



IN THE CORE

THE BEST OF OUR SPORT

Head in the Clouds is the latest book from Cross Country. The book's co-editor Hugh Miller tells us about it

Head in the Clouds is an amazing anthology, full of inspirational stories from inside our sport. Where did the idea come from?

About ten years ago I sat down with huge piles of magazines with the idea to compile a 'Bedtime Stories' collection of tales. I scanned quite a few stories from early hang gliding gazettes like Ground Skimmer, but then laziness won. Then in 2021 I'd just finished writing my psychology book and got the project bug back. One June day my friend Andrew Craig and I were chatting about the anthology idea before flying. He's a very experienced editor and a much steadier hand than me. It was one of those rare 7,000ft base days we get in the UK, and approaching the wispiess late in the afternoon,

I thought of the title. I texted it to Andrew, and then we were off.

The earliest story is from 1973, the latest last year. What is it you were looking for when selecting them?

Some stories chose themselves, like the Croatian Survivor by Davor Jardas, In Deep by Guy Anderson, or Ninth Life by Bob Drury. These are the 'Touching the Void' stories of flying and are unmissable. Haydon Gray's Celebrate Being Alive will catch you in the back of your throat – you'll have to read it to find out why – while Amy Anderson's Blue Sky Blues will have you chuckling about the ridiculousness of XC flying from a retrieve driver's perspective.

how that still resonates today. Why do you think that is important?

This year I've been learning to sailplane, and while it's been fun, boy do they love a rule. It's made me realise just how special free flying is. We are FREE! When we gather on our sites for the epic days, the glint in everyone's eyes ... it's adventure and exploration at its best. I know we are incredibly privileged to be able to fly, but frankly, most people don't get it.

Maybe some people will see gliders circling as they drive to work, or see stuff on social media, or come across this book in a shop, and that may change a few minds, but fundamentally we have to just keep pushing as a sport against airspace increases and land ownership grabs as best we can.

The tagline is Best Stories From 50 Years of Free Flying. Is that 50 years important or is it just a marketing angle?

It's a marketing angle, and I'd like to be honest about that and for you to print it! Because at its core this is a solid, authentic collection of stories where pilots are really honest – and some even a little vulnerable in their honesty.

It's a good collection, but there are so many more classic tales out there unwritten, or written. I hope we've done a good job though in capturing a range of great stories that will serve as winter fuel for those serving time between flying seasons. It happens also to feature stories from 1973 to 2023.

Is there anything you wanted to avoid? Things that you didn't want to include?

Flying is dangerous. As Rob Whittall says, there's an almost poetic beauty in continuing to do something that is just so beautiful but that you know might hurt you, as it has hurt so many friends before. We can't escape that, and it is part of what makes free flying so special in what feels like an ever increasingly monitored and controlling world. While acknowledging the risk and consequences, we didn't want the book to feel too heavy or out of whack. So while we include Andy Pag's incredibly moving story about the search for Kiwi Johnston, and my interview with Stewart Midwinter who is living with a life-changing injury, we tried to keep the overall feel of the book from getting too heavy. The stories by Andrew Court, Allen Weynberg, Matthew Whitall and others definitely help with that too.

Is there a single thread that connects all these stories together? What would you say it is?

It's interesting that there's only one story from a competition in the book – and that's actually about Bruce Goldsmith's hang gliding tumble and reserve ride, rather than the competition itself. I don't quite know why that is. But as Jérôme Maupoint says, the jewels in flying come from experiencing the unexpected. Whether it's the heart-in-mouth, eyes-on-stalks rush of riding a strong climb out of trouble in the mountains, or the joy of meeting a friendly local who appears out of nowhere to offer you a drink as the sun sets after a long day in the flats – I guess there's a thread there, but you'd need someone cleverer than me to explain it!

Who did you have in mind when you were putting it together? Who is it for?

I read an interesting story called The Flat Spell which describes how a small Australian surfing town community gradually turns more and more nuts after three weeks of no waves. Couples start arguing, people start drinking, others start booking flights. Our winters as pilots are our flat spells. In summer, it's hard to remember just how excited you are as the sun starts to rise slightly in early spring and you know the promise of the first thermals is not far away. Head in the Clouds will hopefully keep one or two pilots' spirits up during the flat spells. ☺

Hugh Miller is the publisher of Cross Country Magazine and has been flying for 30 years. Head in the Clouds, The Best Stories From Fifty Years of Free Flying, 320pp, hardback, is available now from the Cross Country Shop and other free-flight retailers



▲STORYTELLING
"At its core it's a solid, authentic collection of stories where pilots are really honest." Jérôme Maupoint shot the cover photo used on the new book on a classic day in Andalucia, Spain
Photo: Jérôme Maupoint