

Let's Take It Nice and Easy....

(...And Make All the Stops Along the Way)

by Jim Kellett

When Frank Sinatra sang "let's take it nice and easy" he was singing about how to enjoy romantic love - but it can apply to a love of soaring, just as well! My personal first "stop along the way" was in April of 1966, I'm still enjoying them over thirty years later; if I keep up this pace, I'll live forever!

Here's three decades of "stops along the way":

April 16, 1966, first glider flight at the Capitol Area Soaring School in Leesburg, VA

August 1, 1966, private pilot's license (flight test on my 32nd flight, and in a 1-26 to boot! Believe me, the rules were a lot looser then!!)

November 11, 1966, bought first glider, a 1-26, N8630R

April 8, 1967, Silver Altitude, Leesburg, VA

September 2, 1967, Silver Distance, Leesburg to Culpeper, VA

August 28, 1968, Silver Duration, Leesburg, VA, completes Silver No. 1487

February 22, 1970, Gold Altitude, Lexington, VA

July 2, 1977, Gold Distance, Warrenton, VA to Rocky Mount, NC, completes Gold No. 1115 (by this time, I'd purchased a 1-23, N10388)

March 7, 1986, Diamond Altitude in the lee wave of Mt. Mitchell in North Carolina!

May 20, 1988, bought my current ship, a 1969 Cirrus N8169

So it's been 11 years since I'd earned a FAI badge.

On March 23, 1997, I finally flew the second Diamond leg. Five hours 32 minutes 24 seconds; 194.01 Statue Miles, New Market to "High Rock Overlook" and return. Good for Diamond Goal.



High rock is the red and white tower just above my wingtip. The streaks and blurs in the center of the photo are due to the marks on the canopy made by the observer before takeoff.

But, you say, what about the flight itself? Fair enough.

My fellow members of the Skyline Soaring Club have heard me preach about weather and know my routine down pat. I don't trust forecasters. I listen to them, but have learned you have to see and touch the conditions

where you want to fly as part of the decision making process. March 23, 1997 was no exception. At 7:30 a.m., when I had to leave home if I was to get things ready in time for a XC flight, there were no RAOB data available from either IAD or HTS reporting stations! So I picked up Bob Collier, who'd graciously volunteered to crew and observe for me, at 8:00 a.m. and off we went.

At the airport, it was overcast and the wind - what there was of it - was parallel to the ridges. Looking grim. We prepped the plane, filled out the declaration form, checked the seals, did the photography, and pulled out to the line. I'm wondering what I'm doing here! I'm really ready to "bag it" and help Joe Parrish with the day's instruction, since it's obviously not a Diamond day, and there's lots of instruction to be done! Bob Collier, however, was wonderful in inspiring guilt - "well, we're here - what are you waiting for?" Right now I have to credit Bob with making this flight possible - had it not been for him and his gentle goading, I'd have never taken off, much less departed the field! He was a lot more than my crew - he was my coach and my conscience.

So, what the hey - I took off at about 11:00 a.m., and tow pilot Kit Carson at my request dropped me off at 3,000 AGL, right over the airport. Joe Parrish had reported some weak lift on the first flight of the day in the Club's K-21; I found it right where expected - the southern "house thermal" - and climbed to about 4,500 MSL. By now the GPS had flagged "Start," and the lift was in the 2-4 kt range. With a mental shrug, I decided to head off on course as long as there was lift and I was in reasonable gliding distance of the field.

About half way between the airport and the rock outcrop at Mt. Jackson about 8 miles away, I hit heavy snow virga! What the hell am I doing?? I can't get over 4,500 feet, it's snowing, it's totally overcast, and the wind isn't favoring the ridge. Still, I'd flown about four or five miles in gentle lift and I knew Bob was down there looking forward to a field retrieve, and I sure didn't want to disappoint him! Helping me dig, the Cirrus out of a muddy field would serve him right for having confidence in me!

So, I pressed on. When I got to Mt. Jackson, I noticed that the cloud shadows were noticeable (less solid overcast), and that while not directly on the ridge, winds were coming around to the northwest a bit and hitting the ridge at about a 45 degree angle. So I reckoned that since there was convection under the overcast, there was likely to be convection parallel to the ridge....and I was right. I cruised up the ridge between 3,500 and 4,500 MSL, not so much in ridge lift as in ridge-triggered thermals. My plan at that time was to land at Front Royal, just off the northern tip of the Massanutten. That would save a little face (at least I'd tried!)

When I got to the northern end of the ridge, it was clear that the thermals were getting stronger. A lot stronger. And I could see that north of I-66 the sky in the valley was clear! So I stopped, caught a nice 3-4 kt thermal, and climbed to about 5,000 MSL, and headed northeast

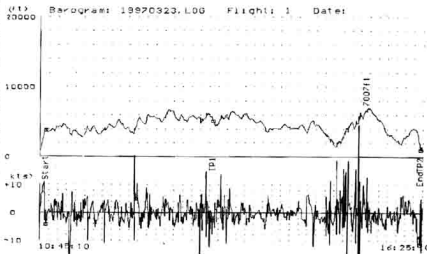
toward the Blue Ridge, about 15 miles away. All this time I figured I could turn around and land at Front Royal airport, now clearly visible off my right wingtip.

But now the fun begins. The air gets clearer. The thermals get stronger. Really STRONGER! By the time I'm within a couple of miles of the Blue Ridge, a strange cloud street has formed that runs roughly parallel to the ridge (almost perpendicular to the wind direction - a phenomenon usually an indicator of wave!) Much to my delight, I cruise between I-66 and Harper's Ferry with only an occasional turn to climb. Most of the time I'm cruising at 5,000 to 6,000 feet just porpoising along!

