

# Soaring Australian Thermals

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Garry Speight  
from 1966 to 2015



# Nihon No Guraidingu (Japanese Gliding)

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I arrived in Japan at the end of March last year for six months research at the Japanese Geographical Survey Institute, located at Tsukuba Science City, a New Town on the Kanto Plain 60 km northeast of Tokyo.

After a few weeks settling in, I started to explore the possibilities of gliding in Japan. Since driving in Japan is not very convenient, I didn't buy a car, but did my travelling by push bike.

Hearing of gliding activity at Otone, about 30 km south of Tsukuba, I set off one Sunday and,

three hours later, after some false leads, arrived at the Otone private airstrip where I found the Japan Motor Glider Club operating a fleet of three Fournier RF-5's and an RF-4. It was refreshing to find some kindred spirits, even if a little bent towards powered flying, and I accepted the offer of a dual flight, though I was rather bemused by the price, 10,000 yen (\$40) for 35 minutes. During the flight I turned the engine off three times, but there was no lift to be found, and we returned, to spend seven minutes doing a vast, complicated circuit pattern, beginning at 1500 ft., as dictated by the pattern of the powered traffic, and navigating by fixed reference points on the ground. However, some of the pilots I met that day had valuable information about gliding fields



*The Keihin Soaring Club Blanik with club members, including the president, Akiyama, in the centre, and CFI Sakai, on the left.*

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and contacts in the gliding movement, so I felt the effort had been worthwhile.

The following week I set off for Sekiyado, also 35 km away, which I had learned was a gliding field run by the Japan Aeronautical Association. I had an introduction to Mr. Sakai, C.F.I. of the Keihin Soaring Club, and was able to get a dual flight in a Blanik with him.

I subsequently joined the Keihin Soaring Club; its name indicates that it is the Tokyo-Yokohama soaring club. "Kei" is what the name of the letter To is called (a la Lewis Carroll) and "Hin" similarly refers to the letter Hama of Yokohama. I hope that is quite clear?

The K.S.C. is based permanently at Sekiyado, which is only 40 km north of Tokyo, sharing the site with a number of university gliding clubs, some of which operate at more than one site. The club is the only non-university soaring club in the Tokyo area except for the Japan Gliding Association, which operates from Itakura, 20 km further north.

The airstrip at Sekiyado is situated in the flood-channel of the Edo River, and is about 1500m long and 150m wide. The width varies a bit depending on how successful the club members are at keeping the grass down. Usually two winches are running at the same time and there is a Super-Cub on hand for aero-tows. The Keihin winch is an impressive monster, truck-mounted with fixed hydraulic jacks, and a 220 hp 10 litre diesel engine out of a road-roller! Because of the flood hazard,

all the Sekiyado gliders are towed over the top of the 10m high flood bank to be de-rigged and stored in a single hangar beyond the bank. Near the hangar there is a clubhouse, a bunkhouse, equipment sheds and car-parking space, but only one of the sheds is for the exclusive use of the K.S.C. During my stay, the club bought a \$200 un-registered mini-bus for use as a field office.

The club fleet consisted at that time of one Blanik, claimed to be the last one produced, one Ka8, and one H 23-C. The H 23-C (Aichi-ni-san-shi) is a Japanese- designed 2-seater built by the Hagiwara Company, resembling some Schleicher design earlier than the K-7. Its role in Japan is like that of the Kookaburra in Australia. For me the H 23-C was the most interesting glider in the fleet, and it became a joke that if the H 23-C didn't get rigged Supeito-san would want to know why. When I flew it solo, I got the type conversion signed by the designer himself, Isao Horikawa.

The K.S.C. had ordered the first production Nippi Pilatus B-4, which I saw on the stocks at the Japan Aviation Company (Nippi) factory at Yokohama. Delivery was repeatedly delayed, notably for flutter testing which, I understand, may never have been carried out on the Swiss-built aircraft. A number of K.S.C. members are employees of Nippi. Ironically, the company also makes fiberglass boats, but is not interested in putting its aeronautical engineers on fiberglass work because it is not relevant to possible contracts on airliners or military aircraft. Nippi built a prototype motor-glider, which is currently out of service awaiting a more suitable motor.

