- How do you feel about the flight?

I have been wanting to fly a solid XC since last season. As you know, it has been a rough year, fires and now COVID. So it was very nice, to get out with a good mate and fly for a few hours in nice conditions.

- How many others were flying?

There were about 10 at launch.

How did they go?

We were the first to launch after Al Dickie. Alex Boiko was keen to go fly some km too, but unfortunately he landed before a good cycle came through Collector. Then nobody joined Sam and I during the first climb. Al Dickie was flying, but he didn’t climb with us. I was hoping to get a good gaggle together, but in the end it was just two of us.

- What was the plan for the day?

In my mind, the plan was pretty simple. Go with the ESE wind, get clear of the airspace (6500’ step) and hopefully get a few pilots over the 40km mark for their PG5 licences.

- How did you choose your route?

The wind chose the route for us. The first aim was to get clear of the 6500’ airspace step, so we could then fly all the way to cloud base. After that we just went with the wind. There was a moment where Sam speared off to the NE. I don’t know what he was doing there.

- Was it hard to stick together in the air?

Yes, it wasn’t easy. It could be easy if everyone is prepared to wait around, but you have to keep moving. Sam was probably in a hurry and I wasn’t so much! I had my speed bar set up for a different wing (Niviuk Peak 3) which resulted in only half bar with my legs fully extended. And I do like to fly conservatively, top out my climbs then go on glide. But Sam was happy to leave the scraps behind and keep some speed on. So I spent a bit of time chasing him. It forced me to speed up. I lost sight of him three times, but fortunately I caught up when he got low and had to sniff out the next climb. I tried calling him on the radio a few times when I lost him, but I he was probably working too hard searching for a climb to reply.

- Were you in radio contact the whole time?

Yes, although we did a bit of yelling too. There was plenty of hooting and hollering going on each time we jagged a climb.

- I notice you both took short detours to the north-east near Gunning and Dalton. What were they about?

You can’t see the clouds and shadows on a GPS trace and they often dictate where you fly. Just north of Gunning, everything was shaded out except for that area to the north east of town, which also has a few hills. So we ended up there looking for a climb, which we never really found until after Dalton. We were scratching and drifting along in zeroes and it felt like we were stuck at 500m agl. It dragged on, but we didn’t give up. Then eventually we drifted into a good climb and both went straight to cloud base. Once we got there, Sam just speared off to the NE. I don’t know why? I had in my mind that we would keep moving down wind towards the NW. So I got on the radio and I was like “Dude, where are you off to? How about we keep going NW.” And he said something like “OK, I’ll follow you”.

- What were the highlights?

We were getting really low approaching the 50km mark. We got down to 200m agl and it looked like we were both going to bomb out at 49km. But we worked well together. We spread apart by about 100m to sniff out more area for a climb and kept going down wind. I noticed Sam bob around a bit and just as that happened I hit it too. We found the thermal we needed to keep on going. Just as we were climbing out, Boiko who had been chasing us in his car, randomly spotted us. It was clear we now had 50km in the bag. Boiko got on the radio and said … “keep going lads!”. It was great knowing we had support from the ground.

To me the real highlight though, was going on glide into Boorowa. Sam was just off to my left and a bit below me. The sun was shining on his wing and I think we both just felt like kings. The only thing which maybe could have improved that moment would be to have a big stereo pumping out The Sultans of Swing by Dire Straits. It was beautiful. The dogs were all barking at us from the backyards in town, you could see people swimming in the town pool and then right in the middle of town, bam, a nice strong smooth thermal back up to cloudbase. That was the thermal which would take us to 100km.

- Were there any nervous moments during the flight?

No. Although we did hear some gun shots at one point and thought perhaps a redneck farmer was shooting us down. In terms of the conditions, it was really smooth flying. Textbook smooth thermals. Dream conditions.

- How was the journey home?

The retrieve was awesome. Boiko picked up some cold beer as he passed through Boorowa. He was right there when we landed, with cold beers. Best retrieve ever.

- What was it about the forecast that made you think it would be a good day?

The old guys at Bright say that the best XC days from Mystic are the SE days. I think that is also true here in Canberra. Looking at the forecast on Friday, I could see a weak cold front, which was due to pass through the area on Friday evening, which was forecast to bring a southerly air mass up to the Canberra region on Saturday morning (the day of the flight). With a cool and moist air mass in the region providing instability in the lower levels and a high pressure system still approaching, the wind in the area was forecast to calm down at around mid-day and go more SE. I thought it looked like the right recipe for a good XC day from Collector. And it turned out to be nice flying conditions. There were Cu’s with a base of around 2200m and a light SE wind throughout.

- How long have you been flying? And how many hours?

I’ve been flying various aircraft since 1996. I initially learnt to fly sailplanes and I’ve been flying aeroplanes for a living since 2006. If you tallied up all of my flying, I would have about 4000 hours. I didn’t get into paragliding properly until 2015. With a paraglider, I’ve logged 400 hours and 900 flights.

- You seem to do a lot of hike-and-fly.

How does that compare with this style of flying?

The way I see it, hike and fly encompasses all styles of paragliding. Hike and fly can be anything from hiking up your local hill to do a sleddy back to the car, or it can be hike up and go XC. Yesterday I hiked to a random launch and flew 70km. Sometimes I like to hike and fly acro. Unfortunately the acro gear is very heavy. With hike and fly you get the added adventure of hiking to the launch. But the real beauty of hike and fly is that it opens up countless possibilities for places to fly. In reality you can physically fly off pretty much anything, provided you can get your wing up and clear the terrain and obstacles. I would love to see SAFA and the clubs work more with the national parks to enable us to fly more freely throughout the fantastic areas (not sites!) that are on offer here in Australia.

- What wing, harness, and gear were you flying with?

Ozone Delta 3 and Neo Stay Up harness with a light weight reserve. My instruments consist of my phone (using XC Track), LeGPSBip vario and Garmin In-Reach mini. I always have the In-Reach tracking going. I recommend everybody get an In-Reach and do the same. It was the In-Reach which enabled Alex Boiko to follow us and efficiently retrieve us both. I took a radio on this flight. If I’m flying alone I don’t bring a radio.

- I notice you **almost** tagged the Boorowa turnpoint. What happened there?

Yes. I noticed it was a turnpoint challenge waypoint, so I started to cruise over to tag it, but halfway there I realised Sam was climbing out and the thermal was developing into a big Cu and casting a big shadow. I didn’t want to get left behind for the sake of one turnpoint, so I went back to the thermal and tried to catch up with Sam.