.50 ²	\$0.60

¹ 5 launches per annum only - \$15 per launch after 5.

² 2 hours per annum only - \$0.60/min after 2 hours.

For MBGC members, flight time charges cease for flight time beyond two hours.

Air Experience flight fees are \$60 for winch launch for the first ten minutes and \$2 per minute after that. Add \$50 for Aerotow launch.

GFA membership fees

Annual	\$187	Three Month	\$60
Family Annual	\$151	Three day	\$10

MBGC Diary

16th June 2007 - Back at Mt Beauty, MBt, RH, IC, BB, PP, and MBd crewed using the IS-28 and Pilatus. Conditions were sunny with light breezes turning south-westerly at the end of the day. There was one usable thermal. Total flight time was 2h 7m from 14 flights. Longest flight time 35m. Max height 3,700 ft.

11th June 2007 - At Bogong Park. AB, PGn, MBt, RH, and MBd crewed using the Blanik. Wagga GC flew their Blanik with PS. Conditions were overcast with light breezes. There were no usable thermals

available. Total flight time was 2h 3m from 17 flights. Longest flight time 6m. Max height 2,000 ft.

10th June 2007 - At Bogong Park. AB, PGn, MBt, RH, MP, AE, and MBd crewed using the Blanik. Wagga GC flew their Blanik with MT and PS. Conditions were sunny with light breezes. There were one or two usable thermals available. Total flight time was 2h 3m from 17 flights. Longest flight time 18m. Max height 2,000 ft.

9th June 2007 - At Bogong Park. AB, IC, RH, MP, AE, and MBd crewed using the Blanik. Wagga GC brought their Blanik too with MT and GJ. Conditions were sunny with light breezes. There were no usable thermals available. Total flight time was 1h 51m from 16 flights. Longest flight time 11m. Max ht 2,000 ft.

26th May 2007 - KP, IC, BB, RH, MP, PH, PGn and MBd crewed using the IS-28. Conditions were sunny with light breezes. There were no thermals available. Total flight time was 1h 7m from 11 flights. Longest flight time 8m. Max height 2,500 ft.



Bill, Phill, Keith, Mike and Mark after doing a hangar clean-up on 26th May.

25th May 2007 - KP, IC, and MBd crewed using the IS-28. Conditions were partially cloudy with light breezes. There were some weak thermals available. Total flight time was 1h 16m from 9 flights. Longest flight time 13m. Max height 2,500 ft.

19th May 2007 - MP, IC, and MBd crewed using the IS-28 and Blanik. Conditions were overcast with a variable light to moderate northwesterly breeze with a variable cloudbase from 3,000 ft up to about 4,500 ft. Very weak but usable thermals were available with ridge lift available later. Flight time was 2h 10m from 3 flights. Longest flight time 1h 20m. Max ht 2,800 ft.

13th May 2007 - PH, MR, BB, MB, IC, RM, and MBd crewed using the IS-28. Conditions were overcast with a light northwesterly breeze fading to calm later in the afternoon. No usable thermals were available. Total flight time was 1h 12m from 12 flights. Longest flight time 9m.

12th May 2007 - YE, PH, PP, RH, MB, IC, and MBd crewed using the IS-28 and Blanik. Conditions were sunny with a light northwesterly breeze fading to calm later in the afternoon. No usable thermals were available. Total flight time was 1h 44m from 15 flights. Longest flight time 11m.

7th May 2007 - KP, IC, and MP crewed using the IS-28. Conditions were sunny with a light northwesterly breeze fading to calm later in the afternoon. No

usable thermals were available. Total flight time was 51m from 6 flights.



Mark and Kitty on the Windsock repair on 5th May.

6th May 2007 - PH, IC, KV, and MBd crewed using the IS-28. Conditions were partially sunny with hardly any wind. Some very weak thermals were available. Total flight time was 1h 10m from 8 flights.

5th May 2007 - MP, IC, KP, KV, and MBd crewed using the Blanik. Conditions were overcast and calm. No thermals were available. Total flight time was 37m from 6 flights. Windsock repaired after being blown off in Thursday night's storm.

26th April 2007 - MP, IC, and MBd crewed using the Pilatus and the Blanik. Conditions were smoky with variable breezes. No thermals were available. Total flight time was 48m from 6 flights.

25th April 2007 - RH, IC, BB, AE, KP and PGn crewed using the Pilatus and the IS-28. Conditions were smoky with variable breezes and heavy alto-cumulus overcast. Rare thermals from burn off fires and odd sunny patches were available to around 7,000 ft. Total flight time was 3h 34m from 15 flights.

15th April 2007 - MP, IC, and MBd crewed using the Blanik and the IS-28. Conditions were clear with a 5 kt northerly breezes and some cumulus clouds over the higher peaks. Thermals going to 7,000 ft were available. Total flight time was 4h 17m from 2 flights.

