

Soaring the Diablo Range

by Kempton Izuno

Bakersfield, California The morning of Sunday, April 18, 1993 dawns cool with a solid gray overcast. Looking east from the motel window, it looks like a no-fly day. No detectable cloud motion, no ground wind and no direct sunlight. But, as is often the case, things are not always what they appear to be. Like the last front three days ago, this front is moving quickly to the southeast, promising good soaring later in the day. At least that's how it appears on the Weather Channel.

Today is the last day of the 19th annual Central California Soaring Club's (CCSC) contest. This year's contest is at Costerisan Ranch, private grass strip in the middle of 4,500 acres of alfalfa just south of Bakersfield. The contest has been held in Taft the last two years and in Delano, Shafter and other locations in previous years. Traditionally the seasonal kickoff soaring event for southern and central California pilots, the contest is a non-SSA sanctioned event intended to introduce pilots to contest flying and to give the more experienced pilots a chance to refresh their cross country and racing skills after the winter. Besides, cross country soaring in the Central Valley offers plenty of easy landing fields.

My first competition experience was a CCSC contest several years ago when I lived in Santa Barbara. Now living in San Francisco, I'm one of a few Northern California or Nevada ships (along with 1WT, 7V and BV) making up this year's field of 29. Flying in the Standard class, we are the only Libelle on the field. The eight other Standards consist mostly of Discus, a lone DG-300 and Pegasus.

Over breakfast, I talk about the day's expected task with my crew. I'm fortunate to have not only my wife Genese's enthusiastic support and crewing skills, but also my stepfather-in-law, John and mother-in-law, Helen, crewing for me this year. We surmise that at a minimum, a 300K task will be called. Actually, it turns out to be a 220 miler: West to Taft, NW to Coalinga, back SE to Buena Vista and return. Walt Roger's forecast is for 5,000 ft. bases in the valley, as high as 7,000 ft. in the hills and a NW 15 - 20 mph wind.

Walking away from the pilot's meeting, I have a brief, but furious conversation with myself: "Hmm, 220 miles. I might average 45 mph, so that's 5 hours. With a noon launch, that's a 5:30pm landing, meaning we wouldn't be leaving here before 6pm. And we have a 300+ mile drive home from here. Got lots of work Monday....."

"Well, how about flying home? You've always wanted to fly the Diablo range and you'll be with the pack for the first half if you get started early. Think about it, straight distance is always a great adventure. If you made it to, say Antioch Airport, that would be 240+ miles. And the CCSC guys have talked about the great soaring out of Avenal, which is on the

way (13,000 ft. bases in the summer time). Besides, you can carry water to help penetrate upwind....."

I broach the idea with my crew chief, Genese. She likes free distance, seeing it as similar to a car rally. We haven't done a straight out flight in two years, and it's a manageable distance. She says, "Let's do it!".

I tell Mike Tomazin, the contest director, that I'm heading out. Like straight out. He wishes me luck. We get ready to go in record time. Other pilots are looking at me with strange expressions as I load 18 gallons of water into 9J, our Std. Libelle (water isn't allowed in the contest). By this time the overcast is breaking up and turning into cu with bases at 4,000 ft. I want to launch as early as possible, but I wind up towing off with the rest of the Standards at 12:10pm, about an hour after the first lift appeared. I feel I'm already late because of the expected headwind.

My plan is to head WNW to Interstate 5, then parallel I-5 either by staying close to the freeway or in the Diablo Range with the goal of landing at Antioch airport. I can only see about 20 - 25 miles ahead in the slightly hazy air. The NW wind is blowing as advertised, but the lift is consistent; about 3 - 4 knots every 3 miles and the clouds are everywhere.

The terrain from Costerisan to Buttonwillow is flat with a mix of field types. Freshly plowed, open marsh, sagebrush & oil patches make for an interesting visual variety. On the first contest day I crossed this area with less than 2,000 ft. AGL and felt anxious. Now I'm averaging a thousand feet higher and have clouds so I'm feeling great. I'm always surprised at myself for how attitude follows altitude! I follow the clouds to near I-5 where they stop. About 40 miles northwest, the clouds start again, but much higher and on the mountains. After a 6 knot climb under the last cloud, I head out paralleling the freeway. Genese left Costerisan at 12:45pm and is only a few miles behind me. John & Helen follow Genese in a second car up to I-5 then head south to Santa Barbara, radioing a "good luck" as they fade away. The rest of the contest "pack" is already at the first turn (Taft) and now heading north to Coalinga. They are catching up fast.

I'm heading NW, directly into the wind now. Although I'm indicating 65 mph, the freeway traffic slowly moves ahead of me. Yeah, it's about a 15 mph wind on my nose. A dry street is working though, so I'm not circling much. There are some cu on the hills to the west, but they're 20 miles away. Most of the rest of the pilots are running under them, I assume. As I close in on Avenal, I move further west following the road into Avenal. This area is mostly grasslands with some cultivation. The valley formed by the mountains to the west and the low hills to the east of Avenal funnels the wind, and my progress is noticeably slowed. It's 2:45pm.

Like the first day, we occasionally cruise at 2,000 ft. AGL, but now I feel confident that the lift is there. I'm still in the blue, but the high cu over the mountains NW of Coalinga look fabulous. If I can get to them, I feel I can really cover some ground. X-Ray Oscar, flying out of Avenal,

recommends moving into the high ground. I thank him for the advice as I fly over the Avenal state prison, the town's "industry". Lift is a broken 2 - 4 knots, but I can't get a strong thermal to lift me to the high ground. I dribble on into the low hills just south of Coalinga. I'm becoming concerned that the peak of the day may have already passed, and I haven't hit the really strong lift yet. Genese is now directly east of me on I-5 waiting at a rest stop.

