

Tonopah Adventures

by Kempton Izuno 1995

PART 1: Site Report

Why would anyone want to go out to a place as remote as Tonopah? It's a 6 hour drive from the San Francisco Bay Area, the population density rivals the Pacific ocean, the word "desiccant" is appropriate and how will you get anyone to crew for you out there? Only one reason: like central Australia or Namibia (Africa), Nevada's Great Basin is a vast area with strong lift, high cloudbase and the potential for long triangle flights. Tonopah is situated at the south end of a series of ranges extending north and east through the middle of the Great Basin.

I believe the Great Basin to be the only place in North America to reasonably attempt a 1000K triangle in our Standard Libelle (9J), offering high cloudbase, long lift day, relatively open airspace, and a large working altitude band over a very wide arena, without the tendency for a late day cool air washout. A 1000K triangle out of Tahoe/Minden area is not impossible, but I thought it unlikely for myself and the Libelle.

Tonopah's potential became apparent in 1993 when we pursued the Hilton Cup. Flying some long triangles, I selected turnpoints out in central Nevada. Tonopah airport itself was a first turnpoint on an early task out of Truckee. Then, high cu ran north and east from Tonopah to the horizon. Two other Minden based tasks again found me in the rich cu fields of the Nevada Great Basin. By the fall of 1994, I had decided to investigate what Tonopah might yield. At the Reno SSA convention, I floated the idea to Tom Stowers who introduced me to Bill Seed from Kansas. "Bill lives out there for the entire summer waiting for the super days." Really?! Turns out Bill stays at the trailer park adjacent the airport (he's the only resident) all summer and flies his DG-600M (KB) in pursuit of motorglider records. Bill noted that:

- Lift regularly starts before 11am
- A light westerly breeze often comes late in the day, but doesn't kill lift unlike the Sierra "downslope washout" effect
- Summer cloud streets over the entire Basin can run far north into Idaho, and as far east as central Utah
- Lift can work over the area until sunset

Tom also recommended talking with Pete Williams (DG-400, "5N") who flies out of Minden, but has been planning some long flights out of Tonopah. Pete sent me a Tonopah info pack he compiled, some of which is included in this report. He and his wife Charmane, would be out at Tonopah in late July trying for a straight out flight into Idaho.

PART 1: The Adventure Begins

I watched the weather starting in mid-July trying to pick which week to go. Good heating finally appeared to stay by the last week in July. My wife, Genese and our 10 month old daughter, Ondine were in Santa Barbara for the two weeks before Tonopah, whilst I stayed up in the Bay Area and worked. Father-in-law, John, by now a seasoned crewperson, would drive Genese and Ondine, and crew with us for the week. Expectations were set when we stumbled on a Cynthia Robins/SF Examiner article a few weeks before departure describing the Jim Butler Day parade in Tonopah: brothels sponsoring parade floats, a political showcase halfway between Reno and Las Vegas, and with the middle America charm that one might expect in Kansas.

Getting to Tonopah was half the fun. We had left 9J at the home of our friends Jean & Rollie in Clovis, outside of Fresno in early July. After work Friday July 28, I drove to Clovis. Jean & Rollie were out of town, but invited me to stay, "just don't let the cat out." Guess who escaped? Next morning, I spent almost an hour chasing Georgette around the lot before corralling her. An auspicious start.

Yosemite was scenic as always, but not a cu in sight. Worse, a 20-30mph west wind blew. Geez, this trip could be a bad idea. Descending into Lee Vining I spotted cu running far to the east. Wow, will I do three or four 1000K flights?! The manic/depressive condition was kicking in just fine, thank you. By this time an enormous dust cloud kicked off the north side of Mono Lake, probably from rotor touching down. Onto Route 120 off of 395 and the remoteness of the Great Basin began to settle in.

"Dang, those White Mountains are big", I muse as I came to the Benton Station intersection. The radio crackled alive as a number of Southern Cal pilots come onto the White Mountains. Wave worked for those lucky enough to find it, others were dropping out at Bishop too battered by turbulence to continue. Three or four pilots managed to connect to streets at Coaldale and go onto Austin, Mina and points NE.

