

THE MAN WHO CLIMBED

Mount Pilatus

Close your eyes and think of Switzerland. What do you see? Mountains, chocolate, watches and, if you're a pilot, Pilatus? And maybe a Swiss bank account with your number on it...

Some don't have to close their eyes to imagine a Pilatus; PC12 owner Simon Hackett, for example, just has to open his hangar. And last month, Mr Hackett generously opened his hangar doors for Kreisha Ballantyne

Stereotypes abound in the aviation industry – and as a female pilot and editor I've encountered enough myself. When I heard the smooth tones of Simon Hackett's voice over the airwaves and was informed he was the owner of a brand new PC12NG VH-TCP, I had begun to form some stereotypes of my own. By the time he landed ahead of me at Cowra, his aircraft was swarming with curious on-lookers, and I declined to join the throng, assuming the pilot an arrogant millionaire keen to boast about his new shiny toy.

I'd seen on the event schedule he would be giving a talk later that evening and curiosity (and the fact there was a bar) inspired me to go along and listen. It's not often I say this: I couldn't have been more wrong.

Standing in front of the screen, with a picture of a non-powered glider looming largely behind him, was a man of average height, wearing a t-shirt with a caption that went way over my head (likely pertaining to computer technology). With a beaming grin, he began talking of his love of gliders, his eyes behind his spectacles glinting with that look that any reader of an aviation magazine would recognise.

His presentation was so genuine, fascinating and funny, I approached him for an interview the moment he closed his laptop. Generously, he agreed and we swapped cards.

I noticed something immediately about Mr Hackett: he is an excellent communicator. Before the night was over, he had emailed me with a plan; a plan so generous you could bundle it up and call it my birthday present. He suggested we fly from Adelaide to Sydney in TCP and he would grant me the afternoon for an interview.

On the morning of the flight, I am greeted by a casually dressed Simon. An unostentatious person, I notice a distinct absence of a giant bling-bling pilot's watch. As we stand for a few minutes, in awe of the magnificent aircraft in front of us, I note Simon's excitement and delight in anticipation of the flight ahead.

With great pride, Simon shows me the engine and checks the oil level, remarking on how typically Swiss the organisation and cleanliness of the build layout is under the various cowls. As we walk around the aircraft, we are dwarfed by TCP, her giant cargo door open to demonstrate just how much she can carry. Simon has TCP configured with six rear seats, four in a club seating arrangement and two aft, and – demonstrating a practical rather than showy nature – has chosen sheepskin seat covers. To prevent me from climbing in through the cargo door to get a better look, Simon directs me to the 'Hollywood' style illuminated passenger entry stairs and invites me inside.

The interior is a dream! I don't know whether to be directed by my inner pilot and gawk at the cockpit, or by my inner ego (where I am a famous writer and owner of TCP myself) and gush over the walnut paneling, the interior lavatory and the swivelly seats. To my delight, I discover I can do both: Simon has had the four club seats fitted with Bose headsets, allowing the passengers to engage with the flight deck.

As Simon is still flying under supervision at this point, we also have on board PC-12 pilot/instructor Stephen Byrne from Pegasus Aviation in Sydney. Both are happy to chat throughout the flight.

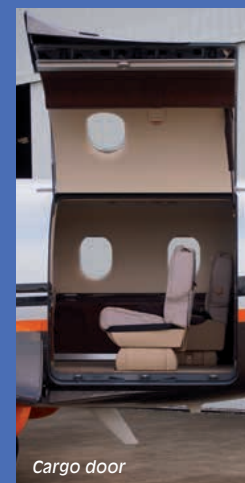
Simon announces we are to stop at Waikerie to pick up some friends from the gliding club (he is a club member). Without a moment's delay, we're out of Adelaide airport, smoothly slicing through the Adelaide sky. Since having flown the aircraft back from Switzerland (see Simon's blog at www.simonhackett.com), Simon has now logged around 150 PC-12 hours.

We climb to FL120 briefly before commencing descent only a few minutes later into Waikerie. I observe with interest the approach speed of 85 knots, which seems so unlikely in such a large aircraft, as Simon lands her gently on only the first third of the southern runway (the PC-12 requires a landing roll of under 600m). He taxis up to greet what appears to be quite a



PC12 Interior

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Cargo door

crowd; by the time Simon has cut the engines and opened the passenger stairs, the throng has grown to around fifteen people; I get a taste of how it feels to be famous.

We're here to pick up Catherine Conway and John Viney, but as there's a maintenance course for gliders being held at Waikerie and the crowd would like to see the engine, ask questions and be given a tour. Genuinely delighted, Simon answers their questions and invites them inside. Half an hour later, we're at FL290, belting along at 260 knots, spotting distant jet aircraft by their contrails. It was, without doubt, the smoothest and most luxurious flight of my life.

In just over two hours, we are inbound for Bankstown, with Simon executing a greaser so fine it elicits applause from the rear seats. It's barely lunchtime when we settle down in my office, munching on Vietnamese chicken rolls, as Simon proceeds to tell me how he went from glider pilot to PC-12 owner in only two steps.

