

THE LONG ROAD TO FLYING

Rob Holmes

I CAN'T RECALL WHEN I FIRST BECAME AWARE OF HANG GLIDING, BUT I SUPPOSE IT'S PROBABLY ONE OF THOSE OSMOSIS THINGS; I MEAN, CAN YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU BECAME AWARE OF PENGUINS? BUT I CAN CLEARLY REMEMBER THE IMPACT OF MY FIRST CLOSE ENCOUNTER – WITH A HANG GLIDER, NOT A PENGUIN.

It was sometime in 1972 when I was driving along the ocean road towards Fremantle when my attention was grabbed by a hang glider floating effortlessly like a huge seagull in the breeze above the beach. I pulled in to have a closer look – the small embankment at the end of the car park down to the beach provided just enough lift for limited soaring. I sat there mesmerised as the pilot moved slowly back and forth not more than 10m or so from the beach below. Sometimes he would pause and hang motionless, rubbing his hands to bring back circulation. Now and then a gust would push him higher – then he would swoop across and up again, holding his position. “How long had he been there for?” I wondered; “How is it that a person can do this sort of thing?” After watching for about half an hour I reversed out and drove off, glancing at the lone floating figure in my rear view mirror until he was out of sight; maybe he would be there all day; how fantastic! I didn't think even for a moment, “Why can't I do that?” Of course I had other fish to fry, other things to fill my horizons; being a lowly paid lab assistant I was putting all my free hours into part-time study at the time.

A few years later my wife and I were approaching a mountain range on our way from Adelaide to Canberra. As the road began to climb up towards the range ahead, I glanced up and saw two black specks high against the clouds. Squinting against the light, I could see that these were unmistakably hang gliders, soaring like wedge-tailed eagles up thousands of feet high amongst the clouds. Once again, the vicarious thrill; a feeling of wonder that people could actually do something like that. But once again I had other dreams and ambitions to follow.

Over the years my career progressed and we weren't a young couple living on the bones of our arses any more. My life's objective was directed towards raising my two daughters; but in the background there had always been that dream of getting back to sailing. The joy of my teenage years spent messing about in sailing dinghies had never

left me. Then it happened one day that my kids no longer needed or wanted my company; very suddenly I found myself with free time on my hands wondering, “*What am I supposed to do now?*” I had never wanted to suggest that we should sink big money into a boat, so I spent a year crewing for a friend who raced every Saturday. Kath had always been aware of my dreams, and to my infinite gratitude, she encouraged me to borrow the money to get our own boat. I bought a 26ft racer-cruiser that was ideal for weekends away at Rottneest Island for the two of us and was well suited for club racing. Every Saturday for the next six years I learned how to sail with a bunch of guys who were as keen as I was. In the early days we would still be out floundering around the marks while the sun was setting and everyone else in the fleet was in the bar downing their second beers. The learning was steep; sailing confidence, seamanship and racing skills come only with experience and persistence. With many long miles of seawater in our wake we eventually won club champion boat one year, and what a buzz that was!

Saturdays out on the ocean were enough to put me on a high through to Wednesday, when I only had another two days to wait for the next Saturday. For me there was nothing greater than that sensation of taking the boat out through the heads – that feeling as the boat comes alive under my feet as she moves to the swells; those “days made in heaven” out on the

ocean under a blue sky and on sparkling waters with just the right breeze to heel the boat; to hear the rush of the bow wave as she surged along. On long weekends and holidays when the weather was right Kath and I would sail the three hours over to Rottneest Island for a few days living on a beach in paradise. But then all good things come to an end.

It was the third serendipitous encounter with free-flight that provided an emotional kick that would just not leave me alone; this time I could just not get it out of my head; what I saw became a compulsion, an addiction. We had trailed the yacht down to the south coast, living on board while the boat was moored to a jetty on the inlet at

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Walpole. Although it was summer it never stopped raining, typical Walpole, so we gave up any idea of sailing and spent our days driving around, looking up old friends and exploring. While on a day trip to Albany, we noticed a sign pointing to "Shelly Beach". The name was interesting enough to turn off on a whim to go and explore.

We had stumbled upon one of WA's premium soaring sites on a day when the conditions were perfect for flying. The sky was filled with gliders soaring the updraft above an ocean far below; hang gliders and paragliders alike. There was a row of hang gliders nearby, parked and waiting for their pilots; way below on the beach were tents and more people and more gliders. At the launching site was a young woman under instruction doing a bad job of trying to kite her paraglider; just a few metres up a hang glider settling in like a giant bird for a perfect top landing against the breeze. "Sell the boat!" I muttered aloud to myself. Kath incredulous, "What?"

