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# REDCLIFFE AERO CLUB

# AIRCHAT

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# A fling with a Sling

## An A320 captain's long journey to 'home built' GA

by Philip Arthur

*I met Linda Sollars, A320 captain and renaissance woman, at Oshkosh this year while I was wandering around admiring the vast array of planes. I'd been following the development of Slings for about 10 years and when I passed 'Sling Island' I saw her sitting in her High Wing (HW) Sling 4 chatting to people. She'd flown in from Michigan the day before, where she'd had the original Rotax 915 engine replaced with a 160 hp turbocharged fuel-injected Rotax 916. And it was two years after she'd personally flown the HW from the Sling Factory in South Africa to Oshkosh in 2022. And that was nine months after she'd commenced a full self-build of the plane at the Sling factory near Johannesburg. But her amazing story goes way, way further back than that. I was so intrigued by our five-minute chat that I arranged to sit down with her for a one on one in depth interview the following day.*

*On arriving at the Sling stand the next day I discovered Linda and a few of the Sling personnel in the process of reinstalling the cowling on her HW after completing the 25-hourly inspection of the new engine. It was clear she was relishing the opportunity to be 'hands on' with the aircraft.*

*Once she'd managed to pull herself away from the plane she started to open up on her background. It was quite a long and fascinating story.*



## A glorified bus driver

When she was young, Linda dreamed of being able to fly like a bird or like Snoopy from the 'Peanuts' cartoon strip flying on his Sopwith Camel. One day she told her father that she'd like to be an airline pilot. He told her they were just 'glorified bus drivers in the sky', so she discarded the idea of a career in the airlines, especially after a high school counsellor suggested the best she could hope for was to become a flight attendant (it was the 1970s after all). While flying occasionally on RPTs as she grew up, being a pilot just didn't seem a viable career for her. So, concluding her desire to fly like a bird was a childish whim, she continued with more conventional studies.

Excelling in maths and science at high school but being not so good at English, in what would become typical of her later life, she decided to use her time at the University of Connecticut to improve on her weakness. Not knowing what she wanted to do for a job she reasoned that writing proficiency would be essential in whatever career she pursued and so undertook a major in English in her undergraduate studies. During those years she says one of the most important things she learned was 'how not to take NO for an answer and how to make stuff happen!'. She wanted to travel but hadn't learned a foreign language at high school and that would normally bar her from taking part in a university exchange program. They hadn't sent students to England before so she asked 'why not?' and lobbied for a 'Junior Year Abroad in England' program. After some cajoling the staff stopped saying 'No' so she spent one year in the UK and travelled extensively in Europe while there. She's proud that the exchange program she initiated continued for many years after she'd pioneered it.

## What? There are small airports and planes?

Linda started playing around with computers while at uni and considered a masters in Management Information Systems in the business school but realised that at that stage in the 1980s the lecturers didn't know much more about such systems than she did. So, once again reflecting that one of her weaknesses was lack of knowledge of finance, and reasoning that whatever she did in the future a knowledge of finance would be critical, after completing the undergraduate degree she started an MBA in finance. In one of her first MBA classes a professor mentioned that he owned a Cessna and flew out of a small airport nearby. 'What? There are small planes and small airports? I had no idea.' The next day she headed to the airport to investigate and was immediately hooked. It reawakened her dreams from earlier and she gained her private pilot licence while completing the MBA.

## Commercial pilot or Wall Street financier?

Now she was really entertaining the thought of life as a commercial airline pilot. As we all know, the airline industry is very cyclical and at that time in the 80s it was a low cycle with lots of furloughs. She discovered that there was a rigorous requirement for good eyesight at the airlines, the FAA requiring 20/80 vision correctable to 20/20, and she didn't meet that. So, she tried bio feedback therapy to improve her eyesight and thought of laser surgery but it was brand new at the time and cost a lot and eventually 'I just ran out of money'. She therefore settled on her private licence and once again parked her desire for a flying career.

