

16th July Corn Ridge, Dartmoor

WNW 8-10mph, Perfect Sky with nice white puffy cumulus with a 4,000ft base. Little drift and consistent thermals.

Weekend camping trip with Mark Ashton Smith, Annie Anderson and Alan (Marks Dad).

Innes Powell from South West Paragliding was teaching on the main slope (NNE). I took off to the left of them where the slope pointed more into wind (WNW). After waiting for ages in light breeze, 2 gliders thermalled out from Sourton ridge 1km in front upwind of me. I got ready and sure enough several minutes later something came through.



I took off into thermic lift and worked this up and down this small shallow slope until I could 360. Gained 3-400ft ato then lost it and glided back towards launch. Entered more lift and hooked into it to gain 700ft, then 1400ft and looked up to see the other 2 gliders high above me circling under a large grey bottomed cloud. I kept concentrating on the lift, looking up at the wing and purely followed the positive air from what I felt through the wing and risers. Eventually I gained over 2,000ft ato!! And by now was well up under the

cloud. I thought I must be near cloud base until I saw another glider several hundred feet above me. This glider must have entered the cloud as it disappeared at one point! I could hear him shouting out with joy 'Whooooo Hooooo!!!' I fused another climb and eventually after 10 years of trying throughout my flying career I was rewarded as I cored this thermal up to cloud-base!!



It was cool and darker under the cloud and I felt sooo small. Occasionally small wispy bits of cloud whizzed pass me to the sides and sometimes underneath! I was afraid of being sucked up into the cloud and even looked at my risers and started thinking about what my options were to descend rapidly if I did enter the white room! B-Line stall, Big ears or a Spiral dive? I thought! I glided and lost 500ft before encountering another 6up thermal. I cored this which strengthened up into a 10up!! I was rocketing back up to the cloud and saw the other glider about 3-400m away also coring up and thermalling up into the cloud again! For some reason I quickly lost or simply over rode my fear of the cloud and decided to stick with this thermal right up into the cloud. The ground below became hazy, then milky white until it quickly disappeared as the cloud wrapped together and closed in beneath me – I WAS NOW FLYING UP INSIDE THE CLOUD!!!!

All I could see of any reference point in 'the white Room' was the sphere of the sun which I kept in one place as to navigate a straight line course that would hopefully take me out of the cloud! I'm sure at one point I lost sight of the sun as the cloud must have thickened. A few moments later I popped out of the side into a gap between the clouds. I was at the inversion layer, it felt like I could almost walk on it as it was such a flat defined milky white layer but of course I couldn't as that would be fatal! The clouds were forming at this altitude and rode along on this layer pushed along by the gentle 10mph WNW breeze. They were flying past me sometimes to the sides, over me and sometimes under once again engulfing me. The cloud edges were brightly lit by the sun and their centres darker grey due to their density. The clouds seemed so dynamic and alive constantly changing shape whilst they swirled around and flew past me. Adrenalin was pumping around my veins, I was clutching the brake handles so hard and my body was tense through

shear fear and excitement. I turned the fear into excitement and shouted out loud 'Yes Yes F**king Yes!!!! I'm at Cloudbase and WOW its amazing!!! I LOVE IT!!! Whooooo Hoooooo!!! I was in heaven, this is what I had dreamed of for years and today I was lucky, it was my turn.

Thermals were of two types: Large smooth areas of lift under the clouds ranging between 1-6up and Small strong bullet thermals from 6-10up. I turned wide and flat in the larger thermals and tighter in the stronger small cores, but at no point did the wing feel over twitchy or uncontrollable. The pressure in the wing was good and I never felt any signs like it was going to collapse. All the time I was flying near to the clouds I was purely looking up at the wing concentrating on retaining the inner pressure, aware of which side of the wing the lift was strongest on and following the positive energy to get high. Only at one point whilst I was flying on the edge of a cloud next to a large blue hole did the wing feel really odd. I must have been flying through turbulent eddies where air of different temperatures was mixing at the cloud edges. The wing seemed to yaw and pitch about on its own in this positive air – but strangely the vario didn't register any change of altitude of lift or sink here?!

I left that cloud and glided towards another due south and kept cloud hopping all the way down the western flanks of North Dartmoor. All the time riding thermals and drifting slightly inland over the barren moor land then tacking into and cross wind back over the fields and road. I did not want to land out in the middle of nowhere as I heard stories of pilots having 4 hour walkouts and as there are no roads, just tracks through the grass, bogs and gorse and I didn't fancy that in today's intense heat with a 20kg glider on my back!

Corn Ridge and Sourton were by now way far behind me, so to was the other glider that had entered the clouds with me, he had turned back. I was now on my own over the Mary Tavy area and was coming to the end of the ridge line and tors. Out beyond the land sloped off into low fields, valleys and general farmland. Then I realised the clouds were also disappearing and there was nothing but a big blue hole all the way to the sea. I had to make a decision fast. Stay with the clouds and go back? Push into wind into the oncoming clouds and maybe try a triangle XC? Or just to keep going and do a straight line distance XC? I was so chuffed with my achievements up to this point that I didn't want to turn back!?! I decided to keep going and venture on full glide into the deep blue!

I could see a 'haze cap' forming at the inversion above Peter Tavy a small hamlet village. This turned into a small cumulous so I headed straight for that hoping to find another climb. I was getting low over the village and looked for landing options; a field next to the cemetery looked good. But sure enough the textbook scenario paid off and soon the air felt positive and the vario started singing beep.....beep....beep,..beep,BEEP. I was saved and climbing out in a 4up. I drifted in lift towards a large rounded hill with a tor on it (Cox Tor) and hoped the thermal I was in would really trigger off this and gain strength to get me back to cloudbase. But it didn't and I lost it ;-(so glided off the hill and looked for more landing options. A large raised open area of moor land with a main road passing through and a large car park pull in looked the most sensible for a retrieve so that's where I came in. Luckily there was an Ice Cream van there too which made me smile as I absolutely love Ice Cream!!



I punched the air with delight, wore a big cheesy grin and felt totally amazing in awe of this incredible dream flight over such beautiful landscapes under such good conditions.

I later found out from Innes Powell the owner of South West Paragliding that I had met the sea breeze front which explains the vast blue hole and lack of clouds. So basically I felt that had there been more clouds that I could have flown much further but was beaten and grounded by the sea breeze. Isn't nature amazing. Ice Cream has never tasted so good...

XC From Corn Ridge to Cox Tor Summary.

14.25km in 1hr 30mins. Max Height 2,800ft ato (4,000ft asl). Max Thermal strength 10-up (1000ft/min).

*Andy Hancock
Credits to Marks dad Alan for photos*