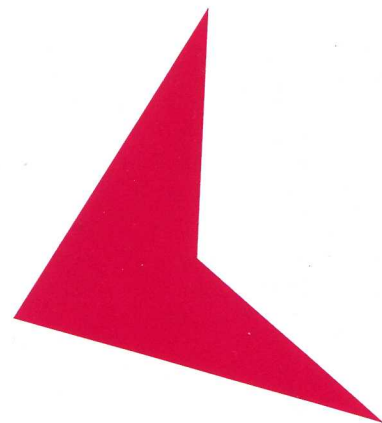


Converted, not convinced



The Journeyman Balladeer joined a fixed-wing microlight syndicate last summer. Having overcome his sense of guilt, and risking the taunts of his flexwing buddies, he looks back on his experience of batting for the other side. His split personality seems to have survived the trauma intact

by Andy Oliver

AT THE start of 2008 the Journeyman Balladeer's logbook showed 508h, all on Rotax-powered flexwing aircraft. By the end of the year there had been an increase of 18h of dual instruction and 25h of solo, all on fixed-wing aircraft. The zeal with which the Journeyman has been converted to side-by-side has put his relationship with the Balladeer, previously always flown in tandem, under pressure. The Balladeer, his education and upbringing founded on the belief that a real microlight pilot should return to the clubhouse frozen and blue, feels betrayed.

This schizophrenia started when some pervert posted an offer of a share in an Ikarus C42 on the club noticeboard. Some readers might never forgive the straying of the Journeyman from the one, true path: others might applaud the fact of what we might term 'his seduction'.

Which way to turn?

The Journeyman, as was ever his bent, swings to the technical side. He summarizes the key difference between fixed and flex as the need to keep the former in balance. Fixed-wing aircraft have a slip indicator to show the yaw of the aircraft about the vertical axis. This is a novelty for the flexwing pilot, and it takes time to learn the co-ordinated stick waving and pedal pushing to keep the ball in the centre, and the aircraft in balance. Close to stall speed an unbalanced aircraft has the potential to drop a wing, and spin. Spinning is bad. Spinning close to the ground is very bad.

In a flexwing, lateral movement around the centre of gravity is not a consideration. Your flexwing cannot yaw, although it might slip marginally sideways in a turn. Your flexwing, when it stalls in level flight, will put its nose down and recover.

An additional complication is that, whereas the propwash is neatly out of sight and out of mind behind the flexwing pilot, with most fixed-wings the propwash is at the front. This corkscrews down the plane and strikes the tail, causing a yaw to the right. At full power this has a large effect, and it feels as if Johnny Wilkinson amounts of right boot are needed to counter this on climb out. A decrease in power, such as an unobvious power adjustment on the approach, causes one to swing the other way. If this wasn't enough of a distraction, one also has to operate the flaps.

Don't flap

Even the Balladeer had noticed the flaps, next to the ailerons, on his first preflight inspection. Flaps increase the lift, but also the drag. On the way up our novice pilots often forgot to take in the flaps at 300-500ft, and on the way down often tried to put them out at above 60kt or so. Both are wrong moves, and cause discomfort to any experienced partner in the right-hand seat. There are two stages of flap: the second stage increases the drag and thus slows

the aircraft down even more, but the lift does not increase in the same relationship. This comes in handy for losing height with a degree of urgency. However, combined with the throttle (which is an additional thing your hands have to deal with), the fixed-wing pilot does have more options, once understood and safely applied, for changing speed and rate of descent than does the flexwing pilot.

Cross dressing

The aerodynamics, weight distribution in relation to height, and smaller wing surface mean that the fixed-wing aircraft can operate in higher winds. To really benefit from this the pilot must master crosswind landings. This entails putting the aircraft into the unnatural state of being cross-controlled. At some stage on the approach, the pilot drops the into-wind wing (in effect slipping into the wind) but prevents the aircraft actually turning by applying opposite pedal, thus moving the rudder in the opposite direction. The result is straight flight, pointing down the centre line, with no drift. If you reach the point where you have no more boot to apply, you have no margin left. The crosswind is too strong, and you should be anywhere other than in this situation. The margin for error is thin, because you are now riding a low speed, unbalanced aircraft, with the flaps down, near the ground. Any change in windspeed, a moment's inattention, a slow reaction, any mistake, might bite you.