The Tail End

This is a recent report from a glider pilot in New Zealand. It puts a whole new perspective on what may be considered to be "normal".

"My short report.

A slow start in weak climbs before getting away in the Mt Hutt wave to 25,000ft. Then heading North to Nelson Lakes I had to fly at 100kts to stay within the FL330 ATC clearance. A number of times I dropped back into sink to avoid going higher or faster in the strong lift. It was extremely cold; everything froze including my Cambridge LCD so I lost navigation data. The wave / cloud patterns extended north to Farwell Spit and as far south as I could see - Invercargill. I felt I could have flown the entire length of the South Island at over 30,000' feet and at warp

speed. However, daylight and cold terminated the flight after ~400km, back to Hororata at about 5 pm.

My true air speed calculator tells me that 100 IAS = 164 TAS @ 32,000 ft. Obviously, the frozen ballast water prevented the onset of flutter. I had to land with full ballast and couldn't de-rig my glider with the still frozen water in the wings. In the failing light I forgot to check the condition of the gel coat but that's not important right now.

The ATC controller didn't seem very impressed when Nick and I called for FL280. Still no reaction when requesting FL300, and FL330. What does it take to impress this man. Didn't he realise just how cool this was? One benefit of flying this high, and with ATC block clearances is that most of the jet traffic is passing below and ATC don't call up very often.

A good session in the Hororata pub afterwards.

Let's do it again, but with warmer clothing.

John."

Battery Safety - A Cautionary Tale

From the Canada Roundtable newsletter via Gliding Magazine International:

One of our members was bringing his Discus out to the airfield in its Cobra trailer. As he got close to the airfield, he noticed what he thought was dust rising from the trailer but thought nothing of it since he was on dusty back roads. When he pulled into Air Sailing and stopped by the hangar, he looked back and realized the trailer was on fire! He quickly pulled it out into the runway and away from the hangar, unhooked his van from the trailer and in a few short minutes the trailer was engulfed in flames while he retrieved a fire extinguisher from the hangar.

The Discus and trailer are a total loss. The fire was so intense the aluminum top of the trailer disappeared and puddles of aluminum formed on the ground. Nothing is left of the glider except some twisted metal fittings and some carbon fibre strands. The bottom of the trailer is heavily damaged but not destroyed and the tires didn't even catch fire. The scene looks like those spontaneous combustion pictures we marveled at as teenagers where all that was left was the shoes.

It is too early to determine the cause conclusively but it is believed the glider batteries, which were sitting on the floor at the front of the trailer with some cleaning rags, may have somehow ignited the rags and started the fire. Perhaps one fell over and shorted out when it made contact with the trailer. All that is left of the batteries are the lead plates.

Take care when transporting batteries!!! Take them out of the glider and put them securely into a closed box like a marine battery box. Do not store them in your glider trailer!

Thomas Knauff
tknauff@earthlink.net

www.eglider.org

EASTER CAMP

By VMFG Member Roger Druce

This year's camp at Mount Beauty featured the best weather we have seen for decades at this time of year.

OK, Yes ... We did lose the first day, Good Friday, due to the wind being just sufficiently strong from the south that one was forced to operate launching into the south. This doesn't work well for a large operation. But more importantly there are serious hassles with towing up the slight slope to the south and towing over the lake and town at low height. Added to this is the effect of weak/strong down draughts due to the southerly airflow falling down the hills behind the town. So we left it to a few hardy souls to winch launch that day.

After that, every day for the next 8 days was flyable and my Duo Discus averaged more than 5 hours a day for seven days. By the middle of the week on getting up in the morning one started to feel that the weather would go stable, but it did not happen.

Longest distance flight by a VMFG member was by Neil Burns in EV who flew around 400 km Mt Beauty to Mt Kosciuszko to Mt Buller and return twice.

During the week Phillip Volk in the club's Hornet made his Silver C 5 hours with a flight of 5 hours 50 minutes. This was a good effort because whilst the available soaring day that day was long it still requires serious application to staying up at Mt Beauty given that often the average rate of climb in thermals over the flight may only be 1 to 2 knots.

Caleb White, lead member of the Kookaburra Precision Soaring Team, entertained those left on the ground with a demonstration of winch launching followed by four minute circuits, so short time wise that they are notable! To give him his due, he flew the Kooka above the top of Mt Bogong more than once.

The social side was excellent. We had a Saturday evening get together for all gliding people hosted by the Mt Beauty club's CFI Ian Cohn with great assistance from his wife Susie. Then on Sunday Tim Wilson and his partner Siew Ang hosted and cooked a wonderful Chinese banquet for members.

