

Saturday, April 29 – My day for 081, an aging Schweizer 1-26 glider built in 1963 and jointly owned with four other club members. But the forecast for tomorrow is better, so good that I could consider a Silver badge distance attempt (flash of anxiety). My wife Miriam suggests I should see whether Bill, who has the glider on Sunday, plans to fly. Just thinking about this, I get an e-mail from Bill offering to trade Sunday for a future draft choice. Done. Dave (another partner) graciously agrees to crew for a Silver distance attempt tomorrow. I have trouble falling asleep and wake early, excited and nervous.

Sunday morning – I arrive early at Front Royal airport, home of Skyline Soaring Club. There are lots of us here this morning, all the makings of a busy soaring day. I find another 1-26 pilot, Bob, in the airport building, he's going to try for New Castle. We're both nervous. Methodically and carefully, I go about preparatory tasks. Dave arrives, waving, smiling and helpful. He seals the barograph (a recording altimeter used to verify that the aircraft was in continuous flight) and straps it into the glider. We discuss strategy. My plan is to release 1800' above the airport and 2 miles to the northeast and from there fly to New Market airport, a distance of just over 33 miles. My plan is conservative – I hope to land at an airport instead of an unknown farm field somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley, but I must make a low start at Front Royal in order to avoid a release altitude penalty. This will have to be a one-way flight because our glider has no camera mount to allow photo verification of a turnpoint, and Dave's electronic GPS flight logger is out for repairs. Kolie kindly agrees to accompany Dave on the retrieve.

I search the sky for signs of lift and see that high haze is limiting thermal convection. I delay launch hoping for this to clear, and news arrives that two club gliders have landed in fields not far from the airport. Not encouraging for a first-timer and a perfect excuse to give in to nervousness and just make a nice easy local flight. But could I face myself tomorrow morning? "Besides" I tell myself "what fun it would be to succeed

The Silver Badge is awarded to glider pilots who fulfill three requirements: a flight of at least 5 hours, an altitude gain of at least 1000 meters, and a distance of at least 50 kilometers (31 miles).

on a day when more experienced pilots didn't!" "Yeah, fat chance" I answer "If you're smart you'll call it off now." The haze moves east and I convince myself to proceed.

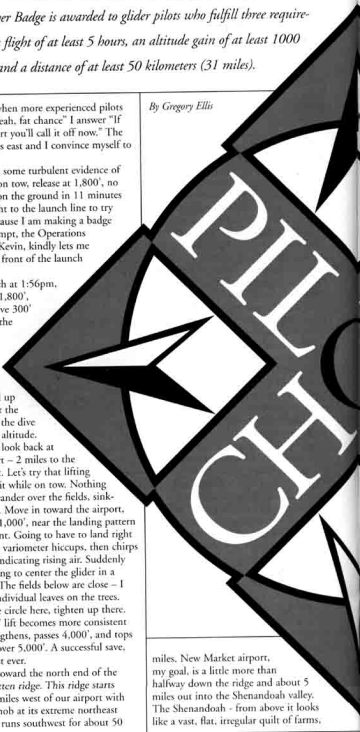
Launch, some turbulent evidence of lift while on tow, release at 1,800', no lift, back on the ground in 11 minutes and straight to the launch line to try again. Because I am making a badge flight attempt, the Operations Director, Kevin, kindly lets me cut to the front of the launch line.

Relaunch at 1:56pm, release at 1,800', quickly dive 300' to record the required notch in the barograph trace, pull up to convert the energy of the dive back into altitude. Turn and look back at the airport – 2 miles to the southwest. Let's try that lifting area we hit while on tow. Nothing there. Meander over the fields, sinking lower. Move in toward the airport, down to 1,000', near the landing pattern entry point. Going to have to land right now. The variometer hiccups, then chirps steadily, indicating rising air. Suddenly I'm fighting to center the glider in a thermal. The fields below are close – I can see individual leaves on the trees. Open the circle here, tighten up there. At 2,000' lift becomes more consistent and strengthens, passes 4,000', and tops out just over 5,000'. A successful save, my lowest ever.

Head toward the north end of the *Massanutten ridge*. This ridge starts about 5 miles west of our airport with Signal Knob at its extreme northeast end, and runs southwest for about 50

By Gregory Ellis

miles. New Market airport, my goal, is a little more than halfway down the ridge and about 5 miles out into the Shenandoah valley. The Shenandoah – from above it looks like a vast, flat, irregular quilt of farms,



The author began his soaring career in 1967, at age 21, and had soon completed the 5-hour flight and 1000-meter altitude gain. But until now he had never flown away from the local airfield.

over the Shenandoah Valley, try over the ridge. No lift. This is about as far as I have ever been from the airport. Altitude slowly bleeds off to 3,700'. Turn back downwind to the airport. Try over the bare spots and the rock faces of the near ridge. Nothing doing, 2,500' – time to head toward the airport. No lift on the way back.