The story starts in the early eighties with the very same Catherine we picked up at Waikerie. They attended university in Adelaide at the same time, and Catherine (who had just returned from a visit to the Adelaide University Gliding Club) encouraged Simon to give gliding a go as well. It was love at first flight.

"Gliding is such a beautiful, meditative thing," says Simon. "Plus, it's so inexpensive, compared to powered flight, it's an ideal path for a uni student who wants to learn to fly."

Simon worked his way through the curriculum, gliding almost every weekend, learning as he went the whims of the weather gods. "It certainly teaches you patience, to be at the mercy of the weather. But more than that, gliding teaches you a skill set that stands you in such great stead later on, as you progress to larger, more powerful aircraft. The stick and rudder skills I have learnt as a glider pilot have remained with me through everything else I've flown. All gliders are tail draggers, and, in fact, I was surprised when I went over to GA, to discover that tail dragging has its own endorsement – that was the only way I had ever flown!"

After a few years of gliding, Simon purchased a quarter share in VH-GQZ, a wooden single seat glider called the Boomerang, built in Gawler in the 1960's. "It was such a beautiful aircraft.

I loved that little Boomerang and flew it every two or three weekends, and I wound up competing in gliding competitions with it as well."

By then, Simon had graduated from Adelaide University and had been employed there as a System and Network Administrator. He became a part of the national team that created AARNET – The Australian Academic and Research Network – the precursor to the commercial internet in Australia.

"I was heavily into writing software and my focus was on writing software that made computers control and move things in the real world," explains Simon. "I wrote a program that, with custom designed hardware, connected a toaster to the internet, with the capacity to burn bread from the other side of the world."

"This was a technology demonstration set up for a software company called TGV from the USA who invited me along to a tradeshow in California to use the toaster as a demonstration to draw people into their show stand! I went back the following year, and they offered me a job, at three times the amount I was earning at the uni. After some considerable thought, I turned them down. I had always wanted to start my own company, and this was the 'make or break point'. So TGV did a lovely thing: they offered me the opportunity to become their software distributor in Australia. They loaned me \$25,000 and I started a little company. I spent four years doing that, made around a quarter of a million dollars selling their software, and then immediately re-invested it all to buy the hardware I needed to become an Internet Service Provider."

Throughout the years of building up his company, Internode, Simon continued gliding. As the company grew, he found himself with the means to buy a larger aircraft, this time it was VH-FQW, a self-launching, cruising motor glider called a MotorFalke.

"What I did with the purchase of the MotorFalke was buy myself more independence. As I became poorer on time, it was harder and harder to synchronise the times I could fly with the times the gliding club was operating. I used the money to buy flexibility. I have over 500 hours in the Falke and I attribute those hours toward the preservation of my sanity in what became a very busy life."

Simon subsequently upgraded to a far more sophisticated and capable motor glider, the 50:1 Stemme S10-VT



Trailing link undercarriage

As a four and a half million dollar aircraft, in the same price band as many start-up business jets, it's very much at the upper end of the cost spectrum for a single.



Glass cockpit



Turbine Engine



Fuel Feed System

(VH-SIO, an aircraft he still regularly flies). But by 2009 Simon felt the need to move on to something a little faster.

To do so, he needed a PPL, and he began the process in reverse order by purchasing the aircraft first! Other students in that situation might purchase a 152 or little Cherokee; not Simon, who opted for VH-YSH, a shiny new Cirrus SR22 GTS Turbo!

"It's the modern geek boy's dream aircraft – glass cockpit and all the best modern technology – it goes fast, looks good, and I ticked pretty much all the boxes on the order form," enthuses Simon.

With a portion of Simon's gliding hours counting towards the VFR day syllabus requirements, it only took him ten hours to earn a PPL.

"Those stick and rudder skills attained in the gliders were easily applied to the Cirrus. The main step up for me was getting in touch with the Garmin G1000. The Cirrus is a much faster aircraft, so you have to keep your mind ahead of the machine at all times. Once mastered, it is a joy to fly."

"However, I started to hit some limitations quite quickly: I became frustrated by being restricted by the weather and saw I would need to step up to IFR; With four children in our family, I became a little restricted by not being able to take them all on a trip together. Also, you do have to bear in mind that when you do tick all the boxes in outfitting your aircraft – air conditioning, anti icing equipment, the weight penalty is substantial. You can really only carry one or two passengers and full fuel with luggage. For me, with a large family, it was just not large enough."

Fortunately for Simon, the year he felt he was outgrowing the Cirrus was also the year he sold Internode to iiNet.

"By 2012, that little company that I started with a loan of \$25,000 was sold for \$105 million, with 450 staff and around 200,000 broadband customers. All of a sudden, I had a lot more liquidity to work with. I had known Sebastian Lip at Pilatus for about eight years and after a great deal of research, the PC-12 was already my 'bucket list' aircraft. Now I was in the happy position where I could say to him, "Ok, I'll take it!"

