

THE FOUNDING OF THE LONDON SOARING SOCIETY

I don't really remember when or how it came about, but the idea that there should be soaring in the London area had somehow become firmly established in our minds, and failed to be dislodged. The above-mentioned minds belong to Willem Den Baars, Don McKay and yours truly, and looking back at some of the past happenings we must have been right out of ours.

In order to soar we decided with great wisdom there must be a number of things (such as a sail plane, a field, a tow plane or winch, and a number of qualified people) to get things (us) into the air. Having none of the required items, we really had a wide choice of where or with what to start and with optimism we began to look around for what we needed. Don, being a SAC member, had soaring magazines, and our interest shifted from the front to the back section and we scanned the “For Sale” ads for a worthy and noble machine with which to start soaring. A Laister Kaufman was missed by one week, but the next issue the ads offered a Pratt Read for sale at an acceptable price. A sail plane somehow had become our number one priority and the fact that the Pratt Read was a two-seater really enthused us; especially since we did not know yet what one looked like. A number of phone calls later we had found out that the Pratt Read was at Pendleton, and was a fantastic machine in great condition that could out-fly and out-train anything.

Unfortunately, it had no trailer but with everything else going for it, the trailer seemed a small detail.

We decided to go ahead and at least take a look at such a fantastic-sounding bargain before it would surely be snapped up by a multitude of perspective buyers. We need not have worried, we could have gone to China and back and still have been on time, since we were the only interested people.

Some would say that we were frantic because someone else would make a better offer. That is definitely NOT TRUE, but in our enthusiasm we managed to forget or ignore the fact that the Pratt Read had no trailer. Necessity is the mother of invention; our poverty and lack of a trailer would force us to be inventive. We were to find out later why the Pratt Read had no trailer.

THE TRIP

Now, we are at the stage where the Pratt Read was purchased, it was loaded on the makeshift trailer and it was pointed towards London. It would be pointing towards London for a long time as the trip along the 401 seemed endless and progress was marked in singular miles. However, I am jumping ahead of the story.

It was 2:00 a.m., and dark and cold, when we set out from Pendleton on what we hoped to be a speedy trip back. Willem volunteered to do the first bit of driving to

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Cornwall for a bit of sleep at a motel, and we hoped to arrive there at about 3:00 a.m. Yours truly at this point was getting a head start on the sleeping part in the back seat.

Collapsing in utter fatigue I was spared the first discovery that we were not going to go all that fast. Willem found out that the top speed, the absolute never-to-exceed speed was 29 miles per hour. Even a half a mile over this and the car and trailer would sway wildly. At that speed it would take all day to get to London, so never mind the sleeping in a motel, we would just stop for food.

The first foodstop was in Cornwall, and it was just them getting light with a dull overcast sky. We had breakfast and felt much better even after calculating how long the trip would take at 29 miles per hour.

Once underway again we found out that the wind had come up very strongly from the south and that it was blowing directly across the road. This had quite an effect on the big wings tied to the A-frames. Everything shook and swayed wildly and we visions of all the nails coming out of the trailer; after all, that was all that held it together. We had no option but to slow down from our already crawling pace. The crown in the road did not help matters and neither did the fact that the trailer leaned a bit to the wrong side all by itself to start with. The wind, the road and the lean of the trailer all combined to make the Pratt Read look as if it were centered in a good thermal with a narrow core.

We did not like the view out the back window, and at one point after the trailer just went along on its right wheel for short durations, we let out some air from the left tire in an attempt to even things up a little bit, but it was to no avail. We just had to slow down more and at times we only made 10 to 15 miles per hour.

Around the Kingston area we entertained the idea of leaving the trailer and going back for it some other day, but since that would not improve the trailer, and the ultimate trip would still be slow and the wind could then be blowing again, we carried on. We stopped at each gas station for food and perhaps to convince ourselves that the wind was dying and we would soon be able to resume what was now considered a fast 29 miles per hour.

The day and the miles dragged on, and we all took turns at driving and trying to sleep a bit in the back seat. In mid-afternoon Don was the lucky person to drive us through the Toronto area, which was interesting to say the least. At one point we had an escort of a D.O.T. highway truck and that perhaps kept us from being hauled off the road as dangerous or for obstructing traffic. We were still only doing 29 miles per hour at best but the wind was down somewhat and we did not have to slow down too often on account of that anymore.

