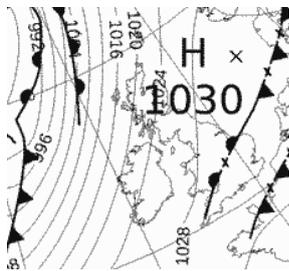


A Cold and Lonely Place by Paul Myers, October 2014

Once again I was lucky enough to visit Feshie for the Octoberfest. On the first Sunday Phil Hawkins celebrated his first ever glider flight 40 years ago by flying with the same instructor, followed by a party with good food and real ale. I am afraid I stuck to the wine. Phil's celebration got me thinking about my first flight at Feshie. It was 34 years ago in the Bocian with Alan Mossman, then the youngest CFI I had ever seen. I have adored the site, the area and the friendliness of the members ever since.



It was a good start to what I hoped would be a good week but how good? Better than last year, maybe, after a week of easterlies, lots of cycling and one flight. I had returned home on Saturday to find that on the Sunday Nick Norman had reached 25,700ft QFE breaking off in 2kts lift because he was desperate to relieve his bladder!

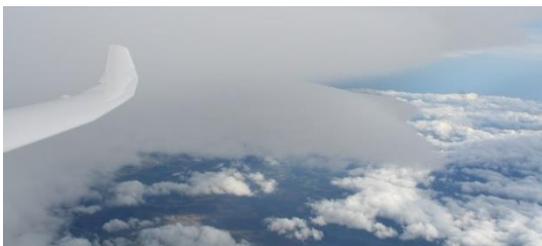


Well, this year was good with flying every day but Thursday 2nd October has prompted me to write this article. It was a strong SW wind with a cloud base of 3/3500ft.

I was second into the air behind the Vega, after Alister Morrison had told me that the wave boxes would be open from midday. Looking at the sky I thought he was being a bit optimistic, but how wrong can you be?

I finally found a hole in the cloud with the Vega in it, over Loch Insh, and climbed to 12,000ft where it topped out. There were wispy high clouds but these did nothing at this height and the good ones were a long way off. I noticed a larger wave cloud with a vertical leading edge near Linn of Dee, so I pushed over and found between 3 and 4 knots of lift.

I had decided to take this climb for all I could before heading north to the high wispy clouds I had seen earlier. After confirming the wave boxes were open it eventually took me to about 20,000ft quite close to the place where I achieved Diamond height in May 1986. There was quite a lot of low cloud cover but it was clearer to the North of the high clouds so that seemed to be the place to be.



I arrived at the first part of the high cloud at around 19,500 roughly over Cairn Gorm; I was a bit disappointed with the 1 knot of lift it produced, but it was stacked to the east and after flying along it for 8 to 10 miles I hit good lift passing 24,000 with 4 knots. I was happy enough and took a few photographs.

Things then seemed to go a bit wrong. Scottish Control called me with a transponder Squawk and instructions to call them on descent and I remember having a bit of trouble setting the numbers. I then started to bang my head on the upper cloud and had to push into wind, the higher layers were further upwind. But I then started to feel very strange, light headed with a tingling sensation all over my body. Not as nice as you may think. I actually thought I might pass out. I also noticed that my oxygen economiser bag was fully inflated and I did not seem to be emptying it when breathing in, but this had not worried me because at high altitudes I often don't use as much as the system provides.



Anyway after dismissing calling for help as a stupid idea (what could they do?) I thought I was most likely to be experiencing hypoxia. I checked my finger nails but they were just white and cold. So whilst holding

the mask to my face I squeezed the bag and took deep breaths. Fortunately that seemed to do the trick but I suddenly felt “cold and lonely” and a bit vulnerable. It takes a long time to get down to 10,000 from there. The lift had also tailed off and I was once again up against the high cover. I had beaten my best outcome target of over 25,000 and I thought I was miles off Nick’s flight and the site record so I decided to get myself down after taking a final couple of photographs to record the event.

Like Nick during his flight, I also needed a pee, but my main thoughts were the cold, the high cover had blocked off the sun, and checking the temperature, even after I had descended for a while it was minus 27C, and, whilst I had the means to relieve myself, I didn’t fancy frostbite!



On the descent I put the wheel down and opened full airbrake. Even keeping the speed down to around 80 knots IAS to avoid exceeding True Airspeed Vne, I managed to achieve between 10 and 20 knots down but, looking at the trace, it still took 13 minutes before I could free myself of the dreaded mask. On closing the brakes the Ventus did not feel to be its usual self and I then remembered to put the wheel back up and got back to Feshie as quickly as I dared, whilst showing healthy respect for the gel. I arrived back at about 6000ft and gently let down to a bumpy (welcome to Feshie) approach.

I gave Bill Longstaff my trace and he told me my max altitude above sea level was 26,446 with a gain of 23,848, but the worst bit ~ I was only 120ft below Nick’s flight and 522ft from Bill’s site record! I am certain there was more height than that available but equally convinced I made the right decision to quit at the time.



Evening wave above the airfield

I told Bill about my little problem and he suggested that the non-return valve from the economiser bag may have frozen due to condensation. This would prevent oxy from getting to the mask (and me). We both agreed that it could have been very dodgy and I made myself a promise to check oxy flow even more often in future. According to the experts with no oxy at that altitude I had 3 – 6 minutes of useful consciousness.

This is the first time I have had an issue with oxy but it certainly makes you think – it’s serious stuff up there!