*Parked at 'Sling Island', Oshkosh 2024*



Having completed the masters, she was determined to fold flying into her career and took a job developing a computer data base for an aviation brokerage. If she couldn't fly commercially at least that would mean some contact with the industry. That morphed into an aviation insurance job and during four years as an insurance broker she discovered that none of the people she worked with in the insurance industry really intended to be there. So, she decided to get out and used her MBA in finance to move to Manhattan and make real money at Lehmann Brothers (long before their infamous collapse that triggered the GFC). That move, and the increase in salary, allowed her to own and operate a Cessna CT210 and fly out of a base at Morristown, New Jersey.

As she continued to fly privately and build up hours it was costing her a lot to maintain the Cessna, with \$10,000 being typical for an annual inspection. So, showing typical initiative, in 1995 she decided to take a two-year sabbatical from financial services to gain her A&P (Airframe and Powerplant) certification, the US equivalent of a LAME. That allowed her to work on the externals (airframe) and engine (powerplant) of her CT210 to ensure that it met FAA safety standards. It'd also satisfy her curiosity on how a plane worked. Concurrently she obtained her certification in electronics technology.

### **From Wall Street to 35,000 feet**

Being passionate about aviation, Linda had been attending Oshkosh regularly, starting in 1985, and while there in July 1997 she learned that the FAA were planning to ease the requirement for eyesight testing of airline pilots. So, at 35 years of age she made a new plan. She'd pivot from finance to the airlines and fly for United, favoured by her for its equipment, destinations and hiring practices. But there'd be a sunset clause in her agreement with herself. If she hadn't become a United pilot by the time she reached 40 she'd return to Wall Street.

Taking a job as a pilot meant a massive pay cut for her but the money was a secondary consideration. This is what she wanted to do. The first step was to buy a Piper Apache twin to build her multiengine time. She worked her way towards a job with United, first landing a job as a pilot with a charter company and later a regional carrier. After joining the regional, Linda realised that the operations manuals were inconsistent,



*Proud owner of a CT210*

so used her downtime to set about creating a single document to bring together all the information and handed the result to management. That experience led to her developing a resource management program and, given her background with an MBA, A&P, plus plenty of flying experience, put her in pole position for a management position. She was invited to be chief pilot for the regional but was not interested in the job at that time, as she just wanted to build time to be eligible to join United.

Eventually she did win a position with United in 2001, just before her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. Sadly, she was almost immediately furloughed in the wake of 9/11. 'But, hey, I'd achieved my goal!'

When the furlough was announced, the Director of Operations of the regional airline called and offered her the assistant chief job and put together a compelling package and she went back to them. Subsequently promoted to Chief Pilot she was flying out of Dulles International (near Washington DC) and commuting between there and New Jersey where she was living with her extremely patient husband of many years. Gordon, who Linda refers to as 'Professor-Doctor-Doctor-Esquire-Esquire,' is a (now-retired) professor of business ethics and also a lifelong learner, who she says, is 'brilliant and beautiful and takes care of the stuff that I leave in my wake as I plough through life at blinding speed.' Needless to say, the constant commuting meant they didn't see a lot of each other but Gordon understood she was chasing her dream.

In 2002 JetBlue, the only airline based in New York, invited Linda for an interview. Having heard about the work she'd done at the regional airline they wanted her to run their System Safety Department. It wasn't a flying position but it could potentially lead to one. Another attraction was that most of JetBlue's routes are north/south. If she could work her way up to a pilot's job it may be her ideal place to work as she could fly internationally but not mess with her circadian rhythms. The company was only hiring captains at the time and they required 1000 hours turbine experience and she didn't quite have that, but in 2005 after they started hiring first officers she qualified. Initially she also retained her role in the safety department but after a couple of years became a full-time pilot and was promoted to captain. She continues to fly for JetBlue today, and loves working there, thinking JetBlue is the best company ever. It really is her dream job.