We thought we were almost home with the successful passing through Toronto but it meant two more stops at gas stations and with our slow speed it would still take 5 more hours at best. The last stop we made was near Woodstock, and it was now getting

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dark due to the late hour, as well as to the approaching storm which could be seen in the West.

Once underway again it began to rain and then the rain became a downpour which lasted all the way into London. One could hardly see the road, but now at least everyone was going slow and it no longer seemed as if we were standing still. It was very windy again, but it was now a headwind and the trailer behaved like a big weathervane.

The Wellington Road overpass came into view and except for some bad moments when we were across the wind on the cloverleaf we were home, in London with a sailplane, as we had set out to do. We arrived at Don's home shortly, and in the pouring rain drove some stakes in the ground and tied the trailer down in case the wind would strengthen during the night.

It was 10:00 p.m. when we congratulated ourselves with achieving our first objective without mishap.

The next day, after a good night's sleep we drove the Pratt Road to the London Flying Club for winter storage and since we had made it back with time to spare, all went home to enjoy Thanksgiving with our families.

Getting Ready to Fly

With the P.R. safely stored in the L.F.C. hangar for the winter one would have thought that our problems were over. This however was not the case: we still had to find a place to fly from as well as a method of getting into the air.

We tried such places as Centralia and Aylmer with no success and felt it would not be worth our while to even approach the people at London Airport, even though the runway length would be suitable for our attempts at getting airborne.

Believe it or not, we were considering car tows as a means that was at least financially feasible. We simply did not know yet that it would take brute force to lift a P.R. and we also did not know that once airborne the P.R. would be capable of lifting an entire car in only weak lift, say about 2 meters.

We were spared those discoveries when Don found two answers to our quests simultaneously by finding the Dodson Aviation Airfield as well as Dodson and getting him to agree to let us fly there. (How Don?) Don also found at the same place a likeable character by the name of Skip Metro who just happened to have a Stinson and who also agreed to try and tow our glider into the air. It must be remembered that at this point Skip had never seen a P.R. and Don, even if he had tried, could not have conveyed its size adequately.

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Skip must be one of those rare men who want to try anything at least once to see if they like it. With Skip came an entirely new vocabulary, and I am sure he could make a success of teaching veteran merchant mariners an entirely new set of words that they would be proud of. Dodson on the other hand knew only a few words but he kept using them over and over without much imagination. He did, however, get progressively louder as time went on.

While Don did the negotiating Willem and myself were busy constructing a trailer for the P.R. This was done in Willem's garage during the cold winter months and it took all winter to cut and fit all the pieces of tubing that went into that aircraft carrier. Actually it only had to live up to three tasks: it would have to be wide enough, long enough and, above all, strong enough to carry our bird safely. We at that time had ideas of going cross country with our glider, but that was of course long before we ever assembled our P.R.

Finally with the trailer road-worthy we set out in the early spring to take the fuselage to Don's garage for minor items such a vario, a new pitot tube and some new tubing, etc. and all we had to do now was wait for the mud on the runway to dry, for Skip to put a towhook on this plane, and for good weather.

It took longer than expected but on the first day of June 1968 we drove the fuselage to the field and Don and Willem went to London Airport to get the wings so we could assemble and fly. Yours truly took some time out to try and show Skip some simulated aerotows as he had never even seen one. We had a great time as I had never even flown a Stinson but Skip figured that evened things just right.

In due time the wings arrived and with the help of many friends we put our machine together and did the checkout of all things vital. If the size of the P.R. gave any second thoughts to Skip at this moment, he much to his credit never said so.

You can be sure however that some second thoughts existed somewhere, if not with us then at least among the by now many bystanders.

We were ready to go, to indeed bring gliding back to London and to fly like one should, in tune with nature and to share our joy as well as our labours with all who would care to.

With Don and myself strapped in, the towrope connected, wingmen checked out and with Skip in the Stinson it was time for one last check and then the thumbs up signal was given for a momentous flight.