Down to 1,000', just northwest of the airport. Strong turbulence and the vario is chirping. Tighten the circle where the thermal weakens, open the circle where it strengthens, pull up in the bursts of lift. At 2,500' the lift becomes smoother.

Suddenly I am not alone; there are three soaring birds around me. I slow the glider almost to a stall and accompany them for a few moments. They veer off left and right, and I keep pace with one of them. I can see his feathers, his color, his head looking quickly left and right. I am invading their world, sharing it with them. They disappear northward. Lift tops out at 6,500'. Head upwind for the ridge again. Sinking too fast. Signal Knob appears to be rising – can't get there like this. Find weak lift over bare rocks on the near ridge. Back up to 5,000'. I penetrate windward, grab a drink of water from one of my bottles, wolf a bite of apple, and reach Signal Knob at 4,000'.

Glide a mile south over the ridge, then out over the valley, then back over the ridge; no lift. Back down to 3,000'. Back to the airport now or I might not have enough altitude to return (flash of anxiety.) Glide over likely thermal-generating spots on the way back, no luck. Sinking

down to landing pattern altitude. At 1,200' the vario clicks and I am back in the fray, circling at low altitude, fields spinning slowly below, sun flashing rhythmically through the side of the canopy with each circle, trying to save the day. The lift becomes turbulent and strong. I'm tossed upward like a leaf in a whirlwind. The vario says 9 knots up. I am still yammering reports to my friends on the ground. Chief Instructor Jim orders me to stop talking and fly the glider. I climb to 6,000'.

Once again I penetrate into the wind, losing altitude while approaching the Massanutten ridge. Getting tired, back aches a little. It's been a wonderful experience so far, a great flight, why push it? I could call it quits, land at the airport and chalk up a fine day. But the landscape beyond my limitations is enticing. The fear, the excitement, the adventure; let's fly over the ridge one last time; if there is no strong lift over the ridge I'll call it a day. I relax a bit. I am directly over Signal Knob at 4,900' when it hits. The vario screams. The wings tremble. Lift all the way around each circle. Dark doubt thrusts itself forward: do I really want this lift? I'll have no excuse left. Choice rapidly approaches. The climb takes me to 7,100'. I report my altitude and position to friends on the ground. They reply "GO FOR IT!" The airport resembles a postage stamp, far below. I look down the Massanutten ridge and can see practically all the way to its southern end.

The moment is now upon me. Am I going to let go and soar off into the big wide world? Trust my skill, experience, training, judgment, open myself to what may come? Or will I slink back to the field, make my excuses and drive home regretting what might have been? Something happens in me. Choice is past.

"Skyline ground, this is glider 126 Delta. I'm heading south along the ridge line. Going for New Market." Dave's reply comes through the radio speaker "OK Greg, we'll leave the field and start driving south along I-81. Don't stop at New Market airport. Keep going down the ridge." The handheld GPS shows 28 miles to go. The landscape crawls under me. I glide above the ridge, first shifting over the windward face and then letting

roads, and streams. Fly fast into strong head winds. Sinking air all along the way. I arrive over Massanutten ridge half a mile south of Signal Knob. I'm on the radio every 3 minutes, reporting my situation. I try



myself drift downwind, slowly sinking, hunting for lift. Always I had looked for those rising air currents. Now I hunt them. I am an airborne predator with thermals my prey. This is different. Primal. The altimeter slowly unwinds. Down to 6,000'. I look back at the airport, far back over my left shoulder. Perhaps unreachable from my present height. Push that thought away. No turning back. Either soar all the way to New Market or land in one of those fields below. I experience a strong sense of self-reliance.

The radio comes to life "Hey Greg, this is Mike, how are you doing? I heard you're on your silver flight. Greg, do you know who this is?" I reply "yes," not quite sure. "I'm out of Dulles en route to Atlanta." Then it clicks – it's my friend Mike, a partner in 081 and a commercial airline pilot. He just took off from Washington's Dulles Airport in his Boeing 737, and tuned in the glider frequency to see what is happening. This is

a real surprise. "Yeah Mike, I'm doing fine how about you? Have a great flight to Atlanta."

