

Freedom of the skies for disabled youngsters



By Sarah Brodie

The West London Aero Club at White Waltham airfield played host to the Douglas Bader – Seb Farrow family fun flying day in August, giving some 40 disabled children and their families a chance to experience flight in a light aircraft.

This is not the first time the WLAC has held such a charitable event, but it was a first opportunity for many of the disabled youngsters and their families to have not only a day out at a beautiful and historic airfield, but to leave the ground and have a free taster flight courtesy of WLAC members.

In July Catherine Loudwell, WLAC's operations manager, sent an email to club members explaining that the club would be working with the Douglas Bader Foundation and inviting pilots to help by offering enthusiastic disabled children and their family members a sample flight.

The day was thought up by Mirelle Farrow, whose son Seb was tragically killed in an accident in California five years ago. She has lovely memories of her son flying out of White Waltham, and felt that she wanted to do something to remember him by, while also giving children some equally happy times at the airfield. She had previously worked with the Douglas Bader Foundation and decided to bring White Waltham and the charity together.

Some 40 disabled children and teenagers aged between 6 and 18 came to enjoy a thrilling and adventurous day out. Extra facilities were set up at the airfield, gazebos were erected and a picnic lunch prepared. After a grey and rotten week we were worried about the weather, but Sunday August 7th turned out to be a beautiful day in more ways than one. Visibility was fantastic.

Looking to the right on take-off from 03, the children saw the London skyline looking at its most amazing, with the new Wembley arch

now dominating the view. The lawn in front of the clubhouse was full of people and the atmosphere was buzzing, with a small brass band playing 1940s music that really fitted with White Waltham's history – Douglas Bader could have walked right in.

The notorious Group Captain Sir Douglas Bader, a second world war fighter pilot and double amputee, had a deep passion for flying and possessed a fearless, positive and encouraging attitude to life. After the war, when he took up a civilian role with Shell aircraft operations, he came to recognise that there were people in less fortunate positions than himself, and he set about improving the lot of disabled people.

Friends and family formed the Douglas Bader Foundation in the early 1990's. The foundation encompasses many initiatives including 'get on with your life' schemes for disabled individuals, and residential weekends for child amputees. There is also a Douglas Bader rehabilitation centre at Queen Mary's Hospital, West London. I'm sure he would have been pleased to see so many disabled children take to the air, as he would have known what a positive impact the day would have had on their lives.

For the pilots, it is always a pleasure to take up a passenger and to share the same exhilaration they feel every time they fly. White Waltham was extremely busy, with movements per minute on the field comparable with JFK. Some pilots did more than ten flights on the day. That sort of enthusiasm for the event came from everyone – from operations staff and ground crew to the event coordinators and bar staff.

WLAC club aircraft were made available throughout the day, including C-172 and PA28s. An Extra 300 and a Yak-52 were available for aerobatics for the more daring

Above: Pilot Sarah Brodie with passenger Natalie Brown, aged 7
Right: Douglas Bader statue at Goodwood

passengers. A selection of private 150s, Cherokees and Warriors completed the fleet.

Many children saw it as a challenge and wanted to learn about the aircraft and take control. Even if they needed help to make certain movements, it gave a real sense of achievement for both pilot and kids to see passengers attempt to hold the plane straight and level or make a turn for the first time. It was heart-warming to see faces light up when the aeroplane actually responded to their inputs. On returning to the ground they told their friends: "Wow, I turned the plane left," and "I saw London" in breathless voices.

These children and families got some indelible memories from the day, and were inspired by seeing the world from an entirely different perspective and taking part in an activity they never thought they could do. The whole day was a pleasure for all those involved.

For information on West London Aero Club or the Douglas Bader Foundation email ops@wlac.co.uk or the douglasbaderfdn@btinternet.com ■