Thursday generated interest with weak waves encountered with the wind coming from slightly west of south (200 degrees) at only 30 km per hour. Very unusual. Ben and I just stumbled into a large area of weak smooth lift over the west end of the Bogong High Plains and at about 2,000 ft above ground. Earlier the thermal lift had been weak and broken. Could the smooth lift be wave? Only one way to test this idea and that was to note the GPS position and circle at a shallow bank angle (to minimise the extra sink generated by turning) trying to hold the best climb rate, 1 to 2 knots. After a few circles drifting with the wind, one encountered turbulence on the downwind side of the circle that seemed to be weak rotor, and the lift weakened. Then one flew back into wind to where the lift improved again and repeated the process. Eventually 11,500 ft absolute was achieved, and yes it is good to have oxygen on board ready for use. To stay high we were forced to test the waves downstream. We worked downwind

through four wave lift bands on a seven km wavelength and we had the impression that the waves were slowly travelling.

I think the second last day Friday was the best offering 6 hours 20 minutes and 380 km accompanied by Ian Cohn of Mt Beauty. Climbing up Mt Bogong at the start I tried going towards Mt Kosciuszko. This trip started with a long glide across the Mitta Mitta valley in dead air at maximum glide ratio. Eventually modest cumulus were reached short of Mt Benambra the first key stepping stone along the way and one could climb happily back to cloudbase. However the visibility was terrible, the worst I can recollect and was getting worse the more east one went due to burning-off fires the day before. I went further east to test the possibility but again the prospect was for a long glide without cumulus on the way. Then again where was Mt Kosciuszko out in the murk, or other key points such as Mt Youngal? In the absence of these points stored in the GPS to enable spot on navigation it was not satisfactory to continue.

So we turned around and went back via Mt Bogong & Falls Creek and then on to Mt Buller around 120 km to the west. At three in the afternoon at Mount Buller there was a very nice line of cumulus leading to the south and the possibility of trying this line was tempting provided you didn't look down at the rugged terrain. However, it meant flying further away from home with the sun's power weakening towards late afternoon. Sadly we left the possibility for another time. Returning home it became a task of staying up later than Neil Burns and a great amount of effort was expended on this task, but to no avail because Neil had elected to land and de-rig his glider immediately after his Kosciuszko-Buller trip.

On Saturday we packed up after a few flights and left the locals to a day that came good later.

Text extract from the VMFG newsletter – "Glide Angle"

Queen's Birthday Weekend @ BOGONG PARK

from Mark Bland

About six weeks ago while dismantling the old Albury/Wodonga winch, I thought it might be a good idea to have a gliding weekend back at the Bogong Park airstrip.



Adam Bland with sister Amanda in VH-GYJ at Bogong Park

It must have been almost twelve years since any gliding had taken place there when the old Wodonga club amalgamated and moved to the Corowa Club. The airstrip, situated about 20km west of Albury on the Murray Valley Hwy, traditionally used to get quite a few tourists drop in for an Air Experience Flights on

their way to the wineries. A few phone calls to get expressions of interest including some of the Wagga / Lockhart members and permission from the landowner and the planning was under way.

The plan was to use our mobile winch and Blanik GYJ, as well as inviting the Wagga club to also send a Blanik. I figured being the middle of winter there wouldn't be much lift so the two Blaniks would keep the little winch more than busy. This proved to be the case with 44 launches carried out over the three days. Saturday and Sunday were beautiful still sunny days while Monday started off foggy and then cleared to a cool overcast day but 10 flights were still done.



Grant Johnson and Max Thompson from Wagga.

Although we only got about six AEF's on Sunday, the ten MBTY / Wagga members who attended all got lots of circuits and had a good time flying somewhere new and close to Albury and Wodonga.

On Saturday night we all gathered at Mark and Susanne's to sit around the bonfire and enjoy some hot soup and casserole and plenty of other refreshments. We also sang Happy Birthday to Rod Harris, who we discovered was celebrating his sixtieth birthday on the Sunday. Along with Corryong this could become another annual event!

An SR-71 Story - from the Internet via Mark Bland

There were a lot of things we couldn't do in an SR-71, but we were the fastest guys on the block and loved reminding our fellow aviators of this fact. People often asked us if, because of this fact, it was fun to fly the jet. Fun would not be the first word I would use to describe flying this plane. Intense, maybe, even cerebral. But there was one day in our Sled experience when we would have to say that it was pure fun to be the fastest guys out there, at least for a moment.

It occurred when Walt and I were flying our final training sortie. We needed 100 hours to complete our training and attain Mission Ready status. Somewhere over Colorado we had passed the century mark. We had made the turn in Arizona and the jet was performing flawlessly. My gauges were wired in the front seat and we were starting to feel pretty good about ourselves, not only because we would soon be flying real missions but because we had gained a great deal of confidence in the plane in the past ten months. Ripping across the barren deserts 80,000 feet below us, I could already see the coast of California from the Arizona border. I was, finally, after many humbling months of simulators and study, ahead of the jet.