"I want to sell the boat," I repeated, more coherently. This time she was not so supportive. "Have you gone completely mad?" "... Yes, I think so!" I mumbled.

Selling a yacht is not all that easy, because sailing has a small following on a population basis. It took two years, but more importantly, two years of discussions with Kath and all our close friends before she eased away from outright and hostile opposition to any suggestion of flying, into uneasy dissent,

resigned to the fact that she is married to a nutter. Of course I never do things on impulse; I like to let a bit of time pass just in case I have let my enthusiasm carry me away – I never carry more than \$20 in my wallet because I know what will happen to the money. Two years was a good amount of time to think things through; to change my mind if necessary. There was a realisation in the end that my sailing urge had been burnt out; the next step, if I were to stick to sailing, needed a partner who was as obsessed as I was. Kath did not like sailing and that sailing to Rottneest Island was something she only put up with to get there; she would rather do it on a power boat. The weather-anxiety on every trip was getting to her over the years. Once we had put to sea against my warnings because she was keen to get home; the experience had left her shaken.

In the interim, I attended a couple of meetings at the paragliding club just to find out what sort of people get into paragliding. I was a bit anxious that the sport would be dominated by adrenaline-driven 25-year-olds. Would it be, "Yes, grandad, what can we do for you?" To my relief there was a complete spread of ages from late teens to seventies and a cross section of society that was as homogenous as could be imagined. There were butchers and carpenters, doctors and engineers, businessmen and students, all with a common obsession to fly.

Two years later I had the cheque in my hand. My first phone call was to our local

paragliding school, "I have the money! When's your next class?" I now have my Restricted Licence, a paraglider, and the gear to go with it.

Flying has brought emotions that I never imagined. Every time a flight is imminent, I am nervy, secretly wishing I was somewhere else. I have changed sports and have to start again on the bottom rung of confidence and expertise. When I am on the launch site endlessly waiting for the right conditions, I pace around, sit down, stand up, walk to my car, walk back again; I am anxious, on edge; fidgeting with my gear; unlike the seasoned pilots sitting around chatting or dozing. When I am in the air I cannot imagine anything more astounding, wonderful, thrilling – words fail me. During the week when I am not flying the tape of my last flight keeps replaying in my head and I am impatient for the next. I have also found a new loneliness; nobody but another pilot can understand what I feel when I am soaring on the compression above a ridge high above an ocean, or being rocketed skywards on the end of a towrope; that wrench on the risers when suddenly lofted skywards by rising air; people looking up as the shadow of my wing passes over. I have learned not to babble to those who do not fly - they can't understand. But, I think I am going to like this new sport, one in which I compete against no one but myself.



AVIATION SECURITY IDENTIFICATION CARD – What Is Required and Where to Get One

Article content supplied by DOTARS (Department of Transport and Regional Services)

What is an ASIC and what is its purpose?

An ASIC is an Aviation Security Identification Card.

An ASIC is an identification medium that identifies that the holder has met the necessary threshold assessment requirements to attain an ASIC and is permitted to be in a secure area, of a security controlled airport, in the course of their duties.

An ASIC enables an airport operator to provide the ASIC holder with the ability to obtain unescorted access of a secure area. However, the holding of an ASIC does not in itself give a right of access to a particular secure area of an airport. That capacity remains entirely in the control of the airport operator.

The intent of an ASIC is to ensure that a person who has access to the secure areas of an airport has been background checked

and is not considered to be a risk of unlawful interference with aviation.

Who needs an ASIC?

All persons requiring regular access to secure areas at a security controlled airport will require an ASIC. A security controlled airport is defined as an airport that has Regular Public Transport (RPT) flights. This definition applies to airports regardless of the number of RPT services the airport has.

Who does not need an ASIC?

Passengers and people welcoming or farewelling passengers do not require an ASIC, providing that they have passed through screening and clearing procedures, and are in an area set aside specifically for the use of passengers and other screened visitors, such as a departure lounge.

What are the assessment require-

ment checks?

An ASIC applicant must undergo the following checks and satisfy mandatory requirements to obtain an ASIC:

- A criminal history check by the Australian Federal Police
- A Politically Motivated Violence Check by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
- A Lawful Citizen Check by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (only applies if the applicant is not an Australian citizen)

What if I have a criminal record?

Will I automatically be excluded from obtaining an ASIC?

Not necessarily – it will depend on the nature of the crime for which you were convicted. Convictions relating to unlawful