I stare down at one field after another. Could I land safely there, or there? What about that one – does it have road access for the retrieve? The words of Jim, my cross-country instructor rise up in my consciousness "Surface – flat plowed & harrowed fields are best for landing; Slope – pick a flat field, land uphill if it is not flat; Wind – read the wind direction and land into the wind, but uphill if faced with a choice; Wires – fields are often bordered by wires, can be deadly for the glider pilot, watch for the wires, expect wires." The vario begins chirping. There is lift to be found away from the airport! I turn circles over the ridge, gain back eight hundred feet of altitude before it weakens. That feels good. May make it yet. I look at fields further ahead for possible landing sites as I push southwest over the ridge, slowly losing altitude.

Ahead, two colored triangles circle

each other just above trees and rocks, a thousand feet below. Hang gliders. There is a town ahead and to the right of the ridge. Must be Woodstock. I share the hang gliders' thermal for a few minutes and gain back 100 feet. Not great lift but I'll take it. Up ahead is Short Mountain, an isolated ridge perhaps five to seven miles long that sits a half-mile upwind of the main Massanutten ridge. At 5,000' I cross the gap to Short Mountain and continue gliding southwest. There is sporadic weak lift. I slow down to take advantage of it, but don't circle. It is too weak and I would loose more in downwind drift than the altitude gain would be worth.

Again the radio crackles to life "Hey Greg, it's Glenn. Where are you? What is your location and altitude? I don't see you." Glenn has an airplane, and is apparently flying down the valley to see how I am doing, a friendly surprise. He asks my distance from New Market airport. The handheld GPS calls it 15

miles. I report it to Glenn, but he can't find me. Suddenly it reads 9 miles. I report this to Glenn, and apologize for GPS problems. He still does not see me. I reach the southwest end of Short Mountain. The vario sings a song of lift and I go into circling mode. Squeeze every foot of altitude out of this thermal. It tops out at 6,000'. I can let myself drift downwind back to the main Massanutten ridge, or angle out over the valley to New Market. The GPS must be wrong. Can't be 9 miles from New Market airport. Must be closer.

I stare down into the valley ahead, and suddenly there it is: New Market airport, in easy gliding range. I've made it! Starting to relax. Mind starting to drift. The words of my instructor come to mind: "Don't stop flying the glider until the flight is over, until you are stopped on the ground." Gliding toward the airport, I finally spot Glen's airplane a half-mile to my right. He begins flying circles around me. With 5,500' still in the bank, it's time to play. Glen radios that I can't outmaneuver him. I reply that I can slow to 31 mph, less than his stall speed, and cut a smaller circle. We zoom around each other.

Soon I am low enough to think about landing. I plan to set down at the south end of the grass next to the paved runway. Don't want to miss the 50-kilometer silver distance for lack of a few yards. I let the glider float most of the length of the grass before easing the spoilers open, and roll to a quick stop. Silence. No noise of rushing air. I open the canopy, step out of the glider and walk upon the earth.

Glenn radios my friends back at Front Royal, informs them that I landed at New Market. I don't hear the reply. Glenn tells me that Dave and Kolie are leaving Front Royal and should arrive in about 45 minutes. He zooms in low over the grass, I wave at him and he rocks his wings in the traditional pilot's salute.

An excited cell phone call to Miriam. "I made it! Landed safely at New Market!" She sounds excited too. "The retrieve crew will be here in 45 minutes." Just then I see my red Subaru pulling a glider trailer enter the airport grounds. "OK Miriam, it's a surprise.

They just pulled in. Must have followed me down the valley. Be home later tonight."

The glider is soon on the trailer and I'm walking toward the driver's door. But Dave informs me "No. You don't think we're going to let you drive back after you just completed the flight?" So I sit in the passenger seat and spend the 45-minute drive back talking about how it was. We drive back parallel to the ridge. I have seen it from a car many times before, but it somehow looks different now. I feel like I own that ridge line. It is mine.

Back at the airport there are congratulations. Another pilot, Fred, has completed his Gold Distance flight of 300 kilometers. We put our toys away and drive to The Mill, a local "après-soaring" hangout: cheap dinners and good companionship. I can't stop talking about the flight. Fred and I congratulate each other, and announce that we are splitting all the drinks between us (the tab, not the liquid). Dave is my Official Observer for the flight, and fills out the paperwork to apply to the SSA for my Silver Badge.

What a day! How fortunate I am to have the support of such friends who made it possible. I hope that I'm that way for each of them. Above all, how lucky I am to share life with Miriam. In addition to all the things we have together, she made this day possible for me.



About the Author

Greg's interest in flying began at the age of 7 and his first glider ride came while he was attending college. He earned his Private

Glider rating, then served in the Navy for two years. After the service he was absent from soaring for a time while completing his education, working for the State Department and raising a family. In June 1998 Greg decided the time was right to return to soaring, and rejoined the SSA, purchased new manuals, searched the internet and found Skyline Soaring Club and some great new friends.