

The Flight of the Bumbling Bee



by Pete Keane

One warm New Hampshire winter day in 1988, my climbing partner Ken asked me if I'd accompany him up the Webster Cliff trail to help him launch his paraglider from the top of the ridge. "Sure," I thought, "I'm not doing anything anyway." I packed a six-pack of beer and some lunch and we headed up. The snow on the trail was broken out, so we made pretty good time while Ken told me all about unpowered flight. I had seen John Bouchard fly off Whitehorse ledge while I had been rock climbing the previous autumn, and thought it looked cool. Then another day I had seen my friend Jeff come up short on the landing zone and put his glider in Echo Lake with a frenzy of splashing. Things didn't look too appetizing then. Above all, I was sure I would never get into it. It was far too dangerous compared to rock climbing, I rationalized, and besides, who could afford the \$800 to buy a chute? No, this sport was definitely not for me.

When Ken and I got to the launch area at the top of the cliff, he unrolled his state of the art Feral E-10 glider that John had just sewn him. He then started to unravel, untwist, and uncombobulate the lines that seemed so very complex to me at the time. It was the maiden voyage for this machine. Ken was nervous. I was glad I was watching.

The launch area consisted of a 10–15 foot running area before the edge of the cliff. The pilot had only a second to decide if the canopy was flying correctly before he was obliged to step into the void. At the time it didn't seem too unreasonable to me. This is what I thought paragliding was all about—some sport for psychos who wanted a diversion from climbing.

Finally he hooked in to his rock climbing harness with two pieces of webbing and I held the leading edge up. I couldn't help feeling a little bit amped. I remember my palms beginning to sweat. It just didn't look as if this wing of nylon and thread would inflate with air, let alone carry a human being down from the top of this precipice. Ken grabbed hold of the risers and tugged. The canopy listed a little to the right, but he ran off the cliff anyway, charging at the abyss with a sense of vigor that I had never seen him demonstrate before. He was airborne and going up. As my jaw went slack and smashed into the ground, my heart skipped a beat and I stood there watching with incredible amazement. Ken was flying, attached to the air only by nylon and string. He flew out over the valley, made a couple of 360's and landed in a patch of grass surrounded by 100 foot trees 2200 feet below.

All at once I was shocked, blown away, and jealous that it was Ken instead of me who had just landed. I sprinted down the trail as fast as possible. I had to get one of these airbags;

there were no two ways about it. I suddenly forgot all the danger that I had perceived before. I was hooked on flight.

A FEW DAYS LATER I CALLED JOHN Bouchard. "I heard through the grapevine that you had a used glider for sale."

"Sure," he said, "I've got a seven cell that flies pretty well, but you'll probably want a nine for your body weight. I could sew in two extra cells. But you're going to have to promise to take lessons, and the best place to do that is in Salt Lake City, not here."

"Sounds great to me," I replied, trying to suppress the trembling excitement in my voice. I was on my way now and there was no turning back.

A week later I talked to John again. He had flown the glider with the two new extra cells in it and he felt something was weird about it.

"It didn't feel right," he said, "but I'll tell you what. Rick Wilcox is going to trade in his nine cell for a bigger one, so you could buy his from me for \$800. It's a good glider, it won the competition at Salt Lake last year."

Psyched out of my mind I went down to the factory to hand over the cash. He took me upstairs to his oval office for the transaction, as if what he was going to say next was of the utmost importance and had to be completed in relative secrecy.

With the sound of sewing machines grinding away from below, he looked at me squarely in the eye and said, "If I sell you this glider, you'll promise me that you're going to take lessons... right?"

I sat back and thought for a moment. Now if I don't promise him, I thought, he's not going to sell me the glider. On the other hand I really don't want to take any lessons anyway. I mean how hard can it really be to fly one of these things? But if I don't agree then he might not want to sell to me. There is no way in hell that I'm going to pay any more money to take lessons. Only idiots and conformists would take lessons for something as easy to learn as this.

