



*Deaf and hearing-impaired pilots can fly 'NORDO' or 'no-radio' in the UK, and a young aviator is working to encourage more deaf people to fly, as **Liz Moscrop** reports*

John Donovan is a man with a mission. As a trainee gliding instructor he wants to promote the sport to other pilots – however, he is especially keen to get other deaf pilots into the air. John, deaf from birth, also wants to teach instructors how to teach deaf people. John's speech is clear, and he can hear well enough with his hearing aids, but he is also a fluent signer who can lip-read, and he checks what people are saying by reading their lips in a mirror in the cockpit.

It's been an interesting journey for him so far, and has included an encounter with a lust struck tutor in France. "Do you like girls?" Profoundly deaf John was not sure he had heard the instructor's question correctly. It seemed like an unusual addition to a checklist. All became clear when they flew over a nearby nudist beach, only to surprise its sole occupants – two blokes playing volleyball. John laughs: "It served him (the instructor) right."

Although that lesson was in France, John's usual stamping grounds are either Shenington or Enstone Gliding Clubs in the UK. At 26, he has been flying for half his life. He says: "It was my dad's influence that got me started. He learned to fly at 40. I was 13 years old and flew the odd flight with him. When I was 15 he



told me that if passed my GCSEs with good marks I could have a gliding course. It was a great incentive." He is proud of each milestone he has achieved since, particularly his first solo circuit and his cross-country flights. One of the tests he has had to pass was to stay airborne for over five hours. He did this near Banbury in Oxfordshire and achieved 5hr 33 min in the air. Thankfully, he was well equipped with sunglasses, sun cream and a hat.

Each time he achieves a goal with his flying he sets another target. He says: "Every time you do something new you get that kick again." Today he holds an NPPL and is studying for his assistant gliding instructor's licence. There are three levels of gliding instructor's licences in the UK and the British

**Top: trainee instructor John in the back of a K13 with instructor Derek Woodforth
Above: using a rear-view mirror John can lip-read what his students are saying**

Gliding Association (BGA) agreed that John should skip the first and go straight to the second, so he will not have to keep flying with strangers.

He kindly offered to take me as his passenger in the front seat off a tandem trainer to show me how a lesson would work. Since he is still a student instructor he could not legally teach me. After we'd strapped our parachutes on (a safety precaution which, incidentally, John has never seen used) we were winched into the air by a

tow truck. It feels like a steep take off, although is actually only the same angle as an ordinary light aircraft.

Once airborne, it is beautifully silent, leaving you free to enjoy the sensation of flight and the views around you. In order to communicate John placed a small mirror, like a car's rear view mirror, on the canopy in front of me. He could then see what his "pupil" was saying. Most of my words were along the lines of "Isn't this fantastic?" as the day was clear and the scenery around Shenington stunning. John caught a thermal and climbed us to 1,400 feet. It was a blustery day, and he did not want to drift too far from the field, so we stayed airborne for around 10 minutes. John had to grapple with a strong crosswind on the landing area, but that only added to the fun. Although he could not give me a lesson, he talked me through all the manoeuvres he performed and clearly has the ability to teach, both on a practical level – he can communicate well despite of his deafness, and an instinctive level – he has a natural gift for instructing.

John's face lights up when he talks of potential gliding challenges. "There are always more goals, distances and targets." His aims are high – as high as gliders can climb. In 2006 Steve Fossett and Einar Enevoldson took a Perlan glider up to 51,671 feet into the stratosphere, and there are stories of pilots in Scotland achieving 40,000 feet. John, who owns a two-seater DG505 semi aerobatic cross-country soaring glider, says he would like to go to New Zealand, the "glider pilots' heaven", and achieve longer cross-country distances.

US flying

John's day job is as a mechanical design engineer and he has taken some of his colleagues flying. He spends his holidays enjoying his passion. In 2006 and 2007 he went to the annual Deaf Pilots' Association (DPA) gathering in the USA and met 200 other deaf pilots. As with many forms of aviation, the US offers great opportunities for pilots. Deaf people can fly anywhere where a radio is not required. This covers a lot of sky. There are more than 13,000 airports in the United States, and fewer than 700 of them have control towers which require radio contact with pilots. The rest are uncontrolled and accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing pilots. As long as they follow the set procedures when flying into and out of airports, all is well.

