

History

The Hawkrider Venture

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As far as can be established, only two Venture gliders were ever built. One crashed in 1962, so the remaining example - recently moved to Narromine Aerodrome, NSW for museum display - may be unique. This would give the type a fifty percent survival rate, not bad for a design now fifty-eight years old.

The Venture story begins in 1946. The prototype was designed that year by the Hawkrider Aircraft Company, a two-man business (E P Zander and H E Bolton) with a workshop for glider manufacture and maintenance in the main street of Dunstable, UK (northwest of London). Bolton, who had a lifelong interest in gliding, was referred to at the time as “one of the best engineers of his field”. Venture BGA-640 (later BGA-688), registered G-ALMF, flew at Dunstable the following year. The Venture was Hawkrider’s only design, but they also produced five Dagling primary gliders, two Grunau Babies, and a converted Slingsby Gull 3 which they called the Hawkrider Kittiwake. The Dunstable factory closed in 1950, and work carried on at Denham (London) for two years before the company dissolved and its founders went their separate ways.

Gliding historian Martin Simons of South Australia writes of the Venture: “When it first appeared, it seemed to be more or less equivalent to Slingsby’s two-seat Type 21 or, as it was called by the Air Training Corps, the Sedbergh, the early version of which was flying as early as 1944 and by 1947 was already in full production [218 were built]. The Venture was very much in the same category, a side-by-side two seater with high, strut-braced wing and about the same span and aerodynamics, except for a more strongly tapered outer wing. It became available too late and offered no obvious advantages over the Slingsby product. Hawkrider in any case would never have been able to meet large orders, even if their aircraft had been fully equal to the T-21.”

Hawkrider itself never built another Venture, but a second was built from plans after the company dissolved. Enter into the story the Dubbo Gliding Club. Writes foundation member Albert Shibble: “It was about the middle of 1950 that a number of fellows sat on the kerb of the main street of Dubbo and discussed gliding, and the formation of a club, following advertisements in both the *Dubbo Liberal* and *Dispatch*.” The first club meeting was on 2 July. Vice president was Jack Coomber of Narromine (40km west of Dubbo), who in 1938 had built himself Narromine Aero Club’s first aircraft (a Corben from plans imported from the USA). During the war he joined the RAAF, and instructed there on Link trainer flight simulators.

The following account of the Dubbo Venture comes largely from the recollections of founding club members Albert and Joe Shibble.

It was Coomber’s decision to buy, for 65 pounds, a set of plans of the prototype Venture. It had a wingspan of 16.76m, a length of 7.42m, and featured upper surface spoilers, and no flaps. The club became affiliated with the NSW Gliding Association, which made it eligible to access government material including war surplus held at the RAAF’s No.2 Stores Depot at Dubbo. Unlimited quantities of the finest quality

spruce, Irish linen, plywood, aluminium and cabling were there for the taking - reportedly left over from production of the wooden Mosquito bomber. The building project was headed by Coomber with cabinet makers Ron and Harley Marks, and Noel Soane. Ron's experience as a Mosquito maintenance inspector proved to be useful; 27-year old Harley had been a wartime bomber pilot. The other members were put to work mostly on building the 162 wing ribs.

Over the period of the project, club membership halved to twelve, due partly to the sheer enormity of the project. The club set up its first workshop in the basement of a block of flats, but was evicted for loudly singing bawdy songs at night! The next workshop was under the Dubbo Showground grandstand. Writes Albert Shibble, "How we froze over three years with the winter's chill wind blowing up against the galvanised iron sheet walls. Conversely, how we were stifled and sweated in Dubbo's hot summer". There was, however, one advantage in working at the showground: the opportunity to "have a whip round" and bet on the greyhounds.

Each rib component was shaped in a galvanised iron jig containing water, and individually steamed over a fire before gluing together, the joins being reinforced with triangular 'biscuits' tacked in place (in later years, "missed" tacks which had worked loose would rattle around in the wings). The plans did not include any details for control cables or pulleys, so the system had to be designed.

As the Dubbo Show approached each year, the club apparently had to 'shift shop' temporarily. Meanwhile, a hangar for the glider was built on Dubbo aerodrome, attached to the Mayor's hangar which was also used by the aero club for its two Tiger Moths.