"Sure," I said after this incredibly reflective series of thoughts. "I would have never even thought to try flying without proper instruction John," I said in my most promising voice. "Besides, I'm moving to Oregon in a few weeks, maybe I can stop by the Point of the Mountain on my way through."

"OK, you got the money on you?"

"Yeah."

"Grease my palm," he said. I slapped eight crispy hundreds into his hand, unknowingly sealing my fate forever as an airhead.

"Good," said John, "I've already called Jay Jamison and told him that you were going to be coming out to Salt Lake. I told him you

would be giving him a call for lessons. He's a real nice guy and a great instructor. He's expecting your call."

Oh great, I thought, now I've really done it. I'll have to take lessons now that John has so thankfully set everything up.

"It just so happens," he continued, "that I'll be out there about the same time."

Well, I thought, might as well have signed my name in blood to this agreement.

RACING ACROSS THE US IN MY RATTY old Datsun, flight dominated my thoughts. I had one scheduled stop in Aspen to visit with some friends and then it was on to Salt Lake to fulfill my fantasy of unpowered flight. During the long cross-country drive I slowly accepted the idea that one day's lesson in flight might not be a bad idea. There was the oddball chance that I might learn something.

In Hays, Kansas my water pump blew wide open on Easter Sunday forcing my plans to grind to a standstill. One frustrated open bivouac on the high plains and a morning of on-site auto maintenance had me rolling westward once again, with majestic dreams of flying filling my caffeine-infested brain.

Once in Aspen, I called Jay Jamison to firm up our plans to go flying.

"No, John never told me you were coming," he said. "I'm going to be out of town during that time." I at once felt like an idiot. John had tricked me into this from the start.

"Give Fred Stockwell a call. He'll be around and he's the other instructor in the area."

A few phone calls later, I got ahold of Fred. Since he was recommended, I decided to go out and do my one token lesson with him. Maybe he knew something that I didn't.

Finally, the day came to leave Aspen and head a bit further west to Salt Lake City and the Point of the Mountain. Heading out of town, my automatic choke quit working and my Datsun quickly ceased to exist as I knew it, once again stopping my countdown to lift off. I limped in to the closest repair shop and begged them to fix the choke that afternoon. There was no way they could do it, they were just too busy. Since my specialty wasn't automotive electrical repair, I had to resort to crude Neanderthal techniques in order to make my date with Fred the next day. I shoved my perfectly flexible toothbrush in my carburetor to hold the choke open and the old beast ran quite well. I closed the air filter cover tightly with the wing nut to hold the mighty brush in place and sped out of town with renewed hope that I just might make it to Salt Lake that night after all.

The drive went fairly well and I found myself cruising the outskirts of town well after midnight. I pulled over near the prison and

threw down my sleeping bag on the side of the road for a few hours of shuteye. In the morning, there was bad news. Fred said the conditions didn't look good for training. My heart sank with perpetual bum out.

"What were you going to do today anyway?" he asked.

"Nothing planned."

"Why don't you come out and watch us fly. You might pick up a few things."

All morning long I watched Fred, Claudia, and Bouchard fly off the North Side, while I relentlessly drove the truck back down that evil road, thinking that I was going to roll that sucker over the drop off and hit the LZ perfectly. I watched launch after launch. Everyone except for me caught air, and I was twitching for a dose. Near the end of the day Fred offered me a tandem ride in exchange for all my diligent driving. I tried to gracefully accept the offer not wanting to let Fred know how much I was burning to get in the air. I was trying to look somewhat cool on the outside while on the inside I was screaming.

Clipped in and standing at the top of the north launch at the Point, I was mildly gripped to say the least, as this was going to be my first rag-bag flight. I was glad that Fred was piloting. It was fairly windy and it took three people to hold us down. The glider was sizable so we had no difficulty getting yanked into the jaws of the proverbial soarable envelope. Once off, I couldn't believe that we were soaring suspended by little more than shoelaces and the material that wind jackets are made of. I especially remember the sagebrush looking like little dots on the ground and, even more important, the leg loops digging into my privates. I felt like I was going to fall out of my harness the whole time, but Fred reassured me that as long as I didn't move too much I wouldn't. Unfortunately Fred felt he was slipping out of his harness too, which wasn't very comforting since neither of us had a reserve. We proceeded to fly around for what seemed like eternity to me but probably was only a few minutes and then began to set up for the landing. Fred coached me on what to do upon contact with Mother Earth, but I was still nervous anyway. We came in hot, the glider shooting over our heads and whapping into the ground. When the dust settled, I was laughing with boyish delight. I had my first taste of flight.