### Travel vs touring

Linda always wanted to travel but likes to differentiate between 'travel' and 'touring'. For her, 'touring' means dropping into different places for short periods while 'travel' means embedding yourself in a culture for an extended period of time so you really understand how other people live and think. That sort of travel is what she really likes to do and her unique mix of skills lets her do that. Her seniority at JetBlue means that her rosters are flexible. She can work for a month then take a month off, then work for a month and have another month off. And so on. That allows her to travel to far-flung places and spend time there. For example,

her experience in developing safety systems at JetBlue led to her being invited to present a course in developing airline management systems in India and therefore spent time lecturing at a university there, while still flying fulltime for JetBlue.

As you may have noticed already, Linda has an inquisitive streak and a continuous desire to learn new things. She also has a passion for safety and worked with a few government-industry workgroups on matters such as the Safety Advisory Circular and at the Safety Management Focus Group. She has also been active in not-for-profits including board and leadership positions with the Association of Women in Aviation Maintenance.

In addition to being a self-confessed 'driven personality', Linda's pursuit of knowledge is accompanied by a constant desire for self-improvement. After a sobering experience in a 360 degree performance review with her subordinates at JetBlue, in which she had to take onboard some 'quality feedback' about her seemingly less than ideal people skills, she hired a qualified life coach to help her become more people-oriented. That so impacted her professional leadership skills and personal relationships that she was inspired to obtain those same qualifications. She attended a coaches' training academy for two years and became a certified life and leadership coach and obtained certifications in nutrition and brain health so she could mentor others. 'And it improved key relationships in my personal life as well'.



## I need a plane to fly in my retirement

A while after starting with JetBlue Linda realised that her CT210 was not getting much use. She was doing all the flying she needed with JetBlue and using her downtime to travel to exotic places in Asia and Europe. She says 'As long as I had the keys to an A320 and could fly to exotic places in my downtime I didn't really feel the need to fly GA at home.' With a crazy travel schedule and not spending much time at home she decided to sell the CT210 in 2007. But, of course, immediately after selling her CT210 she started thinking about what she should fly when she retired in 20 years' time (some serious forward planning here). She had clear requirements for her 'retirement plane'.

It should:

- \* be something with a 'modern engine' rather than the traditional Lycomings or Continentals. 'It had to start and run like my car'. So, a FADEC engine like a Rotax came to mind.
- \* have modern avionics
- \* be affordable to own and operate in her retirement
- \* be IFR rated
- \* fit four adults plus fuel and some baggage
- \* go reasonably fast
- \* be a turbo
- \* be a high wing with unobstructed view like her CT210. As husband Gordon was prone to airsickness, she reasoned that the pendulum effect of a high wing would mean less sickness inducing movement in turbulence.

Visiting various factories, she considered various aircraft and talked to lots of people. The Glasair Sportsman was a possibility but was not a true four-person plane so failed one of her requirements. Her voyage of discovery led her to a variety of experimental aircraft including Vans RVs but while at Sun and Fun in Florida in 2016 she heard about the Sling that was being built in South Africa. They'd just brought out the

Sling 4 and she went for a flight in it. 'I liked it but the wing was still on the wrong side of the fuselage, so it wasn't quite my ideal aircraft - but hey, I wasn't in a hurry so I waited.'

## The High Wing Sling

In 2019, hearing a rumour that Sling may be developing a high wing version, she immediately knew that she wanted one and landed the slot as the first customer. In 2021, as soon as prototype HWs were flying, Linda boarded a plane for South Africa so that she could fly one of them. She was impressed and, given her experience as an aircraft mechanic, she decided to import a kit and build her Sling herself in an industrial building she bought in Naples, Florida. However, there was a speed bump. Shipping disruptions in the aftermath of Covid meant the kit wouldn't be delivered to the US for many months. Once again, not accepting NO for an answer, she changed plans. Her seniority at JetBlue and her flexible roster meant she could travel to South Africa to build the plane while keeping her full-time job, and in November 2021 Gordon accompanied her to Johannesburg to start the build.