The Town

Tonopah (the town) sits in a pass surrounded by mining history. Local lore recalls that Jim Butler and his family left San Francisco after the 1906 quake, discovered and operated Mizpah Hill, site of some 50 gold mine leases. You can't miss the mining heritage as you arrive in town. Tailings all around, old equipment left to rust next to vacant shacks. But paradoxically, it feels rather clean and simple. The town is surprisingly modern and well equipped. El Marques has great Mexican food (and excellent steaks). The Mizpah hotel has a half pound ham with eggs for \$2.95, while the Stagecoach casino provides a Baker's Square type restaurant. There is also the requisite McDonald's when necessary, but good pizzas are tough to come by. For groceries, a very modern and complete Scolari's is next to the Stagecoach. Tonopah also has a hospital, one day photo development, coin laundry, hardware store (limited selection) and a Radio Shack (but don't expect to find upgrade memory there) to round out the basics.

On Pete William's advice we stayed at the Clown Motel. Clean, relatively new, and at \$29/night the price was right. Other hotels are either older or as much as \$69/night. With a crawling infant, I wanted the cleanest floor possible. I had also brought my laptop computer thinking I could get satellite images and forecast data from the Web. However, technology was thwarted again. Because the Clown can't bill you for long distance calls (you have to charge to a card) and because of limited AOL dialing features, I couldn't access the Internet to get my satellite images. I later found a toll free number for AOL access if you don't have local access. Fortunately the Weather Channel was available.

The Airport

The airport is 8 miles east along Highway 6 at 5,426 ft. MSL. Built as a WWII B-24 bomber training base, the main 7,100 ft. runway is today maintained as an alternate for military aircraft flying out of the Tonopah Test Range 20 miles SE. Paralleling the main runway is LOTS of open ramp space (300 ft. x 4,000 ft.). Big weeds grow in the cracks, so before you land on the ramp it's best to check out a clear path by car first. A car race track, petrol refinery, RV park and a few random hangars round out the rest of the airport property. Traffic is very light, with a busy day being a dozen takeoffs/landings. It's ALWAYS quiet on the Tonopah flight line.

The FBO, Desert Flying Service, (702-482-3626) is run by Mark and Linda Petersen. A SUPER nice couple. Mark is a certified SSA observer and has a towhook on his 182.

However, as the primary employee, he is also the mechanic, part time cook, fuel/Ox refiller, weather observer, airport manager, and occasional instructor, so let him know your intentions for say, an early launch (for example) so he can accommodate you. The 182 may leave on a rental for the day, or if it's Sunday, he'll be out after morning services are over. The lounge is air conditioned and comfortable.

Although Mark now provides these soaring services, he got up and running thanks to Bill Seed. When Bill saw the potential out here in 1992, he at first auto towed off the tarmac. Later he set Mark up with the tow hook, checked him out, set up the Ox cart and start gate, and got him qualified as an observer. Thanks Bill!

Of course, the terrain appears very unfriendly, but as I learned, it's manageable if you plan properly. On the first morning Bill took me out into the desert just south of the airport to show me the terrain. Unlike Minden or the Mojave, in the area surrounding Tonopah, you can just about land in the desert itself. It's so DRY the valley brush is very small and at worst, would take off a gear door, or you can pick the many dirt roads with relatively low berms, or dry lakes. As I was to find out, there is little problem finding a place to land safely. The BIG issue is keeping close to (and landing at) civilization.