This first taste wasn't the best idea necessarily. It was kind of like sampling the forbidden fruit. Now that I had flown in a glider, I was sure it wasn't going to be very hard at all to maneuver one myself. Smug and complacent, I knew I could do it. I had, now, enough sketchy knowledge of flight to get myself in real trouble. In other words I was capable of getting the thing in the air and after that I didn't have much idea of what I was doing. I was an accident waiting to happen.

That evening it looked as though the weather really wasn't going to improve for training purposes. I told Fred I would call him in the morning if there looked like any possibility of me flying the next day, all the while knowing I was never going to call. I had this paraglider thing wired, I thought to myself, just pull it up and go as long as it's blowing less than twenty miles per hour. I had all the training I'd ever need.

As soon as Fred, Claudia, and John left, I jumped into action. It was just before sunset, and I had barely enough time to poach a flight on one of the smaller north facing hills without any of the instructional gang seeing me. I reasoned that I had enough knowledge after the day of watching to pull it off; after all I had actually flown on the tandem glider. Being a climber, I hated any formal regulations telling me that I couldn't do what I wanted to. I figured that if they didn't see me try to fly, they wouldn't find out that I was breaking the rules.

I ran up the hundred foot hill, heart beating through my skull and lungs screaming for me to ease up on the pace. I was rushing. Too fast, I thought to myself, slow down. I couldn't. I was racing the setting sun, and I was nervous about getting caught by one of my superiors. I got up to a place to lay out the wing and get hooked in.

We reasoned that it could work. "Besides," said Bill, "I made it across the river last time I tried."

Having never actually flown a paraglider before I devised a complete clip-in system on the spot with three locking carabiners, two pieces of webbing, and my old and abused rock climbing harness. I attached a carabiner to each riser, connected a piece of webbing from the riser to the harness, and connected both pieces of webbing to a single locking carabiner on my waist belt. The single point clip-in was light years ahead of its time. Attached to the paraglider as best as my limited knowledge base allowed, I was now ready to jettison. The wind seemed less than twenty so I decided to give it a try.

I grabbed the front risers as I had seen others do during the day and pulled. The kite waffled over my head and crashed on its side. Some simple brake input and more aggressive running would have solved that problem, but I was far too ignorant of the fact that I hadn't a clue of what I was doing. I laid it out again, rushing around like a person possessed. I kept making mistakes and kept redoing it. Finally after the sun set in the red western sky, I felt that I had matters at hand sorted out to the best of my ability. In the dark, I again pulled on the front risers, harder this time. Not even looking up, I ran. Sprinting down the hill over rocks and sage brush, the L/D of the primeval glider did not want to exceed the slope of the hill. I was sort of flying and sort of running down the hill. I guess the Air Gods were arguing about whether

or not I should be allowed to leave the ground. They suddenly must have reached the conclusion of their debate and evidently must have decided to punish me. Before I knew it I was skimming the rocks at top speed. Then my feet scraped the ground and I immediately face-planted, tasting sage as I hip-checked Mother Earth. I got up right away as a reflex, and quickly realized that I was still intact. A little soreness in my right arm, a tangled glider, and a bruised ego were all my injuries amounted to. I was lucky and began to start realizing it in a very detached manner. Maybe there was something I still needed to learn about this crazy sport. I stuffed my wing in the Datsun and headed north to McDonalds for a well-deserved Big Mac. Maybe I'll have better luck in Oregon, I thought to myself; the weather is no good for flying here.