I was beginning to feel a bit sorry for Walter in the back seat. There he was, with no really good view of the incredible sights before us, tasked with monitoring four different radios. This was good practice for him for when we began flying real missions, when a priority transmission from headquarters could be vital. It had been difficult, too, for me to relinquish control of the radios, as during my entire flying career I had controlled my own transmissions. But it was part of the division of duties in this plane and I had adjusted to it. I still insisted on talking on the radio while we were on the ground, however. Walt was so good at many things, but he couldn't match my expertise at sounding smooth on the radios, a skill that had been honed sharply with years in fighters where the slightest radio miscue was grounds for beheading. He understood that and allowed me that luxury. Just to get a sense of what Walt had to contend with, I pulled the radio toggle switches and monitored frequencies along with him.



An SR-71 in flight.

The predominant radio chatter was from Los Angeles Center, far below us, controlling daily traffic in their sector. While they had us on their scope (albeit briefly), we were in uncontrolled airspace and normally would not talk to them unless we needed to descend into their airspace. We listened as the shaky voice of a lone Cessna pilot asked Center for a readout of his ground speed. Center replied: "November Charlie 175, I'm showing you at ninety knots on the ground."

Now the thing to understand about Center controllers, was that whether they were talking to a rookie pilot in a Cessna, or to Air Force One, they always spoke in the exact same, calm, deep, professional, tone that made one feel important. I referred to it as the "HoustonCenterVoice". I have always felt that after years of seeing documentaries on this country's space program and listening to the calm and distinct voice of the Houston Center Controllers, that all other controllers since then wanted to sound like that... and that they basically did. And it didn't matter what sector of the country we would be flying in, it always seemed like the same guy was talking. Over the years that tone of voice had become somewhat of a comforting sound to pilots everywhere. Conversely, over the years, pilots always wanted to ensure that, when transmitting, they sounded like Chuck Yeager, or at least like John Wayne. Better to die than sound bad on the radios. Just moments after the Cessna's inquiry, a Twin Beech piped up on frequency, in a rather superior tone, asking for his ground speed. "Ah, Twin Beech: I have you at one hundred and

twenty-five knots of ground speed." Boy, I thought, the Beech really must think he is dazzling his Cessna brethren.

Then out of the blue, a Navy F-18 pilot out of NAS Lemoore came up on frequency. You knew right away it was a Navy jock because he sounded very cool on the radios. "Center, Dusty 52 ground speed check." Before Center could reply, I'm thinking to myself, hey, Dusty 52 has a ground speed indicator in that million dollar cockpit, so why is he asking Center for a readout? Then I got it -- ol' Dusty here is making sure that every bug smasher from Mount Whitney to the Mojave knows what true speed is. He's the fastest dude in the valley today, and he just wants everyone to know how much fun he is having in his new Hornet. And the reply, always with that same, calm, voice, with more distinct alliteration than emotion: "Dusty 52, Center, we have you at 620 on the ground." And I thought to myself, is this a ripe situation, or what? As my hand instinctively reached for the mic button, I had to remind myself that Walt was in control of the radios. Still, I thought, it must be done --- in mere seconds we'll be out of the sector and the opportunity will be lost. That Hornet must die, and die now.

I thought about all of our Sim training and how important it was that we developed well as a crew and knew that to jump in on the radios now would destroy the integrity of all that we had worked toward becoming. I was torn. Somewhere, 13 miles above Arizona, there was a pilot screaming inside his space helmet. Then, I heard it. The click of the mic button from the back seat. That was the very moment that I knew Walter and I had become a crew. Very professionally, and with no emotion, Walter spoke: "Los Angeles Center, Aspen 20, request a ground speed check?" There was no hesitation, and the reply came as if it was an everyday request:

"Aspen 20, I show you at one thousand eight hundred and forty-two knots, across the ground." I think it was the 42 knots that I liked the best, so accurate and proud was Center to deliver that information without hesitation, and you just knew he was smiling. But the precise point at which I knew that Walt and I were going to be really good friends for a long time was when he keyed the mic once again to say, in his most fighter- pilot-like voice: "Ah, Center, much thanks. We're showing closer to nineteen hundred on the money." For a moment Walter was a god. And we finally heard a little crack in the armor of the HoustonCenterVoice, when L.A. came back with, "Roger that Aspen, Your equipment is probably more accurate than ours. You boys have a good one."

It all had lasted for just moments, but in that short, memorable sprint across the southwest, the Navy had been flamed, all mortal airplanes on freq were forced to bow before the King of Speed, and more importantly, Walter and I had crossed the threshold of being a crew. A fine day's work.

We never heard another transmission on that frequency all the way to the coast. For just one day, it truly was fun being the fastest guys out there.