The First Flight

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Slowly the towrope tightened and even slower the P.R. began to move for its first takeoff in the London Area. A lot had passed to get to the point we were at now, a lot of problems were overcome and a lot of energy had gone into the entire undertaking. There was no time to reflect upon that however, as we were busy trying to lift the P.R. into the air. Not being used to the P.R. and not ever having taken one off, it seemed to take a long time but after a few bounces onto the tailskid the P.R. stayed in the air. The towplane took a while longer to become airborne, but it was soon evident that we would at least clear the fence. So we decided that we would stay on tow and see what would happen.

One thing that was happening was that the airspeed indicator had decided not to function but otherwise all else seemed okay.

Perhaps Don knows which way Skip towed us aloft but I was lost as soon as we were over 200 feet up and much too busy watching the towplane to orient myself. Skip did bring us back to the field at the proper height and gave the signal for release.

We were on our own. Any thoughts of soaring however were not present as the sky had become quite dark and in fact it just then started to rain. There also was no horizon and it was interesting to find the right attitude to fly at since the airspeed had not fixed itself.

To say that we flew somewhat fast would be correct and as a result the flight did not last too long so that soon we found ourselves faced with the moment of truth, that is: landing a strange bird without the benefit of knowing how fast one is going. The P.R. behaved well and landed more or less at the intended spot.

Don and myself congratulated one another in the few seconds before our friends caught up with us and everyone was talking at once and asking questions, etc.

It had been done, we had made a flight in our own glider and it looked like there would be many more. In our happy state we hardly noticed that it was by now raining much harder, and that the field was slowly turning to mud.

Some people however did notice and did the smart thing and went home. It was our cue to pack things up for the day and the P.R. was duly moved to a parking spot where tie-down would begin. Being a believer that one can never secure an airplane too well and since this was also the first time that we tied it down, it took a long time. It also took a lot of rope and anchors, etc. and by the time we were done we were soaking wet. Ask us if we cared at that point! It would take us some time yet to come down to earth.

Skip's only comment after the flight was that he thought we had tied the towrope around a post and he was only stretching the rope. He did a fine job for his first ever tow.

That night we went to town to celebrate our success and to share our joy with our wives and to talk of the bright summer ahead.

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It would be some summer!

The First Summer

We had it made! We had our own glider, a place to fly from and someone willing to tow us up when we wanted to go flying.

After getting used to the P.R. with some short flights it was time to start soaring. It became obvious that the P.R. liked to soar and that it really had honest performance. On the second or third day out we made it to over 5,000 feet which was very close to seventh heaven.

Also our flights were becoming longer and this created cases of acute boredom in our tow pilot Skip and also with whoever was out at the field to help us. Skip had his own way of dealing with boredom which was also refreshing but our helpers tended to drift off if we stayed up too long. So once in a while we had to go down just to keep the action going.

It was beautiful that summer, but we felt rather lonesome being the only glider in the area and we were hoping that some other enterprising individuals with their own glider would join us to share the soaring and help to keep our tow pilot busier, but nobody came.

One day we saw two other gliders from Dresden on a cross country flight and it seemed to give the P.R. as well as us some added lift. Then some weeks later we saw it, a red and white V-tailed glider streaked by (PHH) and we looked at it until it was out of sight. That did not take very long but the thing that impressed us most was that not once did it circle. Oh, to some day own a bird like that!

The summer went by quickly and altogether we made well over 100 flights but the time came when we dismantled our bird for winter storage. Yours truly would spend the winter working in Jamaica while Don kept an eye on our bird and made a start on a hangar so that the P.R. would be out of the sun and rain during the next flying season.

The hangar, Don's unique design, would go well, and some of the flying would not.

The Second Year

Our second year of operation began well: we had an early spring and our hangar was taking shape.

The P.R. was assembled and at the end of the day we moved our bird into the new home it was to occupy for some years. Now the hangar at this point was not finished and we had to cut some supports out from under its roof and I might say that there was doubt as to whether the roof would come down. The roof after all was holding up the whole

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building, but Don's design came through and in fact there are those who will say that the roof actually went up.

We had some good flights, and we had it made. We flew on the good days only and would go to the field at about noon and we were always number one on the list.

Then our tow pilot Skip crashed during a let down from towing and would spend many months in hospital and in fact never fully recover. It stopped us for some weeks and although a new tow plane and pilot were found it did not seem to be the same. Skip had spoiled us by being there to tow when we asked him and this was not to be found in our new tow pilot.