On Friday 2 October 1953, more than three years of busy weekends came to fruition. The Venture, allocated registration VH-GDU (GFA No.47), was trucked to Dubbo Aerodrome courtesy of the RAAF, with police escort. The following day it was given its first flight by Bob Crick of Sydney's Hinkler club. Along for the ride as ballast was "George the Sandman", a wheat-bag full of sand which, over the years, checked out many a pupil on their first solo. Next up, naturally, was Jack Coomber. The first day's flying coincided with an air pageant, in which gliding and "barnstorming" pioneer Fred Hoinville flew his Tiger Moth in a thrilling display of aerobatics and skywriting.

Cost was the main factor in deciding on auto tow as the launch method of choice. A 1936 Ford V8 sedan was bought, which, with the strain of up to fifty flights each weekend, wore out gearbox parts at an alarming rate. Eventually, recalls Albert Shibble, "Three of us could change a 2nd gear in two or three hours." Winch and aerotow were later employed, Narromine pilot Keith Powell taking it up for many a launch in his Dubbo-based Tiger Moth, which struggled somewhat with the weight.

The Venture was a slow, sedate aircraft. A brass plaque in the cockpit specifies a normal speed of 30mph, and a maximum of 60. Stall speed was just 15mph. It would not spin, however it was looped on two occasions. Its fragile structure suffered somewhat over the years, with running repairs being made after a weekend's flying. Albert Shibble relates one amusing incident in it:

“At the hanger end of the home strip just outside the boundary fence was a little green oasis all year round, surrounded by evergreen shrubs - a popular spot for young lovers. Gliders are comparatively silent when airborne, and as Col Bailey and I turned to land over the oasis there was a couple ‘heing and sheing’ on a rug below. Col leant out and shouted to the couple, “Naughty naughty, God is watching!’ Never had we seen a couple so quickly attempt to separate, jump up and adjust their clothes while they searched frantically for the heavenly voice”.

Now that the club had a glider, membership went up to thirty. The influx of funds allowed a single-seat glider (a Grunau 4, VH-VDU) to be bought, relegating the Venture to A, B and C certificate training and to joy flights. Usual charge was five to ten shillings (a cable break incurred no charge!) Flights averaged ten minutes or less, and C certificate in particular was a difficult feat in the Venture, but there were notable exceptions: among its best flights were an endurance of 5 hours 42 minutes (C. Shibble, 31 December 1960) and a height of 11,000ft (C. Bradley & O. Jamieson, 29 January 1961)*.

On 22 July 1962, on the other side of the world, the prototype Venture crashed at Dunstable due to pilot error, and was written off.

Not long afterwards, a group of Dubbo Gliding Club members from Orange formed their own club. Following its 8,357th flight on 19 December 1964, the Orange Gliding Club bought the Venture for 800 pounds.

The Dubbo club continued on for some years, but by 1970, increasing air traffic into the airport (by now an ‘international’ alternative to Sydney’s Mascot) forced a move to nearby Narromine which had relinquished the international role. The club became the Orana Soaring Club. Narromine, of course, was well known to the Dubbo group, as the aerodrome had hosted, among regular weekend visits, the first National Gliding Championships to be held in NSW in 1962 with three Dubbo members participating.

In 1979 the Venture, by now dismantled and unused, was bought back from the Orange group for preservation by a Dubbo-Narromine consortium of 20, including the Shibble brothers. Stored at Narromine Aerodrome for some time, it was relocated to the nearby Shibble property and, just this November, back to Narromine aerodrome.

Thus, what is thought to be the world’s only Venture glider – a classic example of local perseverance and ingenuity - will now be displayed for all to see.

Postscript: Foundation member Joe Shibble was awarded the GFA’s “living legend” status for fifty years’ service to gliding.

* records from Logbook No.2 of Venture sailplane VH-GDU (courtesy Narromine Gliding Club)

With thanks to Joe and Albert Shibble, and Martin Simons

Image captions:

The Venture takes to the air; note the cable parachute. Courtesy Narromine Aviation Museum.

The Venture fuselage after its recent move to Narromine Aerodrome's 1944 Belman hangar for display.

The side-by-side cockpit. The ASI was a voltmeter, as no available ASIs would read low enough!

Three-view plans of the Venture (courtesy Albert Shibble)