

AWESOME DAYS FLYING INTO THE BLUE

It will be a lifetime before I forget the first day taking off into the blue skies of Temora in the spunky yellow Foxbat with Sheldon Jones, our instructor.

Three of us, David, Karen and myself Julie were excited at the prospect of two weeks of flying training, thanks to a Wheelies scholarship. Wheelies with Wings is a not-for-profit organisation, funded mostly by Qantas pilots, whose intention is to provide people with a lower limb disability the opportunity to experience freedom and achievement through flight. Six scholarships are awarded per year, three in May and three in October.

The first day at Temora didn't disappoint. Our first Monday was my birthday and David announced after our first day the word "awesome". Everyday was awesome as we enjoyed two weeks of clear, still, blue sunny weather.

The Foxbat aircraft is a light sports aircraft and must be flown with a Recreation Australia student membership. The Aeroprakt A22L Foxbat is a light manoeuvrable aircraft powered by a four stroke liquid cooled Rotax engine and the controls are adapted for use by disabled pilots.

Our instructor Sheldon treated us with calmness and consideration as we departed for our second day Tuesday. No more looking around the Temora landscape in wonder or privately going "Woohoo", this was serious. I realised there was so much to learn and it was a strain to the brain.

It became days of acronyms like the work cycle: ADWTA, attitude direction wings traffic altitude, or the pre take off checks: BEMFPAMS, ROAR and TMPFISCH. There was so much to take in however taking off in the Foxbat with Sheldon every day was such a buzz. I've always been a determined "polio" however since my last operation I had sunk into the habit of thinking what I couldn't do rather than what I can. My Temora flying experience has given me such a 'can do' spirit.

Early on I taxied the Foxbat like I walk, haltingly and all over the place. To see and feel improvement slowly each day, adding skills and small achievements has given me a real boost in confidence.

The spirit around the Temora Aero Club and Temora town was friendly and welcoming. We dined every evening at the Temora RSL near the Goldterra Motel. David gave me an electric scooter on loan, which was a fantastic leg saver. We enjoyed racing our scooters over the wide deserted Temora streets to the RSL for dinner. The Wheelies scholarship was all inclusive of motel accommodation and meals and this was a treat for everyone.

Every new day that dawned gave us another blue sunny day and we could hardly believe we were so blessed. Highlights came every day, like the moment when keeping the wings level becomes automatic and the thrill of landing when the aircraft nose gently lowers to the tarmac.

My personal highlight was flying cross-country from Temora to Moruya for the Moruya Aero Club open day and return. It was a two-hour flight each way. Once the Foxbat settled into our route at the cruising speed of 80 knots, there was time to enjoy country NSW from the air. Sheldon gained permission to enter Canberra controlled air space and we turned left to fly over my house in Nicholls. My friends and neighbours knew we were coming, however I think we gobsmacked them by flying the yellow Foxbat around and around above them.

From north-western Canberra, we headed to Black Mountain, Lake Burley Griffin, over Parliament House and the National Gallery and out over the airport. From Canberra we tracked over Bungendore, Braidwood and the Araluen valley and down onto the coast and Moruya. What an amazing experience.

The next day was the Moruya Aero Club open day and we enjoyed watching the Army parachute team, formation flying and aerobatics. It happened to be Mothers Day and we saw an 82-year-old lady tandem parachuting from a small aircraft. After she returned to the clubhouse to the applause of the crowd, she asked her daughter if she could go again...

Late in the day Sheldon took David and I for a training flight over the Moruya coast. It was a stunning blue contrast to the inland fields of Temora. I particularly enjoyed seeing the remote small coastal community of Congo from the air. This is where my convict ancestor settled in the early 1800s.

The second week flew by and there was a sense of urgency to improve our skills and reach a few goals. Although we were reminded that this was for "fun" we wanted every minute to count.

One day we took time out from flying and theory visit the Temora Aviation Museum. It is a stunning complex and display of magnificent aircraft like the Tiger Moth, Sabre, Wirraway and Spitfire. All aircraft are kept in full flying condition. The main museum could be revisited regularly as there is so much to see and details to absorb.

Flying circuits is another big one in the skill department. It was interesting marking out the rectangular circuit in my mind, however putting it into practise was a real challenge. My brain and all my senses were working flat out and although it was tiring, it was the best fun. If I can, I'd like fly again to work on circuits.

We had our graduation day on the last Saturday in front of the Temora Aviation Museum open day crowd. During a break in the air displays of the Tiger Moth, Ryan, Wirraway and Sabre jet aircraft, we were presented with our certificates of achievement by two Wheelies board members, Rob Rickards and Ian Richards. We all felt so proud and pleased with ourselves.

It has taken me weeks to come down to earth after leaving Temora. The Wheelies with Wings motto is "Attitude determines Altitude" and how true it is. All credit goes to Sheldon, our very patient instructor, who has given me the confidence that I can achieve something special.





