

Aerial Photography over Portlethen

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I've had a love of aircraft and all things flying for a great many years; I guess I could trace it all back to when my brother and I had a pack of "Top Trumps" (remember them; best speed, power, passengers and so on, to win cards from your opponent). This passion also carried on with my wife as we managed to visit RAF Leuchars a couple of times to see their excellent annual air show (usually early September). Anyway, a couple of years ago, as Christmas approached I couldn't think of what I would like. We had purchased a computer a year or so previously, so I thought about getting the latest Flight Sim software and a Force Feedback Joystick to operate it. Fortunately for me, Santa was generous!

After a couple of years of Flight Sim and once again struggling to think of another present, I thought; how about an actual flight? I reasoned with my wife (oops, I mean Santa) that it is one of these things you have to do before you are 40 (although I still have another year before that milestone).

The flight was supposed to be mid June, on our Wedding Anniversary, but due to the bad weather it had to be postponed which is quite ironic really, as the previous days had possibly seen the best weather of the year! The flight was re-arranged for a couple of days later. Waking up that day there were blue skies (hooray) but as the time ticked by clouds built up and there were showers. Arriving at the Flying Club I was told that the final say, about whether I would be going up, would rest with the instructor. Fortunately, when he arrived, he reckoned that we could still go up.

First of all, I had a 15 – 20 minute briefing covering such things as the three "axis" of the aircraft (Longitudinal; along the length of the aircraft, Lateral; wing tip to wing tip and Normal; up from the "floor" through the "roof"), the aircraft controls and surfaces (Elevators for pitch, Ailerons for roll and Rudder for yaw), how they work and affect the flight of the aircraft as well as skimming through various items such as why the tail on the Cessna is slightly skewed rather than symmetrical – something to do with the slipstream around the aircraft and the "corkscrew" airflow developed by the propeller and covering the "Trim" control; this is a small, extra, flap that is only on the right hand elevator – but more about this, and my efforts to use it, later.



After the briefing, as Dave, the instructor, was checking the plane over, a Cessna 152, "Golf Romeo November", a shower blew through the airport, "oh oh" I thought, "this doesn't look good". But no, it was still going ahead! Dave came back in and phoned the Tower to alert them we were shortly going to be moving out.

Once we got into the aircraft, the first thing that was noticeable was what a tight squeeze it was! Being just a "smidge" over 6ft tall the seat had to go all the way back (could have done with even more legroom). Dave commenced going through the pre-start-up checklist then fired up the engine and we started taxiing as far as we could go at this stage, about 30 yards! The Tower told us we had to wait in the queue; there were several commercial aircraft and helicopters both landing and taking off. As Dave had explained earlier; "we are second class citizens at the airport". As we waited, a 737 landed in front of us. I commented to Dave that my toddler could recognise a 737 from miles away, mind you, just about any plane that passes over Portlethen is an "ee-seven" to him, whether it really is a 737, Airbus, ATP, Embraer, Dash-8 or a Saab!

After a 15 minute wait, taking off was quite an eye opener. As many people will have experienced in larger jet liners, on lifting off a certain angle is achieved and this will be maintained until the required altitude is gained. I thought that with this being an ickle plane the takeoff would involve quite a low angle of attack and it would flatten off quite quickly. No, totally wrong, once we took off we hit 10 degrees and maintained this until we reached height, it was quite amazing pull for the comparatively low speed. We then passed directly over my work premises, which are situated near the side of the runway, I had previously joked with my colleagues to watch out for a light plane "buzzing" the building, "permission for flypast – permission denied" (Topgun).



After taking off we headed straight down the River Don towards Aberdeen beach (still gaining height). At the beach we levelled off and headed down the coast, getting some amazing views of the harbour then the cliffs around Cove and the sandpits around Marywell. At Portlethen I got my opportunity to take the pictures, almost hanging out of the window to get the best quality images! Once my window was popped open the slipstream held it up against the wing. Fortunately, for being a dull day, the pictures came out really well. We circled around a couple of times, managing to fly directly over our house. Once I had got quite a number of images we headed south towards Stonehaven and then on to Inverbervie.

Dave had earlier asked Radar to keep us informed of any other aircraft movement out of “controlled airspace” that might affect us as we headed further South, as we intended getting as far as Edzell, a notorious route for fast jets heading out on manoeuvres. Sure enough, when we were approaching Laurencekirk we were given warning that there were three flights of fast moving traffic heading out of RAF Leuchars and heading our way, to head into the hills. I did try to keep a look out for them, but as they would have been skimming the ground at speed it was an impossible task.



Around Laurencekirk and Edzell, I was handed the controls to give me a feel for what happens; such as when the yoke is pulled back, pushed forward, rotated left and rotated right. It seems obvious now, but, for instance, pulling back makes the plane start to climb (that's the obvious bit), but then centralising the control will just allow the plane to continue to climb at that same rate; centralising the control doesn't cause the nose to drop; you have to push the yoke back in and then centralise a second time for level flight to be achieved.

There is a Trim Wheel, I could understand the function, but getting it to work effectively was beginning to frustrate me. The Trim Wheel, when used/balanced properly, allows a lot of the flying to be done without much pilot input! The plane can oscillate around for a while until the correct level/speed/attitude is achieved for the setting but once set; it is more-or-less possible to go hands-free!

Once we were past Dunnottar, heading home (I again hung out of the window taking photos), I was given the opportunity to fly again. Dave asked me to head straight for a boat (the one usually moored near Nigg Bay / Girdleness Lighthouse) and maintain height (1000ft). Easy enough, you may think, but there was still a fair amount of turbulence and showers. I managed to get in the vicinity of the boat when I was asked to bank around slightly to line up with a far headland and this brought us, through a rain shower, to the Donmouth Estuary. At this point, Dave took over and he contacted Aberdeen Tower for instructions. We were told we were eighth in line, behind various aircraft and helis.

Although there were occasional large gaps behind landing aircraft, due to possible vortices behind them we couldn't risk landing. So, we circled around Bridge of Don five times! Eventually the last aircraft passed by, a Loganair Islander, not the fastest plane there is!



It was then back to the airport, Dave lined up with the runway and started adjusting the throttle, twiddling the Trim control and generally checking all the buttons, settings etc. After landing smoothly we taxied up to the Flying Club. Once the engine was switched off Dave jumped out, I struggled out and we then had to push the plane back onto its stand, placing chocks around the wheels. We then had a quick debrief on how I found the flight etc. Superb, of course!

I guess I have passed on the flying bug to our toddler as he pesters me with "you goin' to fly a plane on the 'pooter, today dad", he loves looking through aeroplane magazines and I have hung numerous small model planes from his bedroom ceiling as well as telling him the type of any aircraft that overfly our house any time we see them, I just hope that I am getting them right!

Hopefully I will be able to make this an annual experience (just don't tell my wife). It is quite an expensive hobby, especially if taking lessons frequently, to achieve a Private Pilots License, but I could definitely recommend this one-hour trial lesson to everyone.

Ken Watson, Portlethen

www.portypics.org.uk (WebSite containing my aerial photos)

www.airshow.co.uk (RAF Leuchars Airshow WebSite)

www.aberdeenvflyingclub.co.uk (The Flying School WebSite)