The Flying

Our first day (Sunday) was the area checkout. Reno soaring forecast: light winds, 17K bases, 700 fpm, no storms, cool upper trough, and drier. I feared a continued gale after Saturday's wind, but the entire week had only light winds. After assembly and checking the airport out, my crew got me off for a 2:35pm launch. On the first climb, I joined an eagle. Where did he come from out in this desolation? The sky was blue locally, but thermals were only a few miles apart. The closest clouds started 10 miles away and went as far as the eye could see to the north, east and south. I connected with a street at Warm Springs and cruised 60 miles northeast between 15,000 ft. and 18,000 ft. out to Currant. The brown on tan land is truly arid, but there are enough ranches in sight at any one time that I wasn't worried about where to land. Of course, it's easy to say that when cruising at 18,000 ft. Navigation tip: Bill had said to memorize the appearance of Mud Lake 10 miles south of Tonopah. The dry lake is so light compared to the surrounding land, it's easy to see (at altitude) even from 80 miles away. No problem!

Turning at Currant, I followed another street west towards Austin. The valleys can start to look similar, so keeping track of your progress is important (or get a GPS unit). After crossing the Monitor Valley, the clouds ended. It was 5pm and there was no reason to push hard this first day, so I headed south to land at 6pm. 210 miles just for fun in a little over 3 hours!

There was no overdevelopment that first day, but the rest of the week it was common. However, because it is so dry, the showers were fairly small (couple miles across) with a few big ones over the highest peaks. A common cloud feature the entire week was glaciation. A maturing cu would gain a misty appearance as the supercooled water droplets turn into ice crystals. This I initially thought would hold strong sink, like a shower. Upon observation later, I noticed there was little vertical movement as the crystals slowly descend then evaporate.

The Beginning of the End

Monday we didn't fly as I wasn't feeling so great. Tuesday, August 1 forecast: light winds, 18K bases, 1200fpm, some storms, high pressure building aloft. I declared a 500K Out & Return speed task up the Hot Creek Range to a mine near Franklin Lake and return. Although this was over 350 miles, I thought it best to extend the task to include the highest mountain range. Pete Williams commented this can be a great range to run IF it doesn't overdevelop. Pete was looking to make a 500+ miler straight out flight into Idaho

but elected to fly locally. I launched at 1:10pm, a bit late, but didn't think it a problem (Mistake #1). Clouds had already started to lightly shower on course. Then Bill elected to have an aero tow, but was having some troubles so Mark wasn't available to observe my start until 2:00pm. By now a bit nervous, but still confident about the weather, I decide to run the task anyway (Mistake #2). In retrospect I had never started that late on ANY cross country task!

Although the lift was easy to find, I dodged showers the first 100 miles up to Eureka. North of Eureka, I was treated to a spectacular display of a 2 mile high wall of dust lifting off a dry lake and sucked into a small cumulus. Great lift but..... it also had a weird, supernatural look. My gut said "steer clear". At this point I should have figured out to abort the task, but single-mindedness won out (Mistake #3). Arriving at the turn I saw a mine, but it wasn't in the right place. After a few minutes, I gave up and shot the mine anyway. Time: 4:15pm. I had averaged 78mph, but I also had to get back! My route up was now completely overcast with showers. The only sector with sun was to the west, and then I could head south. Indeed the first hour went well with a 50 mile jog to the west, topping out at 18,000 ft. over Tonkin. Then life went south. Literally. A solid overcast lay between me and home. The next 2 hours was a slow death as the wealth of speed gave way to the poverty of low saves. A few weak thermals on the Monitor Range extended my glide until I was directly over a ranch at 2,000 ft. AGL. I was too low to go west across the valley to the main road. To the east, through a small pass the Little Fish Lake Valley beckoned as the evening sun lit up most of that valley. I also knew that the roads in Little Fish Lake Valley were very landable ("60 mph dirt roads" Bill and Pete told me). Time: 7:10pm. In desperation, I hopped through the pass, forsaking the civilization right below me (Big Mistake #4). I had not been in contact with my crew since shortly after starting, nor did I use the Remote FSS stations to post Reno FSS on my progress (Mistake #5).