By now I believe the K.S.C. should have taken

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delivery of their B-4, and I have heard that they also have a Jantar. With about 70 members sharing three gliders at the time of my visit, there was a lot of waiting around for flights. On the other hand, there was seldom a shortage of people for rigging or ground handling, and the aircraft were kept in beautiful condition.

Other clubs at Sekiyado had similar aircraft, Blaniks, H 23-C's, Ka8's, some superb Ka6's, Schweitzer 1-26's, Club Libelles, Astirs and a Twin Astir. Another quantity-produced Japanese 2-seater is the Mita, which looks exactly like a grown-up Briegleb BG-12. Its performance is probably better than that of a Blanik, but it is said to have ill coordinated controls and a tendency to spin.

My flying career in Japan was undistinguished, due to the problem that a gliding license is required

in Japan and I could not produce an actual license from Australia. All my other documentation left the Civil Aviation Authority officials unmoved (and visibly inscrutable too). The argument is not completely over yet, and I have had a lot of help from G.F.A. Secretary Mike Valentine and the K.S.C. President Takehiko Akiyama, both of whom regard it as a matter of principle. In the meantime I took the medical and got a student pilots license, which at least permitted me to go solo, but not to instruct.

While doing my dual training, I flew with each of the English-speaking instructors of the club, and I formed many friendships. The club spirit was equal to the best I have seen in Australia due to the traditional Japanese togetherness feeling. Operational efficiency and fumbles were very much the same as in Australia. Like other Japanese sporting clubs, the K.S.C. operates



*An Astir being tied down overnight during a regatta at Sekiyado gliding field, Kanto Plain, Japan. An H 23-C is being towed over the flood-bank for hangarage.*

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only on Sundays, because most people still have to work Saturday mornings, and continue into Saturday afternoon if there is a rush job on. The fact that the aircraft are idle on Saturdays is, I think, one of the main causes of the high cost of gliding in Japan. The K.S.C. fees in 1979 were:

Joining Fee	\$200
Monthly Subscription	\$ 10
Flying, per minute (minimum charge \$6)	40c
Aero-tow to 2000 ft.	\$10
Winch tow	\$2

High cost is not the only deterrent to an aspiring Japanese glider pilot. Everything else is against him too.

### Airspace

Control Areas in Japan normally have bases at 1500 ft. above surface, and 650 ft. above surface within 20 n.m. of each airport. About 90% of the land area of Japan lies under Control Areas. Nearly all the rest is under military (sorry, Self Defense Force) training areas.

Flight in controlled airspace is not permitted without V.H.F. radio on A.T.C. frequencies. Furthermore, flight planning and position reporting on A.T.C. frequencies are required for all flights beyond 5 n.m. from an aerodrome. Gliders are not yet permitted to carry V.H.F. radio, only 27 Mhz. Another potential airspace conflict resolved!

So far as I can tell, most clubs operate under

some sort of special dispensation. At Sekiyado, the site is within a "Civil Training and Testing Area" extending from the surface up to 2000 ft. so training flights are permitted to 2000 ft. within 5 n.m. of the field. It has been agreed that flights **other** than training flights may be made to 5000 ft. after a telephone check has established that there is no traffic on Shimofusa Air Base.

My friends believe that approval for gliders to carry V.H.F. radio will soon be granted, and they are confident that cross country flights will then be permitted. Japanese controllers do not undertake to provide separation of all traffic in Control Areas as their Australian counterparts do.

