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Four Corners

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Gliding about in Ōmarama; the pressure of greenkeeping; economic ties with China; a map to real places in fictional works; and more.

PHOTO HOLLY DODSON

Sam Tullet and Oban Hansen in a Duo Discus glider at 16,000 feet over Lake Ōhau, in perfect "blue wave" flying conditions.

Flying Solo

At a gliding camp for teenagers in the Mackenzie Country, flying lessons also impart essential skills for life.

By Peta Carey

Roger Read climbs into the rear seat of the Twin Astir glider on the Ōmarama Airfield. A gliding instructor with many thousands of hours of flying all number of aircraft, Read is accompanying 17-year-old gliding student Ted McFadgen, one of 19 students attending this year's Youth Glide camp in the Mackenzie Basin, near Twizel. As the pair settle into their seats, another young pilot is on the ground attaching the winch cable beneath the aircraft.

Instead of being towed up by a towplane, a high-powered winch pulls the glider into the sky on the end of a cable, at considerable speed. McFadgen is expecting to release the winch cable at 2000 feet above ground level (AGL), but the winch operator at the far end of the airfield has deliberately been primed to "lose power" when the glider is at just 500 feet AGL. (In aviation, altitude or height is specified in feet, not metres). McFadgen has no idea.

Dealing with an emergency winch failure will be the last exercise McFadgen undertakes before he's allowed to fly solo. Luckily, he's already been trained for it. Andrew Colby, Youth Glide's "camp father" and airfield controller, is standing by the glider's wingtip. He's on the radio to the winch driver: "Take up the slack", and then "all out", and the Skylaunch winch — 675 horsepower, pulling 2500 metres of cable from winch to the glider — roars into action. The aircraft is airborne within seconds, like a rocket heading up at almost 45 degrees.

Suddenly the power comes off. McFadgen has to respond quickly before the glider stalls, pushing the control column forward in response to loss of speed, and immediately releasing the winch cable. With

Gliding instructor Roger Read gives 17-year-old Ted McFadgen a few last words of encouragement before the young pilot's first solo flight.

sufficient height he makes an abbreviated circuit back to the airfield, landing safely.

With that final test passed, it's now time to go solo. Out of the glider and staying firmly on the ground, Read gives a few more words of guidance and reassurance, then closes the canopy on his student and steps away. This time, the young pilot reaches 2000 feet AGL before turning back to the airfield and makes a perfect landing. The other students are ready with handshakes and hugs all round, but every pilot who goes solo at Youth Glide also receives a baptism of sorts: buckets of ice cold water tipped over their head.

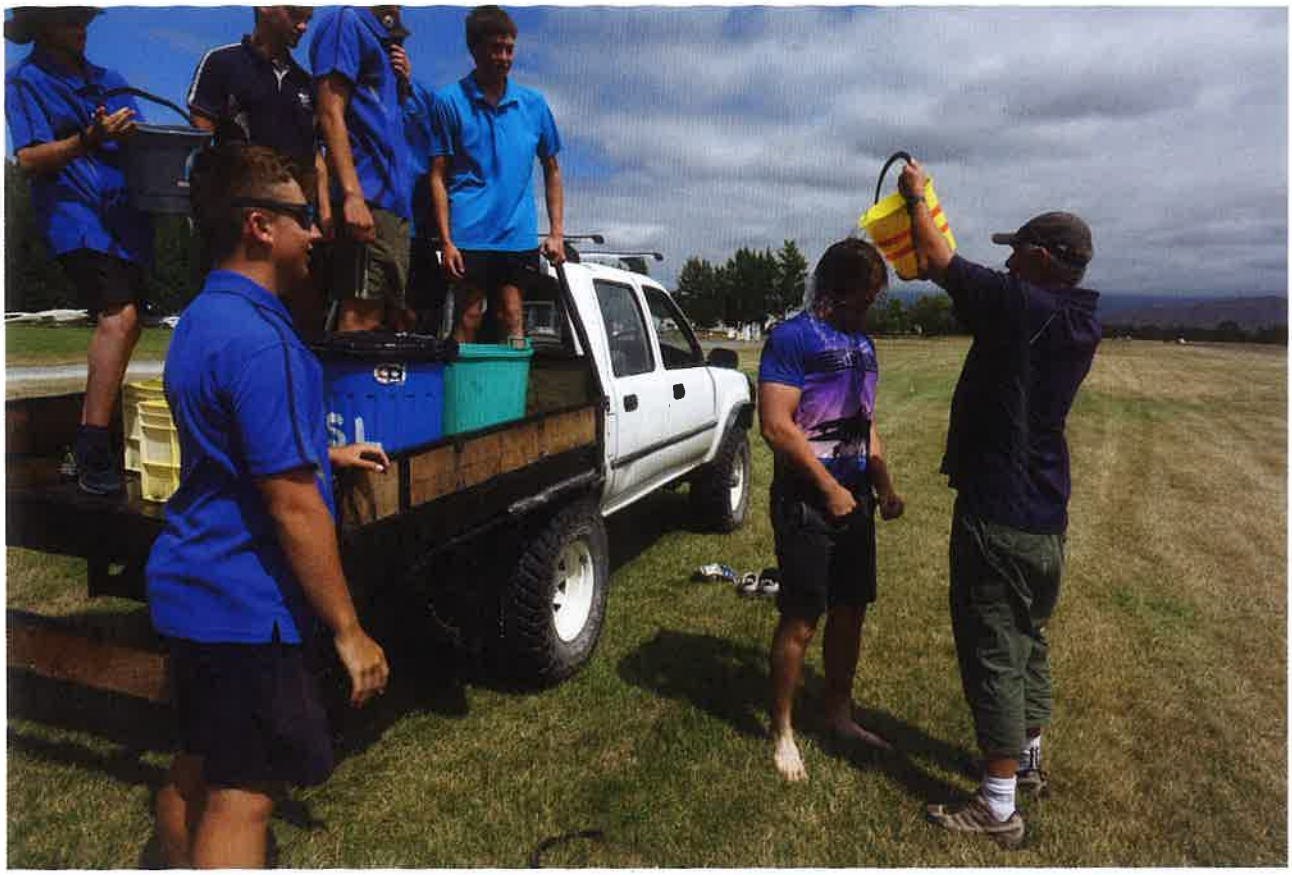
This scenario plays out almost every day at the 17th annual Youth Glide camp at Ōmarama. For more than a week in January and during various other long weekends over the summer, young people camp beside the airfield and receive expert instruction in gliding. Gliding is a sport typically dominated by older, wealthy and often retired men, but Read, founder of Youth Glide, and fellow veteran instructors want to change that – to make the sport more accessible to young people, including young women.