Crossing the shadows of the Monitor Range, the air was very smooth. Only now did I realize that a landout was certain. The best action was to follow the road as far south as possible to get close to Highway 6 and the ranches near there. It's a very interesting feeling, following a generally straight "runway" for a few miles while watching your shadow get closer and closer. It was a smooth a landing as any, letting myself roll for what seems like minutes. My first thought after opening the canopy was, "Wow, it sure is QUIET!" (as if there was anything out there to make a noise!).

PART 2: The Walkout and a Long Flight

(When we last left Kempton, he had just rolled to a stop on a very nice dirt road 30 miles ENE of Tonopah Airport in a 20 mile long valley. Time: 7:20pm.)

My valley was narrow to the north and opened to 10 miles wide to the south. Immediately to the West, low rocky hills run north/south while several miles east brushy ridges rose 3,000 feet above the valley floor. The evening sun brightened the east ridge while high above, thunderstorm tendrils glowed a sunset red. A pretty sight, normally. But right now I felt like Charlton Heston in "The Omega Man". As the last man on earth, he's free to roam during the day, but must take refuge by night lest the zombies eat him in their quest for human flesh. In the opening scene he's knocked out by a car crash. When he wakes up at sunset, he's panicked. And while I wasn't panicked, I was very concerned. No zombies here, at least none that I can see.

First action after pushing the Libelle off the road was to raise a passing airliner. After all, a Reno controller told me to call on 128.725 and request a relay on 123.3 or .5. I spent 20 minutes calling the airliners I could see overhead. No luck. As I spoke, my words disappeared into the air with no echo, replaced only by radio static. With the light fading fast, I removed my contact lenses and scanned the map in case I decided to walk out. I'd have to make the decision shortly to either stay with the ship or try for the freeway miles to the south. A glider is much easier to see than a human, but I also knew it could be at least 24 to 36 hours before someone found me. I decided to walk out. Headlights on the

freeway were visible, the road was well defined and I felt I HAD to let Genese know I was O.K. It looked like about a 9 mile walk. A daypack is a headrest for just such an occasion, so I loaded up with my remaining water, closed the canopy and set off. At a couple hundred yards I stopped, thought again and went back to the ship. Trying the airliners again with no luck, I then re-resolved to walk. A giant jackrabbit who looked to have foot long ears watched me pass by. Time: 8pm, sunset.

Every minute or so I'd stop and look back at the Libelle, getting smaller and smaller until over one hump it disappeared. Funny, how alone and tiny it looked. Then my focus was forward to finding civilization. I kept up a good pace, three miles per hour or so. Fortunately I usually fly with running shoes. The well groomed, flat, dirt road contrasted nicely with the scrub on either side, so seeing the road was no problem. The air was cool, but not cold and not a hint of wind. A great evening for a stroll, but I'd rather not HAVE to be walking! The sunset gave way to darkness, and although the moon was in the west, it only remained for the first hour or so, replaced by scant starlight. From the east, thunderstorm blowoff covered about half the night sky.

Over the next few hours my thoughts were filled with my family. I missed them and I knew Genese would be very worried having not heard from me. It's times like these when the glider (and other things in life) don't matter, only that I wanted to be with my family again. Unbeknownst to me, John had encouraged Genese to pack up, leave the airport where they had waited and get something to eat. Keep the crew fit and ready for anything....

I walked on. In the darkness, the only evidence of civilization was the road I was on, the occasional airliner overhead, and the infrequent freeway headlights in the distance. By the second hour, with nothing to occupy my brain except my own thoughts, I started having audio and visual hallucinations. The first was the "dust storm". I was walking in the west side of the valley in darkness, but the valley's east side was lit up by moonlight. I couldn't see any detail, only a lit but featureless area. At one point, I noticed the border between light and dark was closer than it was a minute ago. Walking along, an occasional glance to the east confirmed the brightness was moving toward me. "That's odd, I don't feel any wind". Then it hit me: "A dust storm!" There had been active cells to the east earlier in the afternoon, so this was not out of the question. A wave of panic ran over me. Then I caught myself and stared at the bright area for a moment longer. No movement. Then as I focused, I realized there was no dust storm. The ridgeline shadowing me from the moon had dropped off, so the shadow was shrinking, making the lit area appear to "move" toward me as I walked. Phew.....no worries about felling sleepy!

