



Attitude determines Altitude

Being in a wheelchair doesn't have to confine people. Indeed, people with disabilities can take to the skies. Did you know that many disabled persons are licensed pilots? Meet Brian Wilson, one of our very own Board Members of People with Disabilities ACT, who is a student pilot. As a child, Brian had polio and lost the ability to walk without assistance.

"I was just 18 months old when I contracted polio in Sydney in 1951, in the last Sydney epidemic before vaccinations were available. I was in Prince Henry Hospital for 6 months and then Canterbury hospital for 12 months. On leaving hospital I wore two long leg braces."

Brian's love of flying led him to take lessons and soar up to 8,000 feet.

"Believing I could never fly a plane as both legs are required to control a plane," Brian said. "That is until I was in my fifties when I found out about the charity organisation called 'Wheelies with Wings'.

"They use aircraft that have CASA approved hand controls so I applied and received a scholarship to learn to fly, which I did and this I thought was a highlight of my life! But then I received a scholarship to advance to flying solo which I did successfully and this was truly the high point of my life."



The first plane Brian flew was a Piper Cherokee (VH-ARC) via a scholarship from Wheelies with Wings. He had 20 hours flying with an instructor before flying solo for the first time.

The first time Brian flew a plane, he felt "total excitement and happiness."

"Accelerating down the runway and lifting-off into the sky is like nothing else. And up there, the manoeuvring like steep turns, diving and climbing and even stalling is all great fun."

Brian has found the hardest part of learning to fly is definitely landing. "Up in the air at speeds over 100 knots (185kph) you don't have the sensation of speed, but on landing at around 80 knots (150kph) as the ground gets closer and closer the sensation of speed really kicks in very fast! And judgement of the approach to meet the ground at the right location in the centre of the runway takes a lot of practice."

The instructor with Wheelies with Wings, Sheldon Jones from Moruya Airport has, apart from his flying and communication skills, unending empathy and patience, according to Brian. Nothing is too much trouble for Sheldon with the range of ages and disabilities that he sees as students, he is a special man and pilot.

"I feel I have always liked flying, I joined the Australian Air League when about 10 years old and ventured right up through the ranks. On leaving school I started with Qantas as an apprentice Ground Engineer Instruments and remained with them for 10 years."

After working at Qantas, Brian was a Technical Officer with the NSW Government looking after all the scientific and research instrumentation.

"From that we moved to Canberra to work with the Australian Government in IT and spent the last 10 years before retirement in Contract Management of the outsourced IT services."

For Brian, the biggest encouragement and help for him with his disability was family and friends to start. Being a baby at onset, he didn't know any difference. "Like most polios, we just got on with it."

"In my late teens I met and married my wife, Jan, who has supported and helped me so much to have as close a normal life that I can, I am and always will be indebted to her."

Brian remains keen to fly - anytime and anywhere.

"I always feel excited with anticipation before the flight, but up there I feel free and that my disability doesn't matter to me or anyone else."

What would Brian like to see change for the better in Canberra for people with disabilities like himself?

"Access to everywhere for everyone."



Late last year, Brian spoke to the Civil Aviation Safety Authority for International Day of People with Disabilities about his early days relating to having had polio resulting in both legs being affected, and his love of all things flying and aircraft.