Some fine soaring days were going to waste, and the season ended all too soon but by now the P.R. had a home for the winter and dismantling was a thing of the past.

At the close of the season we were approached by interested people about forming a soaring club and to this end some meetings were held with all and any interested parties we could find.

Many discussions about the prospects and possible future of such a venture were had and it was decided to go ahead and give it a try.

Don and myself as soaring individuals would now be absorbed into a club, the P.R. would become its first trainer and the hangar was sold at this time to the newly-formed London Soaring Society.

To say the least there were mixed emotions on our part: we would gain insofar as the availability of a tow plane went (with the Auster?) and there would now hopefully be more interested people out on the week-end. Gone would be the days of always being number one on the list and of simply going home after putting away one glider at the end of the lift. The work and responsibilities would increase many times in the years ahead but all we could do at this point was hope that we had made the right decision and that others might enjoy our wonderful sport as much as we had done.

The years since then have told their own story, but that, my friends, was how it was “in the beginning.”

NOTE: the above is part of booklet produced by Mike and Don McKay after the club moved to the Embro field in 1973. For Don's contribution of “Notes”, see History2.

NOTES

I have been asked to add what comments I can to “IN THE BEGINNING” by Mike Frijters, a founding member and first C.F.I. of the L.S.S.

Prior to 1967 at least two attempts by others to start a gliding club in London had been made. The second, by Al Pow, a noted Canadian sailplane pilot, operated briefly as a separate London section using the facilities of the Southern Ontario Soaring Association (SOSA), then located at Brantford Airport. However, this attempt did not survive for long.

Mike has graphically and wittily described events leading to and comprising the third and outstandingly successful attempt, which resulted in the present L.S.S. His account of the trip home with the Pratt-Read, like his presentation of his own part in the events, is faulty in that it is understated in both areas.

Picture if you will a small (4' x 8'), two-wheeled flat-bed utility trailer, together with the gargantuan bulk of the Pratt-Read. The latter is difficult if you have never seen one. It was built for the U.S. Navy to train W.W. II troop-glider pilots. Built, as you might expect, like a battleship. In assembly, lifting one wing panel required at least four very strong men.

Personally I would have said to transport the one with the other for four hundred miles was simply and totally impossible. Not Mike!

He had brought with us two lengths of 2x8 plus miscellaneous lumber and nails and he and Willem, working in freezing drizzle in the light of the car's headlights, managed to disassemble the beast, extend the trailer bed, construct cradles for the fuselage and get everything more or less mobile. The overhang to the rear naturally made the tongue of the tiny trailer go up in the air, and it took Willem's 200 pounds plus to bring it down to the hitch on the car. The end result resembled a large elephant on roller skates.

The actual trip home, like the Pratt-Read itself, is difficult to truly visualize without having been there. I don't normally believe in miracles, but the end result, whereby aircraft, car, trailer and personnel arrived in London safely, without disaster or incarceration in jail or mental institution, comes close.

The L.S.S. owes much to Mike. I have never met so outstanding a natural leader, with the ability to personally analyze and devise solutions to problems. If he has a fault, it is a tendency to be impatient with those less gifted.

Mike's narrative gives no dates or specifics. For those who may be interested, the first flight of P.R. CFZAN was made May 1, 1968 and lasted 15 minutes. Our best flight that season was 4 hours 11 minutes. We used to split the time as pilot in command. The Pratt-Read – once you got used to her – was a glorious bird.

NOTES

Skip Metro, our engaging tow pilot, crashed June 29, 1969. Tragically he never regained the use of his legs, but never lost his irrepressible sense of humour or inventiveness. He is now a prosperous manufacturer of appliances for the handicapped.

The L.S.S. was officially formed March 18, 1970 with the following officers:

President	– Jack Knowles
Secretary	– Doug Proudfoot
Treasurer	– Hans Jacoby
C.F.I.	– Mike Frijters

The membership was initially 10 confirmed members with another 10 “interested”.

During the first year 488 flights were made with the P.R., and the L SPATZ for a total time of 205 hours, 50 minutes.

Green air to all!

Don McKay

NOTE: the above is part of booklet produced by Mike and Don McKay after the club moved to the Embro field in 1973. For Mike’s contribution of “In the beginning” see History1.