Then my ears started playing tricks on me. No wind, no cars, not even a mosquito, nothing. The threshold sound of the air passing my ears mixed with my shuffling feet and the rubbing of my clothes was just enough to fuel my now overly sensitive alarms. I would think I heard voices as I walked, but as soon as I stop and turn around, only silence. I would fix on a vehicle light on the freeway and believed I heard the sound of the car, but as soon as I'd stop walking to focus.....nothing. Although I didn't feel in danger per se, I also felt constantly "at risk". 8^O

Just when I began feeling comfortable, the distinct sound of flapping horse's lips froze me. A mustang pack was within a couple hundred feet, but I couldn't see them. Of course I'm comfortable with scorpions, spiders, snakes and lizards, but equine.....no thanks. It's probably from hearing childhood stories of teeth being kicked in. Now here I was with Black Beauty and her gang somewhere close by. What if I get kicked or trampled? Luckily, they decided to make a run for it (away from me). This was to occur two more times that night.

At the end of the third hour, a truck's headlights approached from the south. Wow! This might be my lucky break! Alas, at half a mile or so, the lights disappeared and didn't return. There was a ranch up ahead to the west about a mile or so, and I felt sure that

was where the truck had gone. At that point, I thought it better to make the freeway (which I could see) rather than the ranch (which I couldn't see). A post held a sign that might tell me something. But.....my 11 year old matches were useless. No flame, no luck. Don't even ask if I had a flashlight.

I drank often, carrying almost 2 liters from the ship. Adrenaline kept me moving, and I never sat down. Now thoughts turned to "what about a sprained ankle?" A show stopper for sure. Well, I wasn't slowing down now, I just concentrated on walking deliberately.

In the fourth hour the freeway lights were definitely moving faster every minute. I was very close! Now this freeway was in designation only, with the actual road itself being a two lane asphalt strip. In the darkness I walked onto the freeway and just about fell off the other side because I couldn't see the road. I had made it! Time: 11:45pm Now how to get someone to stop? Tonopah was 30 miles west and most of the traffic over the last three hours headed west. However, my appearance was laughable: an unshaven Japanese man with funny shorts in the middle of the desert. Would YOU have picked me up?

I waved at the first car from the roadside and they zoomed by. Ten minutes later I stood in the west bound lane and waved a truck. Zoooom. No luck. Since there wasn't any evidence (like a car with a hood up) to visually explain why I was here, this could be a long wait. 20 minutes later I was frantically waving a big rig with my best pleading gesture and he stopped. The door opened and I quickly explained myself. There were two rigs (safety in pairs) and he invited me aboard. I told Steve about the whole adventure, and when I was done, he said normally he didn't drive this route this late. He and his partner move petrol to and from the small refinery at the Tonopah airport over to another remote station in extreme eastern Nevada. He'd seen the glider trailers at the airport but never thought he would be involved with one.

We arrived at the Clown Motel. Up to this point I hadn't had so much as a scratch. But in my haste, I decided to just "jump" down from the big rig cab. Well, those cabs are pretty high off the ground! I pulled a groin muscle on impact and hobbled off to our room, waving good-bye to my savior. I gently knocked, not knowing if Genese was in. She knew it was me from the knock and rushed to the door with Ondine in arms. We had a joyful reunion for what seemed a very long time as I told her the WHOLE story.....

Next day, of course was the retrieve. We clocked my "stroll" at 11.7 miles. We were at the ship by noon and it was extremely HOT. It was even hotter than the airport tarmac. And in a 6000 foot high valley. In this particular case, I'm glad I decided to walk out. As we positioned the trailer, a small dust cloud signaled an approaching federal Bureau of Land Management truck. He was patrolling his territory and told me "Not too many people drive this road". No kidding?! By the way, my ankles were not sore at all from the walkout (glad I keep up my running routine).

