

Douglas is flying high again despite diabetes

RAF pilot Douglas Cairns was dealt a career-shattering blow in 1989 when he was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes.

No longer able to man a plane because of his condition, Douglas (46) who grew up in Lochaber near Fort William, was forced to rethink his life and take on a new vocation.

But thanks to a loophole he discovered in the USA, he was able to rekindle his love of flying in 2000 and only three years later became the first pilot with Type 1 diabetes to complete a round-the-world trip.

Astonishing

Since then he's been flying high and his most recent challenge in June saw him successfully completing an attempt to break the record for landing in all 48 mainland US states.

Douglas and his team left Council Bluffs Airport, Iowa, and travelled 7000 nautical miles, landing in Kenosha, Wisconsin, just over four days later on June 20.

He shaved an astonishing 33 hours off the original record of 131 hours and five minutes and said it could have been even faster had it not been for the weather!

"We had to delay departure for one day because of thunderstorms on part of the route," Douglas explained.

"As we went around we had to detour round bad weather in Montana and when we were approaching the halfway point we

By Jennifer Cosgrove

didn't land where we wanted to because we ended up being surrounded by severe storms with tornado warnings!"

Despite all this, Douglas and his team set an impressive new record, raising over £17,000 for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation UK in the process.

The flight is still subject to confirmation by the National Aeronautics Association but Douglas is hopeful it's just a matter of time before everything's made official.

"We know we've done it but the paperwork still has to be ratified. A record-keeper travelled with us during the flight."

And this isn't the first time Douglas has been in the record books. Since regaining his wings in 2000 he has set five world speed records around America and also two transcontinental speed records.

In 2004, he flew from Montgomery Airfield, San Diego to Kittyhawk, North Carolina, in just over 12 hours and, in 2006, he went from Jacksonville, Florida to San Diego, California, in 10 hours 45 minutes.

Douglas also published a book about his exploits in 2005 called *Dare To Dream: Flying Solo With Diabetes*.

And thanks to all his work publicising the condition, a US company that produces insulin sponsored him for three years to tour America giving talks at diabetes conferences.

But 20 years ago, Douglas faced the prospect of never flying again.

Boyhood dream

It had been his boyhood dream to be a pilot and after leaving Lochaber High School he went on to study geography and business at the University of Edinburgh.

"My dad told me that when I was eight years old I ran into the house having seen a jet fly past and declared that I was going to be a pilot when I was older," he said.

"When I was a student, I joined the university's air squadron. I was sponsored by the RAF through the last year of my studies as a university cadet then I went directly into RAF training after graduating."

Douglas qualified as a jet pilot in 1987, having trained at RAF Cranwell in Lincolnshire. He then learned to become an instructor, qualifying a year later.

"I was posted to RAF Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire in September 1988 and only six months later I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes."

Douglas said he had all the classic symptoms including feeling exhausted and subdued, ravenously hungry and incredibly thirsty. In the six weeks prior to his diagnosis he lost 26 lbs.

As soon as doctors found out the cause of Douglas's ill health he immediately lost his pilot's licence.

"In 1989 there wasn't a country in the world that would let you fly even on a private pilot's licence. This was due to the background risk of having a low blood sugar reaction.

"It was a bitter blow because I'd lost my boyhood dream and I had to start again from scratch."

Douglas entered a graduate training scheme with a financial company in London and went on to work in Bangkok between 1996 and 2000.

Then, in 1999, he was bowled over to discover that a scheme had been launched in the US allowing people with diabetes to fly with a private licence.

"I had to pass a very strict medical and prove I hadn't had any diabetes attacks in recent months and that my condition was under control," Douglas explained.

Each time Douglas flies, he has to check his blood sugar 30 minutes before take-off, an hour into the flight and then 30 minutes before landing, making sure it's within a safe range.

Freedom

There are now five countries in the world — including the UK — that will let private diabetic pilots fly, but Douglas says the USA is the only one that gives him complete freedom.

"A system was introduced in UK in 2002 but flights are restricted to daylight flying only and single engine planes.

"In the USA I can fly and anytime with passengers. I could even fly a jumbo jet!"

In 2002 Douglas's company in Thailand was bought over and he had the opportunity to take time off — that's when he decided to fly round the world to raise awareness of diabetes!

His five-month trip began in Iowa, Colorado. He flew through 22 countries and covered 26,300 nautical miles — even stopping off at Inverness Airport on the way!

Douglas returned to the UK to work in London at the end of 2007, but was still itching to break another record.

"I'd been quietly thinking about doing another project, but one that was much shorter and sharper than the last one," he explained.

"I was aware the record for landing in 48 states could be broken. I thought I'd have a go."

Douglas is now busy planning yet another record attempt, which he'll embark upon in June 2010.

"I can't reveal too much about it at the moment but it's a similar record to the last one, just a bit more challenging," he smiled.

"It will include a flight between Hawaii and California, where we'll need extra fuel tanks!"



■ Douglas had to pass a strict medical to prove his diabetes was under control before he could fly again.

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■ Douglas's plane, a Beech Baron B58.

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