Straight and level

While in any form of manoeuvre there is much more to do with hands and feet (and arguably brain), once in flight it is all very comfortable. Having negotiated a happy equilibrium between airspeed, attitude, revs and trim, the closed cockpit offers many advantages: not least the ability to fold maps, consult books and guides, and fiddle with your kit: all without gloves. ▶

Facing page: (top) Spamfield 2006 – room for all persuasions; (bottom) the Journeyman, in shirt sleeves, reaches for another sandwich



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▷ The Balladeer: A triaxiaphobic flexophile

Enough of this rational stuff. The Balladeer is at heart a triaxiaphobic flexophile. He flies with his senses, and his comparison is based on the feeling and emotional thrill of flying. It was he who spray-painted the graffiti 'Weight-shift Good – Tri-Axis Bad' and 'Fixed-wings Go Home' on the hangar down at the Animal Farm Flying Club. While inquisitive enough to try anything once, the Balladeer's sense of what is natural is based on years of firmly pulling on his bar. So his past and his prejudice can lead him to intolerance of, and plain rudeness about, those who march to the beat of a different drum.

Up for longer

Benefit 1: In flight, without the rushing mighty wind, you can play with the settings of the cockpit heater, open a large picnic basket, pour hot beverages from a flask, or look out of the tiny windows. In your shirt-sleeves! For hours! Just as you can in a Nissan Micra on the M1.

Benefit 2: You can stay upright in wind that has the flexwings either tied down or tucked up in the hangar. This is a key consideration, especially in recent seasons. Of course, the aircraft still bounces and bumps about, but the capability could give you more flying days per year. Russian roulette fans can attempt to land in the quartering tailwind position (you are getting it from the side and behind you). This one is an additional shot in the fixed-wing pilot's locker but, if the runway is short, it puts more than one bullet in the chamber.

Going down

There is no Benefit 3. Apart, that is, from the ability to sideslip. Full flap, power off, nose down, offset by one wing down but going forward, dropping like a stone. Like riding the bomb at the end of Dr Strangelove, a-whoopin' and a-hollerin'. The manoeuvre combines the stability of a Fireman's Pole with the thrill of a funfair ride. But the critical need for a smooth transition to the right posture for touch down make this a potentially lethal manoeuvre if you do not pull out smoothly at 'le moment critique'. Not so much 'le petit mort': rather 'le grand accident'.

Well hung

While one can cover distance in lesser time and with greater comfort, there is none of the physicality that comes from being in direct connection with the wing.

Like Hercules, the flexwing pilot is astride the earth, hanging in the cerulean blue, biceps rippling from invisible currents. A joystick has all the immediacy of a cricket stump in a bag of marbles.

In summary, the Balladeer feels that a flexwing is easier to fly and less likely to kill him. Move the bar. Press the accelerator. Feel like an eagle. End of debate.

Why kickest thou against the pricks?

The Balladeer has always found prejudice to be rather a comfort. The devaluing of alternative life styles allows him to justify his own choices without thinking too deeply. And yet... and yet! He must confess to a partial Damascene conversion by the end of nearly 50h side-by-side. Even if he deviates no further from the joy of flex, and writes the whole thing off as temporary bad judgement, he is a better pilot for the experience.

“ Like Hercules, the flexwing pilot is astride the earth, hanging in the cerulean blue, biceps rippling from invisible currents ”

Way to go

AFI Alistair Way at Somerset Microlights has helpfully counselled the Journeyman and the Balladeer throughout their exploration of flex and fixed. He comments that our guinea pig pilots' confessions reflect their greater experience and confidence with the top end Pegasus. Even after 50h of control inputs via a stick rather than a bar, neither persona is fully calibrated to the Ikarus C42's abilities and responses.

AFI Way feels that their conclusions would be different if they had grown up in the fixed tradition, and then explored the flex, rather than the other way round. For the record, his own opinion is that 'fixed wing is more complex, but easier to master'.

So, at the end of one of those rare days when the evening sun warms the wriggly tin of hangar down at the Animal Farm Flying Club, and the gentle summer airs stir the green grass, there is a change, a new spirit of toleration.

Our pilots settle their aircraft down for the night, flexwing and fixed-wing, tucked up together. Gone is the graffiti. In the club house a sign now reads:

'Wings good. No wings bad'.

In a new spirit of inquiry, or perhaps revenge, the Balladeer has signed up with Devon & Somerset Condors, the local BHPA group. The Journeyman must brace himself for a summer of tugging. □



The Balladeer caught in a compromising position