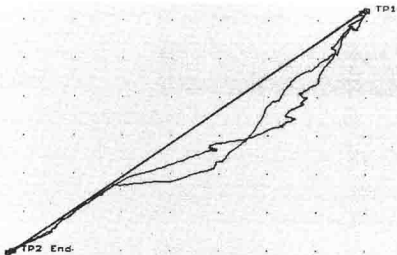
The cloud street petered out at Harper's Ferry, but the good thermals continued right on up to the gap where the turnpoint is, just west of Ft. Ritchie. I'd never seen the turnpoint before. But there was this huge red and white tower sitting on the edge of a gap just as the GPS flagged that I was in the photo sector, so I took three (Why take chances? Film is cheap!) pictures just to make sure I was in the correct quadrant! At this point, I've averaged only 38 mph, in spite of the fact that I had no significant headwind and had what I considered to be excellent lift conditions.

Turning back to the southwest toward Harper's Ferry, there was major overdevelopment over the Blue Ridge. There was still lift under the overdevelopment, but hardly the fantastic stuff I'd enjoyed on the way up, and I could see sunlight on the ground in the valley towards Berryville and Winchester. My first choice was to drift back toward the east a little and try to skirt the overdevelopment until I got past it.

However, in a few minutes this decision proved to be an error. As I approached Harper's Ferry again, I was



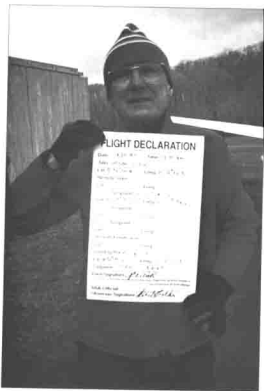
On this unofficial barogram (from the GPS), you can clearly see the low point east of Winchester.



On this GPS track of the flight you can see the low point near Winchester in the center of the frame; it's where the track doesn't go anywhere for a while as I scratch!! The straight line is the task track.

being forced much too close to the controlled airspace around IAD. There was also some snow virga appearing under the overdevelopment between me and the Shenandoah Valley. I still had the option of landing at Scott Airport - another compromise with pride - but since I'd come this far, I'd make every effort to reach the upwind side and salvage this flight. I was pleasantly surprised to find moderate lift under the eastern edge of the overdevelopment and was able to climb a bit to about 5,000 MSL until I was well west of the Blue Ridge where Rt. 7 crosses the Shenandoah River.

Here, the lift quit. A solid band of overcast, running NE-SW at about 7000 feet MSL, was very clearly defined.



The Flight Declaration form upon completion.

I judged the edge of the deck to be maybe another 5-7 miles, so I very conservatively flew for the sun, due west. As I passed over Berryville, it was crisis time. I'd already switched the GPS to "emergency," and confirmed that the Winchester Airport, 11 miles away, was the closest. However, I was now down to about 3,000 MSL; under ideal conditions, I'd need nearly 1500 feet to get there! I didn't want to make the mistake of making an unplanned landing trying to stretch a glide to an airport, so I picked out a landing field right where I was (and a couple of alternates), started monitoring the Winchester unicom (I've seen some of the patterns their power pilots fly!!), and started scratching for serious. At one point I got down to 2,200 MSL (about 1100 feet AGL) just a few miles directly off the end of Winchester's runway 32. But the scratching paid off. One kt, two kts....finally worked my way back to about 3,000 AGL and locked onto the strongest thermal of the day!! Like an elevator to 7,000 feet MSL! I stopped trying to bargain with God....

Now it's getting to be fun again. There's the northern tip of the Massanutten, about 25 miles away, clear as a bell. My trusty final glide calculator says I can be there with about 4,500 feet; if the ridge is working, that should be it! So, off I went. Checked the little ponds along the way just to make sure the surface winds were blowing out of the northwest (they were). Just like the calculator says, there's the tower on the ridge, a little more than 4,500 "in the bank," so down I go!

The rest was pure euphoria. I took a minor detour around the three lovely hang gliders in the air over their

launch point at Woodstock, then back down to 80-100 kts on the ridge. About a mile short of the southern edge of Mt. Jackson, I slowed down, climbed back up to 4,500 feet, and did a final glide the last 10 miles right down to the deck at 8W2.

I couldn't resist a low pass down the runway - and the joy of seeing the GPS flag "END TASK!" just as I hit the low point! And there was Bob, standing next to the runway, waving his hat in the air!

I still get the thrill every time I fly. Every flight is a "new stop along the way." I'll get a Distance Diamond before I die but I'm not in any hurry for either one!! Now - how many more stops along the way am I gonna get to take??

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim's a retired Federal executive who lives in Winchester, Virginia. He's the Secretary of the Skyline Soaring Club that flies out of nearby New Market, VA in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley (best soaring in the east), and he currently serves as the Chairman of the Classic Division of the Vintage Sailplane Association. A good ol' Southern boy, he was raised in Spartanburg, South Carolina before doing graduate work at Purdue and teaching for a while

at UNC-Chapel Hill. Then it was 30 years with the Feds, at the National Science Foundation, Department of Energy, and Federal Emergency Management Agency. This year he celebrated his 40th wedding anniversary with Pat Dowling Kellett, with whom he had three kids (two of whom soloed in gliders but never licensed). There are also 6.3 grandkids as of June of 1997, none of whom has any flight instruction (yet). When he's not soaring, he's driving a recumbent bicycle on tour; he made the first (and only) bicycle pilgrimage to the SSA headquarters in the spring of 1996 en route from San Diego, California to Brunswick, Georgia!



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Again, thank you for your assistance!

-Denise Gartman, Editorial Assistant