

Good companions



Turning flying into a family affair has all-round benefits, as a group of Navy pilots are proving. By Pat Malone

Does your partner fly with you? If so, you're one of the lucky ones. Anecdotal evidence suggests that general aviation is rarely a shared passion in families, and that going flying is something that a chap (he's predominantly male) does with his mates (so are they).

Need it be so? An encouraging experiment currently under way at RNAS Yeovilton indicates that given the right approach, partners who are trepidatious, reluctant or dismissive at the outset can come to enjoy and even enthuse about flying. A sensitive, constructive and low-pressure introduction to aviation can make all the difference to an ambivalent other half's life. Half a dozen ladies whose husbands fly have taken to the cockpit and, using a modified version of the AOPA Companions Course, have become interested and useful flyers, in one case even going solo and planning to pursue a PPL.

The Fleet Air Arm's Yeovilton Flying Club is quite special, not only in having the use of a well-equipped Naval airfield, but in enjoying the sort of camaraderie that is not always a feature of flying schools. Open primarily to serving or former members of the armed forces, it also casts its net into the wider community but retains a close-knit atmosphere in which experiments like this can thrive.

But such a programme needs a motivating force, and that comes in the form of Michael Ryan, a former Fleet Air Arm Sea Vixen pilot, current Senior Pilot of the Fleet Air Arm Squadron and Vice President of AOPA, who has got his teeth into the idea of flying

partnerships and is gently nudging people in that direction. The fact that all the 'companions' are female is accidental and immaterial; they might just as easily be male, although one tends to find that where women are qualified pilots, their partners already have an aviation bent.

Michael Ryan says: "The basic idea of the AOPA Companions Course is that people who fly regularly as front-seat passengers should be able to navigate safely to an airfield and land should the pilot become incapacitated. While our companions course does the same thing, it differs from AOPA's in some ways; it need not all be conducted by a qualified flying instructor, it is more readily tailored to the needs of the individual, and it seeks to equip people psychologically for the task, which is very much a Fleet Air Arm thing."

Four of the six people on the course flew into Bembridge on a hazy September Saturday to have lunch, which is in keeping with the course's aims of enjoying the purpose of the flight (lunch), going somewhere nice (Isle of Wight) and providing mutual support (two aircraft, six flyers and a very congenial atmosphere). Lunch was laid on by Maurice Hynett, deputy chairman of Britten Norman Ltd and an active member of the FAA Squadron – they look after each other, these people. The girls are at different stages in the course, ranging from two hours in the right seat to three hours solo. The course has no particular length, and indeed can become an open-ended 'learning for life' programme.

Sandra Potepa's husband Stefan got his PPL at Yeovilton at the age of 50, and Sandra

Above: The group at Bembridge - from left, Dave Cooper, Charlie Ryan, Michael Ryan, Julie Cooper, Sandra Potepa, Clare Cooke
Below: Former Sea Vixen pilot Michael Ryan, the driving force behind the programme



initially had no intention of learning to fly. "I joined the club for the social side with no intention of taking the controls," she said. "I flew with my husband but I didn't really enjoy the experience. Then Michael suggested I start this course. And in fact, it has changed my outlook. I've only just started, but I find that being useful adds something, even if it's just being able to change the radio frequency. The fact that I can contribute brings a new dimension to it." Sandra is now planning to take lessons with a view to getting her PPL.

Julie Cooper, who flew into Bembridge with her husband Dave in a YFC Cherokee, was reluctant to fly with Dave in his CAP 10B when their children were young, but now that the youngest is 15 she feels able to do so. "I'm enjoying learning what it's all about," she says. "Some of my fears have been dispelled, and although it will never be a passion with me, I find I do enjoy it and look forward to flying with my husband."

Clare Cooke has taken matters furthest, having gone solo four times. "I intend to carry on and get my PPL," says Clare, whose husband Henry owns two aircraft, a Piston Provost and a Jet Provost. "If someone had said to me, come and have flying lessons and get your PPL, I would have reacted badly – but I met Michael and his wife Charlie and I was intrigued to find that Charlie was learning about flying. They suggested gently that I have a go, which is not as intimidating as 'Come and learn to fly'. It had to come from a third party, too – you wouldn't necessarily listen to your husband.

"I'd flown with Henry, but it makes an enormous difference to be an interested party rather than a piece of baggage. And once the ball is rolling, one thing leads to another. I quite quickly decided to get my licence, and I went solo in 14 hours. I've flown solo four times and I'm looking forward to my qualifying cross country, but my goal is to do a loop in the Piston Provost, and I intend to do that this year.

"It's not what I would have expected in a million years, but I put it down firstly to having the impetus from Michael and Charlie, and secondly to having this support network



of people who are doing something similar."

Michael Ryan, who owns a beautiful TB10, says: "Charlie has flown with me, but not enthusiastically. There's a nervousness that stems from lack of understanding, and I have been keen to overcome that by showing people why we do what we do, and how safe we seek to make it.

"So the course starts with ground school, when I draw an analogy with driving a car. How much recurrent training do you do after you've got your driving licence? How do you do your daily checks, your 'pre-drive' checks of the car? How do you formalise your regular checks when you're driving? And of course, they do none of these things, which impresses

on them that we have a very different approach to safety in aviation. We progress to more sophisticated ideas, like teaching them to recognise the development of a chain which might lead to an incident, and to break it.

"Then they're taken for an instructional flight, with our chief instructor David MacKay helping out; but each flight fits the requirements of each person, and there's no rigid structure, although we fit in as much of the AOPA Flying Companions syllabus as possible. We find some are amazing – one lady confidently flew the ILS at Yeovilton on her first attempt and kept the wires in the middle all the way. What has surprised me is

Above: Julie Cooper and Sandra Potepa at Bembridge; both now enjoy flying with their husbands

Left: Clare Cooke, who has gone solo, aims to fly the Piston Provost this year



the level of enthusiasm as they switch from being reticent and perhaps reluctant to wanting to do more, and the growing confidence that makes them a real asset on a flight, rather than a passenger, and in some cases leads them on to become pilots themselves.

"Other pilots at the club are terribly jealous – they say, 'Oh, your wife flies with you? You're so lucky to have a wife who's interested.' But really it's just a matter of approaching the idea in the right way, and making it relevant."

Could the concept work at any club? It needs a central figure like Michael to take control, bring everyone together and push things along. The AOPA Companions Course is more instructor-focussed and probably suits more flying clubs, and several partners (mostly ladies) have successfully completed it. Details are available on the AOPA website www.aopa.co.uk or from the office on 0207 834 5631. ■