



Glenn Bannister with his aeroplane.

## AROUND THE WORLD WITH WINGS AND WHEELS

**A round the world flight that started in Switzerland in November plans on taking a simple message to the wider aviation community - disabled people can fly too.**

It's been said aviation is a great leveller and that participation in flying is more dependent on the burning desire to get in the air than gender, age or status in society.

Glenn Bannister has another one to throw in - physical disability. As a paraplegic who was injured in a motorcycle racing accident 20 years ago he's one of a number of pilots who prove that once you are in the air, everyone is equal.

The self-confessed 'nerdy kid' learned to fly at 17, long before the spectre of disability would rise up and change his life.

"I started flying early and did my PPL in about 1976. I just saved and saved and every dollar I earned I spent on flying. I was flying a 150 and a 152 that cost about \$20 per hour. I got really excited when I got into the big stuff, the 172.

"After I got my PPL I flew Archers, Lances and the 182RG - basically anything I could get my hands on. I also owned an American Eagle ultralight at one stage and that was among the most flying fun I've experienced. I'd get up early in the morning, when it was dead calm and just buzz

around, chasing birds. It was just great."

After building up a successful agricultural business farming chickens, Glenn was able to buy a Hawk XP, which he "flew the wings off" with trips across Australia from a strip on his farm.

Twenty years ago, that all changed.

"I was competing in the Australian Safari for KDM and just came off. It was that simple.

"Apart from concerns about how this was going to affect my family and our business, all I could think of was if I could



***"Apart from concerns about how this was going to affect my family and our business, all I could think of was if I could fly again. I couldn't think of anything else".***

fly again. I couldn't think of anything else. When you are in that situation you need something that will give you hope. In rehab I saw people who were climbing cliffs and that got me going by giving me hope that I could fly again. After your accident you are really uncertain about what you are going to be able to do once you get into a wheel chair.

"It's really all I thought of because aviation has been such a huge part of my life."

With the internet still in its infancy, Glenn's solution was to start making phone calls, trying to find anyone who had

been down the path he was now following. Through this research he found Suzi Duncan, a pioneering Australian disabled pilot who has helped many disabled people take to the skies.

"Suzy from Vision Air hand controls got me back on track and I did a few hours with her at Royal Vic Aero Club. Then I put the hand controls on the Bendigo Flying Club Archer and flew that, and then five years ago I went to Slovenia and bought the Pipstrel, which was built with dedicated hand controls. I was just so happy to get back flying again. When you are disabled once

you get in an aeroplane you are equal to an able bodied pilot. I can do anything in my aeroplane that an able bodied person can do."

Watching Glenn get into his aeroplane makes you realise his strength; both external to lift his body onto the sill and then pick his legs up by hand and swing them in, and internal to accept the challenge of losing command of half of his body. Once on board it's obvious the hand control design is a work of art.

His left hand is on the traditional joystick while his right also holds a joystick

on a padded cradle. Left and right of the centre stick gives throttle while fore and aft movement of the cradle gives rudder. It's incredibly well thought out and appears to be extremely comfortable. Handflight was founded by Daniel Ramseier in 2007 and meets at the Swiss town of Gruyere every two years. It has become the biggest fly-in of disabled pilots from around the world and provides a unique opportunity for both disabled and able bodied pilots to share experiences and enjoy flying in the beauty of the Swiss Alps.

However the decision was made to take Handflight away from its Swiss home in 2018 and fly around the world to spread the message that disability needn't ground people who want to fly.

Two modified Flight Design CTLS aircraft, accompanied by a twin Comanche support aircraft, departed Geneva in late November with experienced pilots Paolo Pocobelli and Guillaume Féral in the command seat.

They will fly some of the more difficult stages solo, like the trip to Australia and the long over-water sections involving the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, with many other legs open to other disabled pilots.

Two other Australian pilots, Cliff Princehorn and David McPherson will take part, assisting with the Australian part of the trek and then flying across the United States.

Italian Paolo lost the use of his legs in a skydiving accident in 1994 in what he describes as "a bad day at the office." It was while recovering in a German hospital in 1995 that a friend showed him a magazine article about disabled pilots flying sport aircraft with hand controls. He left hospital in January and was flying by February.

In the 24 years since his accident Paolo has gained his commercial pilots licence in the United States and has enjoyed a career as a flying instructor.

He says his success as a pilot has been built on the inspiration he's received from other disabled pilots who have shown by example what can be achieved by people with a disability.

"Since my accident I have travelled a lot, studied a lot, worked a lot and flown a lot, but none of this would ever have been possible without the inspiration I had from the people I met on my way.

I was inspired by Claude and Guillaume, I was inspired by the people I met in Egypt and the way they managed to overcome difficulties, despite their lack of resources. I was inspired by Mike Smith, an American pilot and real pioneer of aviation for the



disabled. I was inspired by the satisfaction of my students. Inspiration is the best gift a person can receive. It is often inspiration that gives hope to people. Hope to be able to change their life or achieve something considered impossible.

"This was the main reason for me to accept, with great enthusiasm, the proposal by Daniel Ramseier to become

a member of the Handflight round the world project and bring a message of hope and inclusion to as many pilots as we can; a message not only to people whose life was badly challenged but an inspiration to governments and organisations who could be inspired by Handflight and start to change their attitude toward people with disabilities." ❄️