Matthew Herrman, a DPA board member, is a certified commercial pilot. His licence allows him to fly crop dusters or skydivers' aircraft non-radio. He has flown more than 365 different types of plane. He says: "The challenges of being a deaf pilot are flying without radio contact, having to watch air traffic all the time, and meeting people who couldn't believe deaf people can be pilots." There is no reason why a hearing instructor cannot teach a deaf pilot to fly. The DPA website details how one pilot learned by reading his instructor's lips, using flashcards and communicating by written notes. That applied both on the ground and in the air. John believes this is achievable in the UK. Thanks to his signing skills he says: "I can bridge that gap between hearing instructors who cannot sign and people who only sign."

The DPA website is a great resource to learn more about flying. The newsletters are packed with information and useful tips. In the Fall 2006 issue instructor Mel Futrell wrote: "I am frequently asked by deaf people and hearing

pilots alike, 'How can a deaf person fly without being able to use the radio?' This is an understandable question on the part of the non-pilot who is not aware of flight rules and the role of radio communications in aviation. But for the hearing aviator, familiar with Visual Flight Rules, uncontrolled airports and lost communication procedures, this is a less tolerable transgression. I know people who fly old vintage aircraft that are not equipped with radios. Pilots do not seem to ask them how they fly without being able to use the radio. Why does their understanding fall short of the individual, when it is so readily afforded to the machine? The answer may lie in taking the social stigma out and putting procedure in its place. I was once browsing through an aviation forum and came across an avid discussion about the do's and don'ts of flying NORDO (short for "No Radio"). A submission by Henry Kisor caught my eye, and my consideration. 'I'm permanent NORDO.' So: 'They're just permanent NORDO' is my now patent response to these aviator queries."

Europe's skies

The position in the UK is that if you can hear with aids and prove that you can communicate the CAA will accept that you could pass a JAR medical so long as you carry a spare set of aids in the cockpit – similar to pilots who wear glasses. If you cannot hear with hearing equipment and cannot use the radio you can still pass the NPPL medical. John says: "Airfields in the UK need prior permission to land there, and technically you should be able to phone in advance and say you have no radio. I can also tell people that I cannot hear very well and make blind calls." He would not fly solo in controlled airspace as he finds the radio too difficult. John often flies long cross-country flights with another hearing pilot who does the radio calls. He has been on many enjoyable trips this way, including to France.

France is home to Henri Corderoy du Tiers, president of the French Deaf Aero Club. An active campaigner for deaf pilots, Henri is the European representative to the International

Deaf Pilots' Association (IDPA) and to IAOPA. He is a private pilot with more than 730 flight hours and a motorised ultralight pilot. He has held a world speed record in the light twin-engine aircraft category as a co-pilot, flying a Cessna C310 from Mayotte, Comores to Mombassa, Kenya. In 1988 he filed a lawsuit against the French Medical Advisory Board for taking away his flying licence because of his deafness.

Elsewhere in Europe, Sweden produced the World Flight for Hearing in 2006. This was a unique round the world flight in a light aircraft undertaken by Johan Hammarström, then aged 28 with 1,000 hours in his logbook. Johan, along with Henrik Ejderholm and Martin Håkansson was the first pilot with a severe hearing impairment to complete a world circumnavigation in a light aircraft. Flying a DA42, the team set out in March 2006 from Sweden and returned in August.

The DPA points out that since aviation started deaf and hard of hearing people have flown aircraft solo. Cal Rodgers was the first deaf pilot – trained by the Wright Brothers, he flew from New York to California in 1911. The world's first deaf female pilot was Nellie Zabel Willhite from Yankton, South Dakota, who got her licence in 1928.

So if you are deaf or hearing impaired, where can you go to learn to fly? John is keen to hear from other deaf people who would like to try gliding. He says: "I want to set up a group for deaf pilots in the UK." He has contacted the British Disabled Flying Association, who will put him in touch with other deaf aviators, and invites any deaf people who are interested to contact him on jtdono@googlemail.com. ■

Other resources that may be helpful:

www.worldflightforhearing.com
<http://deafaviator.blogspot.com/2007/11/wel-come-deaf-pilots.html>
<http://www.volez.com/aeroclub-sourds/GB/index.html>
www.deafpilots.com



John Donovan (right) with (left) Henri Corderoy du Tiers of the French Deaf Aero Club