Youth Glide is a nationwide not-for-profit organisation, which runs camps and events to encourage people under 25 into the air. Former All Blacks captain Richie McCaw is its patron, and instructors generously give their time and expertise for free.

Read's career reads like a *Top Gun* from downunder: Strikemasters, Skyhawks, RNZAF Squadron Leader, Red Checkers aerobatic team.

It's a huge responsibility for instructors, deciding when a person is ready to go solo. It usually follows about 10 days of instruction, often over one or two camps. These instructors not only have robust Civil Aviation guidelines to follow, but also years of experience in the psychology of teaching. "As instructors we have to read and understand the individuals we're flying with," Read explains. "When the students first arrive they have no knowledge, no responsiblity, but by the time they go solo we've given them all the knowledge and all the responsibility. It's a big step." But Read also puts the emphasis on enjoyment: "Even in the Air Force, despite the stricter environment, it was important to make it fun. Students blossom in that."

Read first glided in 1972, then trained in the Air Force. He's renowned in aviation circles for gliding a Strikemaster jet on the "giant wave", a rare phenomenon of wind and weather resulting in powerful lift conditions, from the Ruahine Range along the length of the North Island – with the engine off. Read's career reads



A Youth Glide ritual involves a complete drenching when each pilot goes solo. Read has the honour of pouring the first bucket of water on his student McFadgen's head.

like a *Top Gun* from downunder: Strikemasters, Skyhawks, RNZAF Squadron Leader, Red Checkers aerobatic team, eventually flying Boeing 777s for Air New Zealand and instructing military and civilian pilots. But Read continued his love of gliding throughout. Now retired, he's intent on giving back: Read helped fund the club's $200,000 Skylaunch winch. At just $25 for a tow to get airborne with the winch (covering diesel and equipment costs), it's more than $75 cheaper per tow than to do it by a towplane — making gliding more affordable for students.

Read and other instructors tell stories of young pilots coming out of their shell, finding a newfound confidence, not only from the flying, but from the supportive atmosphere of the camp. "I often suggest Youth Glide is more of a lifestyle camp, with a bit of gliding thrown in," Read says with a grin. Andrew Colby, airfield controller, and father of another young pilot, has tears in his eyes telling the story of one young woman who had attended three camps before going solo. "Shy, always shuffling slowly, she eventually found an inner strength when she went solo, running across the airfield and grinning like you wouldn't believe. Amazing, what a gift this sport can be."

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From flying solo around the airfield, the students can then learn how to soar, to find and harness the magic of lift (from pockets of rising air or wind) that can carry the glider far into the mountains. Read suggests gliding, with no auxillary back-up power, gives students not only a love of flight, but something else critical to life. "What we're trying to do is instill a process for these young people to apply common-sense assessments to what they do. To understand what the consequences are at all times," he says. "It's called 'situational awareness', to look out for the 'what ifs', to have contingency plans up your sleeve — where you can land if you suddenly lose height, for example. It doesn't just apply to gliding. It's why glider pilots often make the best drivers on the road."

On the last night of the camp, students, instructors and parents (most of whom have worked tirelessly throughout the camp) come together for a shared meal, for various awards to be given out, the students all giving their heartfelt thanks and promises to return. Late that night, a few young people remain, crowding around a TV screen. Read sits down to join them. There's only one choice of movie. *Top Gun: Maverick*. Of course. ■

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