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JSHPC Rising High in Wa

This is the sister-piece to the article highlighting the work undertaken at the Force Development Training Centre at Crickhowell. The centre at Crickhowell is also home to the Joint Services Hang-gliding and Paragliding Centre (JSHPC). Here its OC, Sqn Ldr Matt Cooper, discusses what the centre has to offer and how it is developing.

What is the aim of the JSHPC?

We are a Level 4 adventurous training centre which means that we're here to provide qualifications and to assist unit cdrs by providing them with personnel qualified to lead unit-level expeditions.

What is the Course structure provided here?

We follow the structure set out by the British Hang-gliding and Paragliding Association - the Elementary Pilot Course followed by the Club Pilot Course. The elementary Course brings you up to a standard where you can launch and land the aircraft and do small flights from the tops of hills, which incorporate turns. The Club Pilot course teaches personnel to a standard where they can take-off in stronger winds and stay airborne using the dynamic lift of ridge soaring and then land back on top of the hill. The Club Pilot level is significant in that it allows personnel to fly solo outside the school environment.

In addition we run an Intermediate Pilots' Course, providing further flying experience post-Club Pilot. We also run an Advanced Pilot Course which is where we take pilots to the Alps and work through the tasks in the pilot logbook to get people to a level where they are ready to sit the pilot exam.

Also, in Oct 07, we introduced an Expedition Leader Course. This follows the recognition that there was a gap in the national governing body hierarchy of courses. Basically, there was no course teaching you how to lead a flying expedition overseas and manage its associated risks. The course we have introduced plugs these important gaps and it's also true to say that the national governing body is very interested in our work in this area.

What developments have there been to the infrastructure of the centre?

We have benefited greatly from extra funds provided by AOC 22 (Trg) Gp. This has allowed us to replace the roof of the accommodation block and refurbish students' rooms and ablutions. We also have a programme in place to improve students' down-time facilities and develop a covered outside classroom area. Finally, provision of a new instructors' admin area should allow us to free up other rooms to students, thus increasing our student capacity further. Although the standard of accommodation remains fairly basic, all in all, the centre is now a much nicer place to spend some time.



Why was this location chosen for the JSHPC?

From day 1 in hang-gliding and paragliding you are the pilot-in-command of your own aircraft and you have to learn the most difficult aspects first: take-off and landing. To teach these aspects you need to have access to a large variety of slopes from a flat area for ground handling, gentle slopes for first hops and slightly steeper slopes allowing 15-30 sec flights and ultimately slopes that allow for hundreds of feet of clear air between the pilot and the ground. Furthermore, you need these slopes facing many different ways to allow flying to take place regardless of wind direction. What we have in South Wales is a fantastic collection of such slopes and hills; therefore, this is one of the best areas in the UK to learn to hang-glide and paraglide. We also benefit from the mining heritage of this area which has left roads to the tops of many of these hills allowing easy access.

What developments have there been to the equipment you use at the JSHPC?

We have had an equipment replacement programme in train for the last year and use technically advanced paragliders that are some of the safest available. The pace of technical development in these relatively young activities is fast and so it is important for us to provide the best and latest equipment that we can afford and our paragliders not only have good performance, but also excellent inherent safety and are very forgiving of students' mistakes.

We feel that it is important to teach on equipment that we would recommend personnel to buy.

We have also acquired some new paragliders for our Club Pilot students; these have an increased level of performance over the basic training wings, but also provide a high degree of safety.

We recently acquired two new ground training paragliders that are half the size of a normal paraglider and only used to practise ground handling techniques. These enable us to extract training value from days that may otherwise be too windy to use the real paragliders.

What other items of equipment are needed for paragliding?

The paraglider or hang-glider is of no use to you by itself. You need to also have a harness, boots, helmet and warm clothing. Club Pilots must also have reserve parachutes. More advanced pilots also

use a GPS to keep a log of their route and examine statistics about how much height gain was achieved and where this was done. The most useful piece of equipment for pilots wishing to stay airborne for longer periods is the variometer; this informs you whether you are rising or falling and help you to utilise areas of lift.

So are these expensive sports then?

You can equip yourself with a paragliding rig for about £2K. This is clearly more expensive than hill walking but if you are a keen mountain biker, canoeist or diver you could easily spend the same. Each of the individual services also has their own hang-gliding / para-gliding association with equipment that can be loaned to bridge the gap for recently qualified pilots.

Given the wide range of activities available through the JSAT scheme, why would you recommend hang-gliding/paragliding?

The JSAT scheme is truly excellent and you get many positive experiences from all of the activities; however, as OC JSHPC I am required to be biased and am happy to be so! In my own experience piloting your own aircraft in silence, harnessing a medium that cannot be seen (the air) and looking out on the world way below does things for you emotionally and developmentally that some of the other activities can only hope to emulate. I have mountaineered in the Himalayas and been canoeing, mountain biking and sailing, but nothing gives me as big a buzz as flying. It is inherently challenging and requires many skills from navigation and route planning through communication to leadership and fear management - and there can sometimes be an awful lot of fear to be managed! These are all essential aspects of AT activities. But there is another aspect to the activity that also recommends it: it can be enjoyed to the highest standard by people of all ages. Britain is fortunate that in the civilian sporting world our hang-gliding team are world champions and that the individual world champion paraglider, Bruce Goldsmith is also British. Bruce is in his mid-forties, which proves that experience and knowledge can defeat youth and enthusiasm, although I am fortunate to still have the latter...(ahem!)... while developing the former.

What have been your most memorable flights?

About three years ago I was lucky enough to take a tandem paraglider flight in the Dolomites and I found it absolutely exhilarating, deciding at once to take up the activity in the future - now I am the OC of the JSHPC! My most exciting flight occurred earlier in the year in Slovenia. I had just achieved my Club Pilot rating and, having taken off from a high vantage point, I travelled across a vast alpine valley where I could see for nearly 40 miles. I set off into the valley and climbed to heights of over 6500ft flying in and out of the high mountains - it was absolutely tremendous. It was also quite intimidating and several times I thought I was going to have to land but I was able to 'scratch around' for some lift and on one occasion went from almost the foot of a mountain right back up to over 6500ft! The conditions were very bumpy and I had a partial canopy collapse but our gliders are so inherently safe that I only noticed this when the canopy was re-inflating itself without any input from me. This challenging but exciting flight ended after 3hrs and 42km of journeying!

Many thanks to Matt and his staff for their time and assistance in putting this piece together.

PS. The new FDTC/JSHPC Crickhowell website can now be found at:<http://www.raf.r.mil.uk/live/crickhowell/index.htm>

Leigh Posthumus