Back in Tonopah the four of us, led by Genese, stocked up my NEW landout kit including a cellphone, flare, flashlight, nylon jacket and pants (walk through scrub), handheld transceiver and a survival kit. We also agreed on a new protocol of leaving messages at FSS stations on the hour and using a gridded map to quickly broadcast my location. One Tonopah oddity: Cellular One reception is great, but no signal with the GTE Mobilenet service.

Renewed Determination

Thursday, August 3 forecast: light winds, 20.2K bases, 1375fpm, some storms, weak high over Sierra. Bill kept focusing on dewpoint as a key indicator out here, so I noted how it matched with the soundings. Today I launched at 11:15am, declaring a 1000K triangle but abort south of Eureka due to OD. Besides, the sky to the north of Eureka was a strange mix of overcast and swirled cloud forms. I had never seen anything like it

before. Running east to the sun (with flashbacks of the walkout looming) I rode a 5-8 knot thermal to 17K over Mt Hamilton. I comfortably cruised between two storms south of Duckwater, then ran a cloudstreet the 100 miles to home.

Friday, August 4 forecast: very light winds, 18.8K bases, 1218fpm, no storms. I'm feeling the pressure to make some kind of long flight, so I declared a 1000K zigzag: Cherry Creek, Cerro Gordo, Basalt and return. A new task strategy emerged: Align tasks to have the OPTION of running a mountain range or the flatlands. If conditions are weak, run the ridges; if OD, then it's out in the flatlands. Either way I'd deviate less than 20 degrees off course. In hindsight, I should not have used the Inyos as they suffered from the very washout effect I had come to Tonopah to avoid (i.e. stay in the Great Basin).

Launch is 10:35am. Cu to the north lured me with a max glide for nine miles trying to reach the first cloud. No luck, so I head back to the airport finally pulling myself up from 1,100' AGL in 2-3 knots. Leaving the airport area at 11:15am, I raced from cloud to cloud (15-16K bases). My soul sang as I take in the large, firm cu on course, running 80-90mph between clouds (too slow!), stopping for only 10 knots or better. I was at Cherry Creek (175 miles out) by 1:30pm and back to Tonopah by 3:45pm with 18K in hand. Average speed: 78mph. I could see cu on the Whites, but couldn't tell about the Inyos. Cu continued to the Bishop radio towers where it was clear the Inyos were completely blue. Dang. I sank lower and lower until I was 1,000' above the Inyo ridgeline. At this point, my correspondence with Tom Massoth (Tehachipi pilot) came in handy. He had recommended that when the Inyos are blue, better time is made by pulling up (but not circling) in the ridgetop thermals and keep pushing ahead. On days like this, the thermals don't go high enough to make circling worthwhile. A few miles north of Cerro Gordo, a Diamant passed under me heading north. Until now, Cerro Gordo was only a picture that Tom had sent me, but I couldn't miss it as I came abeam of Keeler. Time: 6:20pm. Turning north, the clouds on the Whites were there but SO far away. Bumping along I circled for the first time across from Tinemaha Reservoir. Could I connect with the clouds? Steadily I sank until ten miles north of Bishop I was at 7K going down. Sigh. I conceded the task and landed back to the Bishop airport at 7:50pm. Not a 1000K but a personal best of 550 miles and 9.2 hours. Perhaps one of the longest Libelle flights?

The family crew would pick me up the next day as it's on the way back to Santa Barbara for John anyway. Garry & Michelle of Hangar One were very friendly, making reservations for me and taking me into town. Turns out Garry was the instructor at Tehachipi who helped me with my first flight in the Libelle 6 years ago. If you need to stay in Bishop, I highly recommend the Bishop Elms Motel. Clean and inexpensive (\$35) with Jeanie & Scott Graupensperger as great hosts complete with a courtesy airport shuttle.

All in all, a tremendous experience. Tonopah was something new for Team 9J, but it was an adventure of the highest order. We'll be back again.

Kempton Izuno December 1995