Originally, she'd planned to have the completed plane shipped in parts to the Sling base in Torrance, California, where it would be assembled, but when Sling founders Mike Blyth and James Pitman told her they wanted to fly HWs to Oshkosh the following July her eyes lit up. And when they asked whether she'd like to join them on the adventure you can imagine her response. So, with the aim of having the plane ready to fly into Oshkosh in July 2022 they got to work. A tall ask you may say, but hey, who doesn't like a challenge? Over the next eight months Linda and Gordon flew back and forth to South Africa five times, allowing four months to work on the construction and have the plane ready to fly by early July. Being present on site at the Sling factory while assembling her kit/factory-assist aircraft, Linda was able to provide feedback during the development of the model. In addition to an in-frame ballistic parachute and a third alternator she installed a smart oxygen system to all four seats, a state-of-the-art braking system, and extra navigation instruments with full back-up instruments. Other additions were reclining seats and adjustable headrests.

Linda also wanted to have it 'N registered' before leaving South Africa so arranged for a friendly FAA designated examiner to meet them in Johannesburg to carry out the necessary inspections prior to departure. By 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022 three High Wing Slings - one taildragger, the original prototype and Linda's aircraft - were ready to embark on an epic flight across the Atlantic to AirVenture 2022 in Oshkosh.



*On arrival at OSH 2022 Photo courtesy of David Tulis/AOPA*





### The SHW Maiden Odyssey

The three aircraft flew in company on the 'great adventure' that has been documented in a film called SHW Maiden Odyssey - Oshkosh and Beyond (see link and QR code below), Linda flying her plane with Mike Blyth as her copilot.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW8eGGmW7Q&t=490s>



Each aircraft was fitted with extra fuel tanks in the back seats, giving them approximately 17.5 hours of endurance. Their journey took them first via Angola and Ghana to the Cape Verde Islands off the west coast of Africa, then across the Atlantic to Barbados and via the string of Caribbean islands to Nassau in the Bahamas and Florida. From there it was a short hop to Oshkosh in Wisconsin. Although they had hoped to arrive in Oshkosh in time for the start of AirVenture they were delayed a few days and arrived on the Wednesday. Plans to arrive early in the day were also thwarted by weather so they ended up arriving just before the afternoon airshow. But they'd made it.

*From top: HW Sling cockpit; optional ballistic parachute; route taken on the 'great adventure'*



## Winding up, winding down

In a couple of years, Linda will reach the mandatory airline pilot retirement age of 65 so will wind up with JetBlue. Gender discrimination she experienced in her early days of flying although not completely gone, is not nearly so prevalent anymore. Early on in her airline career passengers were known to have disembarked because they didn't want to fly with a female only flight crew. More recently however, when joined by an all-female crew, Linda announced to her passengers, 'Today we have a completely 'un-manned' flight'. This time, there were cheers and nobody walked off the plane.

Drawn to Florida by its active aviation community, Linda currently splits her time between work in New York, a home on a runway in the North Carolina mountains and a hangar home in the Spruce Creek airpark near Daytona Beach, Florida.

An important step along her journey was her time in Naples, Florida, where she has a condominium and had purchased the industrial space. The idea was to build her Sling there but with the Covid speed bump it was no longer needed so she leased space at 'Gallery 206' to jewellery designers, painters and

photographers. As a sculptor herself (another life skill she picked up along the way), Linda has donated some of the figures she's created to charity. She also actively supports and promotes the Naples Youth Aviation Project, a not-for-profit organisation where aviation-minded youth can build an aircraft under the guidance of experienced mentors from the local EAA Chapter. She actively promotes the project and hopes to find the time to mentor budding pilots in future.

<https://www.facebook.com/NaplesYouthAviationProject/>

Through her active mentoring and the build and journey in the Sling, she has found herself to be an 'unintentional influencer' and is answering the call to tell her story through speaking all around the world and is also writing a book. Having visited Australia only once in the past she has the great southern land firmly in her sights and plans to visit soon. She'd like to learn a foreign language so maybe Australia will be her first port of call when she hangs up her keys at JetBlue and her first linguistic challenge will be mastering the art of the local vernacular. With Linda anything could happen and probably will.

<https://lindasollars.com/>

