

Quest for Diamonds - 1996

by Ken Ward

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When we left our badge seeking pilot after the 1994 season, he'd just completed his Gold badge. Now, on to Diamonds! The Diamond badge requires a 5000 meter Height Gain, a 300 km XC Goal flight, a 500 km XC flight, and a 5 hour duration flight. If you recall, the Diamond Goal flight requirement was satisfied by the Gold Distance leg. Happily, the Silver Duration counts for the Duration leg of the Diamond badge. The task at hand is the Diamond Distance, an XC flight of 500 km. Flying the BASA Pegasus out of Truckee, I prepare my own declaration board in compliance with the 'three turn point rule', picking the Bishop Radio Relay Station, Tinnemaha Dam, and Virginia City. Truckee to Bishop and back would make 500 km, as would Truckee to Tinnemaha and land at Minden, and Truckee to Bishop to Virginia City with a landing at Carson City.

Getting out of Truckee was no problem. With 14,000' showing over Mt. Rose, I pointed the Pegasus toward the center of the Pine Nuts mountain range. Arriving at 12,000' I quickly regain the lost altitude and head for Mt. Siegal, at the South end of the 'Nuts. Topping out at 15,000' I head out for Mt. Patterson. Things are looking good from 16,000' over Patterson, so I set out for Potato Peak, where I arrived at 15,000'. I had previously received good advice, which said that in order to fly to Bishop, don't leave Potato Peak with less than 15,000' and without seeing clouds over the White Mountains. Given that both these constraints were satisfied, off I went. I have to confess to feeling a little intimidated, gliding into the White's for the first time. They were looking totally awesome, covered in snow. I arrived at about 13,000' and immediately climbed back up to 15,000'. My GPS directed me straight towards that little black square on the sectional, which denotes the Bishop Radio Relay Station. I didn't acquire it visually until I was within 1.5 nm. GPS to the rescue!

Another good planning step was to figure out ahead of time, exactly what I should be looking at, when inside the approved photo quadrant for my tumpoint. This reduces workload at the actual tumpoint, but I shot 6 pictures anyway, knowing that the left wingtip should be pointing at Glass Mountain. I also had a timetable, figuring that I should be at my tumpoint no later than 3 p.m. As it was, I completed the pictures by 2 p.m. and was thinking that everything was going just fine. Right. Cruising back up the White's uneventfully toward Boundary Peak, I was flying dolphin style, gaining height while flying straight ahead; I love it! Departing Boundary at 16,000', I headed towards the same friendly cloud street that brought me in. Hey, where did all the lift go?!? There was nothing but sink under the clouds that were working great just an hour ago. I flew out to a sunlit patch and began working some light lift, not wanting to land on that little dirt road that stretches toward Mono Lake.

My cruise from Truckee to Bishop had turned into a struggle to get back home. Fighting my way slowly back towards Potato Peak, I plotted a final glide into Lee Vining, just in case. I got up enough to be able to make it to Bridgeport, and continued the flight back. I got to an almost completely dark Mt. Patterson, to find absolutely no lift. Sinking slowly and looking out towards Topaz International Airport, I desperately circled in the only patch of sunshine, and was rewarded with a slow climb back to the 15,000' cloudbase. At this point I was going to be happy just to make it back to Minden, much less Truckee. The high ground around Lake Topaz rewarded me with enough lift to dash for Mt. Siegal, which is where my situation began to change for the better. The Pine Nuts were still working! Back to a 15,000' cloudbase on the 'Nuts, I headed for Virginia City, knowing that a tumpoint there followed by a landing at Carson City would bag the 500 km task. There turned out to be a fat thermal waiting for me a Virginia City, so I shot some pictures there, and undertook the final glide into Truckee. It was with great relief that I could see the Truckee-Tahoe airport rising above Mt. Rose.

It's often said that Truckee is hard to get back into, but I think it's not as uncommon as is popularly believed. In any event, if you can't stand the idea of not landing at your home airport, then you probably shouldn't be attempting XC flights anyway; actually you should plan on landing out, and then be pleasantly surprised when you don't have to. I put all my emergency landing places into my GPS waypoint database, which allows me to use the 'find 10 nearest' function. After an uneventful landing at Truckee came the inevitable round of photos and paperwork. Two weeks later, after declaring a 1000

km task, I abandon it for a blue wave at Minden. In light lift I struggle to 24,700' before the Wave Window shuts. A carefully constructed barograph calibration trace reveals the required 5000 meter height gain.

The work of me and my Observer, Les Sebald, is again rewarded by the fat letter from Arleen Coleson (also known as "the badge woman"), announcing that I had completed the Diamond Badge, U.S. #818. Now I'm *really* starting to get stoked about this badge flying thing. I can't hardly wait for next season, and to get working on earning my 1000 km Diploma. C'mon! Let's go flying!