



AFG Gliding Scholarship 2024 Charlotte Williams

This summer, I had the privilege of being awarded a scholarship from The Honourable Company of Air Pilots (HCAP), which allowed me to attend a week-long gliding course at the Portsmouth Naval Gliding Club (PNGC). The experience was as challenging as it was rewarding, providing not only technical skills in aircraft handling but also unforgettable moments of teamwork, resilience, and sheer exhilaration in the beauty of flight.

The week began with settling into military accommodation at AAC Middle Wallop, shared with other scholars. Living together created a close-knit group dynamic; we were all eager, a bit nervous, but united by our common passion for aviation – whether civil or military. Every evening, we gathered for insightful talks delivered by both commercial and military pilots, covering topics from the physics of Apache helicopters to life as a long-haul airline pilot. These sessions were inspiring and placed the significance of our scholarship in the wider context of a career in aviation, as well providing a platform for discussion and networking with our peers.

By day, our focus was hands-on learning, spending as much time in the sky as possible, despite often battling unpredictable weather. The winds could be sharp, the rain cold, but those moments only added to the depth of the experience, providing a realistic insight into gliding life! There was an unspoken understanding amongst us that every minute aloft was incredibly precious, and that drove us to make the most of every opportunity to get in the air.

Flying, as we quickly learned, is far more than just sitting in a cockpit. There were countless hours of groundwork behind every launch. We worked together as a team, supporting each other through aircraft maintenance at the start and end of each day, learning about the intricacies of glider launch mechanisms, and making sure that everything ran smoothly. The camaraderie we built on the ground certainly translated into a greater efficiency in the air. When one of us succeeded, we all did, and we supported each other as we each took to the skies.

In the mornings, we would head out to the airfield early, often greeted by brisk winds or rain that threatened to delay our flights. But we were relentless and braved the weather – whether pulling gliders into position or helping with pre-flight checks, we supported each other’s learning, determined to maximize our flying hours. Although our final two days were halted by the weather, we took the time to visit the Army Aviation Museum, as well as learning more crucial glider theory from our brilliant instructors.



I had no experience in control of an aircraft until this scholarship, and my first flight was a revelation. Gliding is an entirely different experience from powered flight – there is a calmness in the silence once you're in the air, a peacefulness punctuated only by the soft whoosh of the wind against the wings. Yet, it was also raw and demanding. There is no engine to fall back on, no sound to rely on except the wind. To be piloting for the first time in an aircraft without an engine was both terrifying and liberating! In that glider, every movement counts, every change in the air requires a response, and every decision in the cockpit has immediate consequences. It's a type of flying that forces you to be entirely present and focussed. I was fortunate enough to learn in two different types of gliders (the Duo Discus and the K21), which showed me the differences between a high-performance cross-country glider, and the regular type used for training. Alongside this, we experienced the 'Grob', a powered glider – which was a unique blend between glider and motorised aircraft which I really enjoyed!

One of the most memorable moments of the week was completing a full circuit by myself. It was a blend of nerves, focus, and exhilaration. From take-off to landing, I was in control, and fully aware of the incredible responsibility I had over this sleek aircraft beneath me. My instructor managed to remain silent, only speaking once we landed safely on the ground, at which point we laughed over the squeaks of terror I let out while flying us! The world below appeared so small, and for a few minutes, I was alone with the wind and sky, a sensation that I will carry with me for the rest of my life... and hope to experience many more times.



This course wasn't just about learning to fly – it was about understanding what it means to be part of a team, to push through discomfort, and to fall in love with the art and science of flight. I will never forget the early mornings spent on the airfield with my fellow scholars, the feeling of the glider as it lifted off the ground, and the serenity of soaring thousands of feet above the rest of the world.

My week at PNGC has confirmed my passion for aviation and aspirations to become a pilot, and I am deeply grateful to the AFG and HCAP for making this experience possible.

Gliding, in all its beauty and challenge, has left an indelible mark on me, and I am

eager to continue pursuing my dream of flight.