A WEEK OR SO LATER I FOUND MYSELF standing atop a small hill in the desert about twenty miles east of Bend. Knee-deep sagebrush enveloped my lines. I was poised and at the ready. It was midday and a few swirls of dust were spinning in the air, but of course I thought nothing of it. Conditions seemed adequate for flight as I knew it. My girlfriend, Cathie, held up the glider over the sage as I pulled on the front risers. I began to sprint over rocks and bushes and all at once I was airborne. Not like last time, either—I was really flying. I got punched up fifteen feet or so and then back down by some seemingly weird air currents that I wasn't able to explain. Ten seconds later, I cleared the barbed wire fence and augered in, making a distinct trench in the desert floor. I was laughing like a little kid, who had just gotten his new toy for Christmas. As I picked the dirt out from between my teeth, I realized I was happier than I'd been in a long time, maybe since childhood.

My self-appointed apprenticeship drew to a close after a few flights from the small knoll, and I decided I was ready for big air. Bill, my boss at the climbing school where I was working, also had a paraglider. We decided that we would hike up the 1200 foot hill behind Smith Rock and fly across the gorge of the Crooked River. There was a small dirt road with a raging irrigation canal on one side which we could use as a possible landing spot before committing to the crossing of the gorge. It wasn't an ideal LZ but we reasoned that it could work. "Besides," said Bill, "I made it across last time I tried."

We set out with a third friend, Jon Patterson, and after about an hour and a half of huffing we were sitting on the launch pad staring down at the torturous landscape. A light uphill breeze greeted us and we began laying our gliders out. Bill pulled up first and blew it. I pulled up and started running. My left side listed as I was launching and it dragged through the branches of a tree. I kept going anyway and

managed to get aloft. Now I suddenly felt that I had bitten off more than I could chew. Being suspended 1000 feet above the ground on my fourth flight exceeded my fun threshold just a bit too much. I glided out and made a straight flight path for the gorge crossing, hoping and praying the whole time that my lines weren't going to break at this height. About a third of the way across the gorge it became painfully clear that I wasn't going to make it. I abruptly turned back towards the dirt road in hopes that I would still be able to make that. I got the feeling that Someone was on my side because I had plenty of altitude to line up for a safe approach on the road. I set up for my landing and kept getting pulled side to side by the swirling air around the gorge. It dawned on me at this point that I had very little margin for error. Fifteen feet to the right and I would plunge into the irrigation canal, riding my glider through airless underground tubes. The same distance to the left and I would have to land in junipers and boulders or, worse yet, bounce over the edge of the gorge and sample the delights of the pesticide-infested Crooked River. Barely able to control my over-correction oscillations, I greeted the dirt with a wham and established my trademark trench as my personal landing mark. What an incredibly gripping flight it had been! Somehow I had again gained sinister satisfaction from cheating death and it was starting to become addicting. While I was packing up my bed sheet, I watched Bill's approach and incredibly smooth landing. When he came over I asked him how he was able to land standing up. I hadn't been able to pull a stand up landing yet.

"Pull the brakes all the way down just before you're about to hit. The glider slows down and just sets you on the ground. It's called flaring."

"So that's what I've been doing wrong," I said. "I had no idea I was supposed to do that."

"Try it sometime," laughed Bill, "it makes for much softer landing."

"I think I'll try it—pile driving in is getting old," I said, slowly realizing that my apprenticeship wasn't really over yet.

OVER THE COURSE OF THE SUMMER I finally perfected my stand up landing technique. Its amazing what a little braking can do. I flew alone all summer, mostly at Haystack Butte, and at Smith Rock. The hills east of Bend didn't seem steep enough to bother with, although I flew a few times out there.

Pine Mountain was the biggest hill east of Bend where all the hang gliders flew. After learning a little bit more about the sport, it seemed like it was the place to fly. Phil Pohl, my die-hard flying partner, and I fantasized about flying off the north peak of Pine, but only if I could clear the trees. He had flown the north side and his Condor SP-11 could easily clear the trees. My Feral nine cell was another story. I had attempted to fly off the north side twice before and both times I had to land on the flat bench below the summit pyramid.