Just about every major cross country flight I've ever had has a few minutes where I really, REALLY work at climbing. The mouth goes dry, the stomach tightens up, the lift is highly uneven, the ground is too close, and I curse/pray unmercifully. The gullies and washes in the low hills south of Coalinga are where dues are paid today. I bounce between 800 and 1,500 ft. AGL for what seems like an hour. Actually, it's only 15 minutes, but making the experience all the more frustrating, only 4 miles west in the mountains the clouds are nice and firm. The cavalry arrives just in time, however, as IB (Nimbus 3), 2K (Janus), 96S (HP-18), and 7V (Discus) all mark a thermal for me a mile north. I feel relieved, especially since I can hear GB (Ventus) and HO (Pegasus) landing south of Avenal.

A strong thermal over town gets me to 5,500 ft., and I'm off into the mountains. Following a narrow valley NW I'm anxious about hitting the inevitable downwind side sink, but there isn't any this time. I reach the clouds and it's 8 knots up to base at 7,600 ft. The peak here is 5,241 ft., so we're well above it. While climbing I can see that I'm on the south end of a cloud street along the Diablo range stretching as far as I can see (at least 30 miles). Wow! I tell Genese the good news, then hear 96S wish me luck. The air is noticeably clear to the west and hazier in the Central Valley, perhaps indicating that these cu are also forming due to a convergence zone.

The next hour is almost all straight ahead cruising between 4,500 to 5,500 ft., staying 500 to 1,500 ft. under the clouds so I can see which are the darkest ones. The lift averages 2 - 4 knots, and I'm indicating 65 - 75 mph. For the first time I'm relaxing a bit and enjoying the view. The hills are 2,000 - 4,000 ft. in this area and are covered with a mix of dark green scrub and patches of fresh green grass. The valleys leading east out of the hills are also a light green, with an occasional farm house and plenty of landable fields.

The clouds look very good to my left, on the west side of the Diablo range. I suggest the idea to Genese about heading over there and aiming for a South Bay airport. She observes that might not be a good idea because we'd be out of radio contact for probably an hour and that there aren't any airports until in the Salinas Valley. Unlike the Sierras where other glider pilots are around to relay, we are alone in this airspace. I haven't heard anyone else on 123.5 for the last hour either. Prudence wins out, so we elect to stay on course on the east side of the Diablo Range.

I'm still dolphining along under the cloud street just enjoying the sheer pleasure of working predictable and easy-to-spot

lift. It's now 4:30pm. San Luis Reservoir comes into view 15 miles ahead, directly on course. This reservoir is about 7 by 8 miles and the street heads right out over the middle of it. The lift is good and cloudbase is still around 4,500 ft., but I can't help but feel a tad nervous putting myself out "over water".

Genese reports that the winds are NW at 25 mph with higher gusts on the freeway south of Los Banos. I briefly consider if I should land at Los Banos airport, but tell her that I'll keep moving on so long as clouds work. I mean, this street MUST get better once we make it into the mountains past San Luis, right? I announce this prediction to Genese and promptly invoke one of the Soaring Voodoo Laws: Announced ambitions lead to opposite results. Within a minute, the lift dies off even though the cu is still there. I wind up at 1,000 ft. AGL just NW of San Luis Reservoir in hills scratching for lift. It's now obvious (now that I'm well below the clouds) that the street abruptly ends a couple miles north with not a cloud to be seen beyond. With depressing certainty, I know the next thermal will be the last. I downgrade my expectations and accept a 2 knot thermal. The Libelle does her best as we climb slowly but steady to 6,000 ft. at the edge of the last cloud. It's now 6pm with nothing but clear air in front of me. I tell Genese it looks like I'll be landing at Patterson with a chance for Tracy if I hit something in the blue. Tracy is 40 miles away, while Patterson is only 24 miles. Both are into a 20 mph headwind. I set off at 70 mph, still hoping to find lift.

After 5 minutes, downwash from the mountains puts me in 2 - 3 knot sink. I gradually move east towards I-5. There are a few bubbles at 2,500 ft. that give me momentary hope, but it's probably garbage from the North wind. By now Genese is a couple miles from Patterson. I tell her I can see her in our white Toyota truck and trailer zipping along I-5. I can see the Patterson hangars too, next to the aqueduct amongst the green orchards and fields. I've never been there before and I hope even though it's labeled private, that the people will be friendly. The Patterson strip is very convenient. It's paved and a 1/4 mile from the I-5 off ramp. I linger over the freeway for a couple of minutes to let Genese get onto the field.

Unbeknownst to me, she arrives at the front gate only to be greeted by the airport dog that's barking ferociously, but can't be seen. Turns out Fido is in a cage right around the corner, but just to be safe, Genese runs down the fence a ways, then hops over. Meantime, I dump my water and set up for landing. It's 6:30pm and the valley air is clear, but the runway is already in the shadows. On downwind I spot Genese running out on the runway. 60 mph over the fence and it's a smooth touch down with a short rollout. I've returned to earth. Genese runs up out of breath, but happy that we're reunited. I give her a hug and then we push 9J back against the hangars in a wind sheltered area.

We walk back to the truck and see a sign in the front office window of Patterson Flying Service: "No services, no gas, so go away!" Well, it is a private strip. And the gate is locked too. Fortunately, we can drive around the fence on a side road. Disassembly goes quickly in the cool wind but we're

both feeling warm from the excitement. We're on the road by 7:45 pm. What a great day!

We flew 197 miles in 6.2 hours. Certainly not a record flight, but it was scenic, close to home, and a ton of fun. So this spring and summer, give the Diablo range a try. It's mountain flying right close by.

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