

By, Riaan Struwig



A few weeks ago I decided to tell the story, the rollercoaster ride which Tony Gibson is talking about. I felt it is important to tell potential aviators about the way forward.

I met Tony at a friend's house. Tony invited me to a charity event at "Groen Goud" grass Farm. When I saw Tony fly, I told my wife that I wanted to start flying PPG. To my surprise she gave me one condition: I had to sell my motorbike. It was clear she hated the bike... That same day I sold one of my large scale RC planes and the Monday I placed my order with Tony. By the weekend, bike was gone, a few extra planes were gone and I was the very proud owner of my first Power Paraglider kit. This was around December 2005. I was still working for Denel at the time and i had lot of leave so, I decided to use the time to start my training and hoped to be finished by the time I had to go back at around 15 Jan. When you decide to take leave to start your training, consult with your instructor. To my surprise Tony was on his way to Margate for the holidays. On the 22nd Tony contacted me and said that he decided to come back and we could start. Probably the best Christmas present ever!

After the well-known weight loss ground handling session it was the big day: my first flight on a Fly Castelluccio 200cc motor with a Reaction Dudek wing. I can still remember the first flight. I was on top of the world, and told Tony what to do. Well, Tony decided to make it a memorable flight. He told me to fill up with two liters of fuel and I had to go. Ten minutes in to the flight I was comfortable and even talked back to him on the radio, I really enjoyed the flight. He then instructed me to add power and start to climb, while he kept me over the field. My heart stopped with the engine. I panicked and called Tony on the radio. He calmly said: "Well you are the pilot, fly the unit. He brought me in for a perfect landing and then I realized it was all planned and the safest way to land.

During my training I broke a propeller or two. Ok, maybe three because I did not listen to Tony. This was when Tony emailed me the article he wrote on, "The roller coaster

ride". All about one day you are on top of the world and the next down at the bottom. I was told golfers also experienced this, one day a good round of golf and the next the clubs ended up in the water.

Tony and I combined our two companies, one which I started the year before and Flying Unlimited. We grew fast and by 2007 we starting building our first PPG Trike the nDiza and soon after our first PPG back pack the Cumulus. In 2007 I flew my first SA bougie in Natal and met some of the greatest pilots and instructors in SA. 2009 I went to the World Paramotor championship in Czech Republic where I competed and flew with the best in the world. I still believe it was the most tiring 10 days of my life, but also the best. I met and made friends for life.

Around 2010 we were approached by the Military and soon after started with training of three SADF pilots for the Kruger Park Rhino anti poaching project. The next year Tony and I were invited to fly with them in the Kruger Park for a few days, again a highlight of my flying career.

At the same time they asked as to look at a more reliable unit, more suitable for SA conditions with certain specs. Tony knew almost all the motors in the world and flew most of them, he approached me and we decided to start with our own design, with specifications from the Military and ideas from previous motors we built. The first Spider was built and we shipped it to other countries.

Around 2013 Tony went off to Dubai and I started with another engineering company. During this time I also met new friends, Andries and Maretha. During 2015 Epic Aviation was born. Within a few months it became one of the largest schools in SA with the joint venture between Blue Gravity and Epic. With Kevin being one of the senior PG instructors in, SA Epic Aviation at Grassland Sports club can now offer a complete training package from Paragliding, to Powered Paragliding, trikes and power parachute training.

Well with almost 11 years of being an aviator (over 2500 flights, Fix wing, PPG, PPT, PPC, & PG) I came to the conclusion that I need to assist every eager aviator with some pointers. Please keep in mind it is my personal opinion based on almost 7 years of training and selling equipment:

Know and trust your instructor! (Golden Rule!)

I still believe I was instructed by one of the best instructors in the world, Tony Gibson. I still learned a lot from Tony after my training was done. He kept on giving me tips and advice to improve my flying performance.

One of the biggest mistakes you could make is to sign up with an instructor with a bad reputation. It does not matter how good he is or claim he is. . Do your research and contact a few schools and instructors before you decide. First you have to have a trust relationship. You need to trust him with your life and be able to trust him to get the correct equipment etc. SA only has about 12 PPG/PPT/PPC instructors with only a quarter in Gauteng. **Do your research!**

Deciding on what to buy.

Again you **HAVE** to do your research before you buy anything. Be very careful. . Don't settle for the first deal which comes your way. Your instructor should guide you on what to look for, what size motor you need, which wing to buy etc. Most of the instructors will be able to assist you with new and second hand equipment. The most important part is to ensure you get the correct motor and wing for your weight and to ensure the items are airworthy, safe and approved.

Some of the biggest mistakes I have seen and still see are new pilots who open some webpages, buy a motor or a wing from some classifieds etc. for a bargain! Well you might buy a bargain but in most cases it will cost you more in the end. You will arrive at the school with your bargain and the instructor will inform you that the unit is not airworthy. The wing might be too old, unsafe and in almost 100% of the cases never tested, serviced or certified. **KEEP** in mind your life is in his hands and at the same time he has to test fly it for you. Personally I would not test fly any equipment that is not tested, certified or serviced.

Clients/students usually ask us for advice, which wing and motor is the best? I would rather tell you which the top 5 choices are. Most of the world top wing manufacturers are on the same level. I do believe the best wing for you will be the one your instructor prefers and recommends. Ultimately he would have to fly it and train you on it.

When it comes to motors, you need your instructor's advice. You have to look at your weight and location. If you weigh 100kg and you try to train on a small top 80cc motor in Gauteng, you will not fly. Again do not be fooled by sales talk. There is about 10 good PPG manufacturers in the world with at least 5 being represented in SA. Most of them, if not all of them, use the same engines from Italy, with only the frame and harness which differs. When you look at the backpack PPG, look at sustainability, repairing cost, availability of spares, how quickly you can repair it etc. Carbon fiber units are not the best suitable PPG's for beginners or SA's harsh conditions. It looks nice in the beginning but it will cost you to maintain and to repair. Buying a Ferrari to be used on your farm would be silly.

Always keep in mind that it is a sport, weather dependent and governed by the recreational law in S.A. Yes, you can use it commercially, but do understand your limitations. Trying to do anti poaching patrol, 300feet up at 50Kmh with poachers with an AK47 on the ground, it won't be a good option. Remember that you are only allowed to fly VMC, meaning from sunrise to sunset. Being limited by weather you would probably only fly for 2 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the afternoon in the summer. There are pilots who use PPG/PPT/PPC successfully in SA for Farm fencing, game counting, etc.

The good news are!

I still believe any form of paragliding is the best way to fly, being an LSA pilot as well I still feel it is the safest way to feel the total freedom of flying to soar freely through the sky like a bird. Make the correct decision and do your research, contact schools, organizations etc. and

“Stop dreaming, and start flying”