Finally one day in late November, we were surprised to find a light north breeze blowing up the peak. We were overjoyed. It was the time we had been hoping for. Phil laid out and popped off, flying out over the trees with plen-

ty of altitude. I laid out, pulled up my glider and made a course for the northeast point hoping that I could clear it and the trees below. My goal was to land at the base of the training hill and go where no man had gone before... in a Feral nine cell that is. As I approached the drop-off, I began dropping down. It became clear that I wasn't going to make it. I landed right on the edge, opting for a safe landing instead of a tree-hanging session. I quickly wadded up my glider and hiked back up determined this time to make it. If only I could succeed on this flight, I thought, it would be a real feather in my cap, maybe even an end to my apprenticeship. I again laid out, waited for a good cycle and launched. I ran hard, trying to maximize my speed and pointed it towards the northeast knoll. I was losing altitude, but not quite as bad as the last attempt. As I flew over the point, I lifted my legs to clear the ground and skimmed over the cliff. Great, I thought, I'm actually going to make it. Now the trees were rushing up to meet me, so I picked a course and flew between some of the larger ponderosas, much to Phil's amusement I'm sure. I made it between the trees and pointed it towards the LZ where Phil was waiting for me. I came up short with the trusty Feral, but this time it didn't matter—I had flown the North Side and emerged unscathed. Now I knew that my apprenticeship was not over, it was just beginning.

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element of error brought in by the fact that all variometers have a delay. Try to learn to interpret what your variometer is telling you liberally. You can often feel when the lift is starting before your variometer tells you. Incorporate your bodily sensations in the timing of setting up your straight flight. However, even if you ignore the delay entirely and use one of these methods like a robot, you should find your thermaling improving.

Question: What rate of turn is most effective for thermaling?

Off the top of your head, how many seconds do you think you spend in a typical 360 degree turn? Many pilots will guess somewhere around five to ten seconds. In actual fact, ten seconds is a very steep turn. Most pilots making conservative turns will take between fifteen and twenty seconds per revolution. If this seems unreasonably slow to you, time yourself through several 360s the next time you fly. You may surprise yourself!

In light lift pilots have a tendency to make large, shallow turns trying to achieve the best

sink rate. However, since the lift is stronger in the core of the thermal, better results may be obtained by thermaling tighter. In the case of a pushy, small or badly defined thermal, tighter turns may be the only way to gain altitude. It seems funny when working a thermal that is barely keeping you aloft to tighten your turn, but often this is just what is needed. When thermals are very punchy (meaning that the transition from lift to sink is very abrupt), tighter turns will help your wing stay in the lift and will help to prevent collapses as well.

There is no single turn rate which is best; unlike the above examples, there are certainly fat, constant thermals where slow turns are appropriate. However, it is worth your while to experiment with tighter turns. If your turns are typically of the fifteen to twenty second variety or even slower, try gradually moving to the twelve to fifteen second range. Be careful turning your glider faster than that. Many gliders will take a ten second turn or even faster, but trying it for the first time should be done in a controlled situation, with plenty of altitude, and ideally in a maneuvers clinic. If you ever have the opportunity to watch competition pilots in person or on video, time their turns. Twelve

seconds seems to be a very common rate.

After learning the information and techniques presented in this article, you may find that you were aware of them all along. We often feel what works, and many pilots have put this into practice without ever fully realizing what they are doing. Transferring this knowledge to a conscious level, however, will allow you to fine tune and augment your intuition. Although some of the material seems technical, which might not coincide with your idea of personal freedom while flying, you'll find that the ideas are quickly internalized and will become second nature. More concisely: "fly it, you'll like it."

Elisabeth "Boone" Boonin began paragliding in 1991. She describes herself as an albatross: "ungainly on launch and landing but not bad in the air." Elisabeth lives in the Pacific Northwest with her devoted canine companion, Indy.

Patrick Sugrue was an early pioneer of paraglider flight and development. He cut his teeth in England and the Alps, and he is currently instructing paragliding in the Las Vegas area.