

Quest for Gold - 1996

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When we left our badge seeking pilot after the 1993 season, he'd just completed his Silver badge. Now, on to Gold! The Gold badge requires a 3000 meter Height Gain, a 300 km XC flight, and a 5 hour duration flight. The Gold Height Gain was achieved on the same flight that I did the Silver Height Gain and the Silver Duration. Happily, the Silver Duration achievement counts for the Duration leg of both the Gold and Diamond badges. The task at hand is the Gold Distance, an XC flight of 300 km. As it happens, there is a Diamond badge task which is also a 300 km XC flight, the Diamond Goal badge leg. Many pilots, myself included, attempt to claim both badge legs with a single flight. This is where your careful reading of FAI rules will pay off. The Diamond Gold is rightly described as the most tightly proscribed flight of the badge series. Getting this one right demonstrates that you have a firm grasp of the actions required to soar for badges.

Flying the BASA Pegasus out of Truckee, I declare an Out & Return flight, to Bodie and back to Truckee. Even though I could have chosen a flight in compliance with the 'three turn point rule', I opted for the O & R based on the sound advice of reducing the navigational work to be performed. I like flying out of Soar Truckee, with its friendly FBO personnel, the proximity of the flight line to the tie down area, and the early starts available in the nearby mountain range. Getting out of Truckee was no problem. With 14,000' showing over Mt. Rose, I pointed the Pegasus toward Freel Peak, at the South end of Lake Tahoe, as no clouds were yet showing themselves above the Pine Nuts. The only anxious moment of the flight came in a sink hole over Spooner Summit, but with the Carson City airport nearby, I could focus on escaping the sink, instead of panicking about landing. Freel Peak rewarded me with a climb to 15,000', so I continued down the East side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, until arriving on the far side of the Topaz valley from Mt. Patterson. My handy Trimble FlightMate Pro GPS had been telling me that Bodie was off to my left, so away I went for Patterson, leaving the Sierras to overdevelop. Topping out at 16,000' over Mt Patterson, the GPS supplied me with a course to Bodie. The day was really starting to turn on now, and I arrived over what the GPS identified as Bodie, still with 14,000'.

I want to insert a small plug for GPS technology here. This little device made locating turn points that I had never seen before, a snap. Never having viewed Bodie, there were any number of likely spots. The GPS gave me the confidence to shoot the photos and head for home. Remember that when you're lost, it's hard to be fast. Navigation headaches detract from the energy you have available for flying safely, and in the high deserts, you need to constantly monitor your energy usage. Make sure you're properly oxygenated and hydrated during XC flights. If you're not emptying your bladder at least once during the flight, then you're not consuming enough water. Trying to fly with a full bladder is very uncomfortable, and you could even burst it in a hard landing.

Now for the trip back into Truckee. I was really happy to find a nice, working cloud street directly pointing to Freel Peak. Climbing while flying in a straight line towards my goal, is one of the things that I enjoy most. With 16,000' over the South Lake Tahoe airport, I knew that I could make the long glide directly back into Truckee, over the cold waters of the lake. Surprisingly, even out over the center of the lake, the sink was never more than 2-3 knots. Some people prefer to follow the Sierras up the East side of the Lake, so as to keep the Carson City airport closer. After an uneventful landing at Truckee came the inevitable round of photos and paperwork. The work of me and my Observer, Les Sebald, was again rewarded by the fat letter from Arleen Coleson (also known as "the badge woman"), announcing that I had completed the Gold Badge, and in addition, had knocked off the Diamond Goal task.

By this point 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 completing my Diamond badge, which will require both 500 km XC and 5000 m Height Gain tasks. These tasks will be attempted in the same Pegasus, which is being flown dry, with instrumentation consisting of airspeed, altimeter, mechanical vario, electric vario, & the GPS handheld receiver; nothing exotic here.