### Terrain

The terrain in Japan is about as bad as it could possibly be for glider flying. Eighty percent of the country is mountains, with practically no slopes lower than 30°. The rest is either cities or paddy fields. The paddy fields are smaller than Australian housing blocks, and are surrounded by banks and ditches, so they cannot be recommended for out landings, Furthermore, they are flooded in summer. Only Hokkaido, 800 km north of Tokyo, has any significant number of larger dry fields (precisely 250 m long; that would smarten up your spot landings!). The one possible location for gliding fields has been exploited by the Japanese enthusiasts. Every major river is bounded by flood-banks 5 to 10 m high. These banks must be rather widely spaced to contain very large floods, leaving between the banks a broad strip of land that is not suitable for building houses or growing crops. It is used for recreational purposes such as baseball diamonds, golf courses, and gliding

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fields, including Sekiyado. If A.T.C. clearance could be obtained, one could fly rather extensive cross-countries relying on the cleared open spaces along the major rivers, and on civil aerodromes and the golf courses that are situated on higher ground.

### Weather

The weather around Tokyo varies a great deal from day to day and from hour to hour but, in general, it rains all through the summer and autumn, which are also very hot. The rain and low cloud-base, combined with the farmers' custom of flooding the fields, dampens the prospects for soaring. The air is rather unstable though, and there are often strong thermals between the showers. Just as in Europe, it is a problem on many days to see the cumulus clouds through the smog. During the winter, I am told, there may be some soaring, but operations are limited by extreme cold, snow, and high winds blowing from Siberia.

### Social Attitudes

The Japanese gliding scene appears to be dominated by university gliding clubs and by university old-boys' gliding clubs. This follows from the well-known Japanese attitude of loyalty to one's own family, school, or company. To belong to a club or organisation that is independent of these groups presents a problem of divided loyalties to a Japanese. This not only limits the membership of independent gliding clubs, but also inhibits cooperation between clubs in the Japanese Gliding Association, making it rather ineffective, and unable to present a united front

in its dealings with the Civil Aviation Authority, which controls glider pilot licensing and glider airworthiness as well as airspace use.

For the dedicated glider pilot, the frustrations of gliding in Japan can be bypassed by going overseas: the problems about this are time and expense. Time is a problem because, even though many people get three weeks leave a year, it is not the custom to insist on taking it all, or on taking it at a time convenient for the person rather than the company, especially for an activity that the company does not support!

As to cost, the Tokyo-Sydney air fare in 1979 was, at \$1400, probably the most expensive per km in the world, and tickets bought in Japan cost 15% more than they do here! Some of my friends travelled to Estrella, Arizona on a package deal that included glider hire and accommodation for less than the airfare to Australia! However, they weren't very impressed with flying Schweitzer 1-26's. I met a number of people who had been to Waikerie or Narromine and who felt that it had been worth the expense. Others are planning to come as soon as they can. They have a saying: "For gliding, Japan is Hell; Australia is Heaven!"

Towards the end of my stay, Mr. Sakai asked if I would like to earn my "C" badge, because he doubted if any foreigner had ever done so in Japan. In due course I qualified, so on my last day I was presented with "A", "B", and "C" certificates, with badges marked "JA". The club also gave me a model of an H 23-C with the same registration letters and paint job as the one I flew.

Two schemes have come to mind to build

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*Isao Horikawa competing in the NSW Gliding Championships at Narromine with Shoichiro Sakai, our translator Pauline Kent and Garry Speight spectating*

bridges between gliding enthusiasts in Australia and Japan. One is that, if the Japanese manage to establish a cross country school, which could conceivably be done on Hokkaido, Australian instructors with racing experience might go there to instruct in the northern summer. The other is to encourage the participation of Japanese pilots in Australian State Championships.

This second idea was prompted by hearing someone say that the Japanese are disturbed to realise that they do not now have any pilots capable of representing Japan in the World Gliding Championships. This is basically due, of course, to the near-impossibility of practicing cross-country soaring in Japan, but even when Japanese pilots go cross-country in Australia or elsewhere, they practically never have a chance

to compete in races. As a first step, after checking with the N.S.W.G.A. President, I wrote to the Keihin Soaring Club, proposing that a pilot should share my Astir with me in the forthcoming N.S.W. State Championships. I am happy to say that Isao Horikawa intends to come, and that Shoichiro Sakai hopes to come as crew.