TCP – which he chose because it stands for Transmission Control Protocol (the 'language' behind the operation of the Internet) – is fully equipped with almost every optional extra Pilatus offers. As four and a half



"Find something you have an aptitude for, and that you really enjoy. If you're fortunate that it's something other people are prepared to pay for, and if you are mad enough, you might decide to start a business doing it..."

Simon Hackett



TCP in Pilatus hangar, Switzerland



Stemme S10-VT Motorglider – the original VH-TCP



Pilatus PC-12NG

million dollar aircraft, in the same price band as many start-up business jets, it's very much at the upper end of the cost spectrum for a single.

"It's about your mission," he explains. "Yes, I could have bought a light biz jet, but my mission matches the one mission the PC-12 was designed for – it is a high performance SUV with wings and the best 'high end' bush-capable plane on the planet."

Sporting a much larger cabin than your average biz jet, the PC-12 can carry a lot more – 1500kg of people and cargo.

"I can go absolutely anywhere in it, from Sydney International to a 600m strip in the middle of nowhere. You can take it camping and, unlike in a jet where you have to find a big bitumen strip and then hire a car, with this plane you can land exactly where you want to be. The mission profile for TCP is to be able to take my family to interesting places, to do business where ever I want, and to charter it out when I'm not using it so that it can earn its keep.

"It's extremely safe; the single engine means its cheaper to run, and as I'm used to flying aircraft with zero engines, flying one with only one is

not a particular concern for me. It's a 16:1 glider with the engine off, which is surprisingly good for an aircraft not intended for that role – and a sign of excellent aerodynamic design. I have the embedded appreciation, as a glider pilot, that it's not the engine that keeps you in the air – it's the wings! Carrying that knowledge with me is what's let me step up so quickly." Having placed an order with Pilatus, immediately set about learning to fly a PC-12.

"I spent a week at ground school, which is very much a systems training exercise: it's not about learning how to fly, it's about learning about what this thing you've just climbed into contains – hydraulic systems, electrical systems, avionics, navigation systems, de-icing systems – and how to operate these systems. For me, it was also the first time I'd ever flown a turbine engine. In Australia there is a specific PC-12 type rating (in the US there isn't, and at 4740 kg MTOW it is still a 'light' aircraft – if only just!). Somewhat untypically for a PC-12 pilot, I was not already instrument rated.

"In addition, for me this was my first experience at flying a pressurized, retractable, turbine aircraft, as well as

my first experience flying under IFR conditions – all at once!

When I mention to Simon that I was once advised by a wise old pilot, "Buy an aircraft you will grow into, not out of," he nods vigorously, and says, "It took me most of 100 hours to get completely comfortable flying the aircraft through the full flight sequence with full IFR procedures. The insurance policy specifies a minimum of 100 hours turbine experience – and I can see why."

"Is there anything you'd add to the PC-12, anything you feel Pilatus has overlooked?" I ask Simon as we prepare to leave for the train station.

"Very little. Being in the IT industry, I did add a few bits of electronics – a four-place intercom in the cabin and some USB charger outlets to complement the existing 110V AC cabin system. But really, it's the perfect aircraft for my needs: its short field capability, given its size, is second to no other. It really is my dream aircraft. There's only one other aircraft I have on the radar – and it's not yet certified.

Of course, Simon is talking about the PC-24 – Pilatus' recently announced twin jet, claimed to be a jet version of the PC-12 with similar short and unimproved field capabilities.



"It will be the ultimate upgrade! Imagine the RFDS being able to medevac at over 400 knots out of a rough bush strip!" gushes Simon.

With that amazing thought hanging in the air, we board the train to Central. As we part, he offers aspiring PC-12 owners some advice,

"Find something you have an aptitude for, and that you really enjoy. If you're fortunate that its something other people are prepared to pay for, and if you are mad enough, you might decide to start a business doing it," suggests Simon. "These things don't always work out – but the things that don't work out perfectly are the things that we truly learn from. Understand the risks and then take the plunge!"

Only able to dream, I close my eyes and think of Switzerland... ■

The author would like to thank Simon Hackett, Stephen Byrne and Sebastian Lip for their assistance in writing this piece and Scott Ballantyne for his help with the headline.

PERFORMANCE

The PC-12 NG Executive has the following performance under international standard atmospheric (ISA) conditions:

Take-off distance over 50 ft (15 m) obstacle	2,650 ft	(808 m)
Landing distance over 50 ft (15 m) obstacle	1,830 ft	(558 m)
Max. rate of climb (MTOW)	1,920 ft/min	(585 m/min)
Max. cruise speed	280 KTAS	(519 km/h)
Max. range with 3 passengers (30,000 ft, High Speed Cruise, NBAA IFR reserves)	1,573 NM	(2,915 km)
Max. operating altitude	30,000 ft	(9,144 m)
Stall speed (MTOW)	66 KIAS	(122 km/h)

WEIGHTS

Basic empty weight	6,557 lb	(2,974 kg)
Max. take-off weight	10,450 lb	(4,740 kg)
Max. landing weight	9,920 lb	(4,500 kg)
Max. payload	2,283 lb	(1,036 kg)
Payload with max. fuel	1,029 lb	(467 kg)