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My Journey Into The Sky

I stood at the top of the hill looking down the slope with my “wings” spread out wide. I leaned forward and began to run. Slowly I lifted from the ground...I WAS FLYING! As I neared the bottom of the slope, “Brian, time to get up, school starts in an hour.” What the heck? Damn it! Just another flying dream. In this dream, my “wings” were my arms and it felt so good to fly. I reluctantly crawled out of bed and got ready for school.

I was about ten years old and by this time flying dreams taunted me quite often. As I walked up the street to school, I thought about how cruel the dreams were to only give me a glimpse into what it would be like to really fly.

The grade school I attended had two slides, the little slide and the “big” slide. I spent a lot of time around the big slide that day. It was Friday and I had an idea.

Running home that day, I could hardly contain my excitement. My dad had a couple of frog gigs made with ten-foot bamboo poles and I knew where the extra bed sheets were kept. After getting permission to play at the school grounds, I grabbed an extra bed sheet, my dad’s frog gigs, and some twine from the garage. With determination and a plan in mind, I took my stolen supplies to the “big” slide.

Once at the school, I removed the prongs from the frog gigs, spread the bed sheet out wide, and laid the bamboo poles across the sheet in an X pattern. I then used the twine to lash the corners of the sheet to the pole tips and also lashed the intersection of the two poles.

With absolute confidence in my flying machine, I climbed the big slide grasping the intersection of the poles with one hand and holding onto the ladder rail with the other. At the top, I turned around so as to face away from the slide and prepare for flight. Holding the “wing” above my head, I leaped forward and... plummeted to the sand below. The sand saved me from any serious injuries. The “wing” merely slowed my descent by a little bit and now I had to explain to my parents why one of their bed sheets was soiled and slightly torn.

Saturday morning— I went outside to ride my bicycle. I got on my bike and began to peddle. As I peddled, the bike rose a foot or so above the ground. I discovered that the faster I peddled, the higher in the air the bike would take me. At about two hundred feet, “Brian, are you hungry? We’re making breakfast now.” Great! Why did they have to wake me up just when I was getting some good air?! I got up and had breakfast, wishing that I was still asleep and “flying” my bike.

After breakfast, I went out to ride my bike, this time for real. Cruising the neighborhood, I came across a dumpster with some building materials around it. Of particular interest was a big roll of clear plastic. I rolled it out and it was at least ten feet by ten feet. What a score! This would surely work as a hang glider sail. I had seen pictures of hang gliders (Rogallos) and knew what shape to make my new wing. With scissors, I cut the plastic into a triangle shape. My dad didn’t gig frogs anymore, so he let me keep the bamboo poles and I scrounged up a couple wooden poles from around the neighborhood. With duct tape, I taped the bamboo poles into leading edges, taped one of the wooden poles down the center to form a keel, and the other wooden pole was cut shorter to form the cross-bar.

With even more confidence, I returned to the big slide. I figured that the bed sheet was porous and that the plastic would perform much better. Besides that, now I had a real “hang glider” shape and would certainly fly. I leaped from the top of the slide again, this time holding onto the cross-bar with both hands and... plummeted to the sand again. However, this time the wing and I actually fell with a forward motion due to the shape of the wing. Figuring that this was close enough to flying, I “flew” my wing several times that week until it was tore up completely and could no longer be re-taped.

Things went on this way for several years with many failed contraptions, such as adding wings to my bicycle and peddling real hard to jumping off the roof with cardboard wings. It was a long time before I gave in to the idea that maybe flying was beyond my reach. Besides, girls were starting to look good now and I wanted to drive a car.

Twenty years old now— With raging hormones subsiding and the newness of driving a car wearing off, my dreams of flying became re-kindled. I found myself looking through the picture book of hang gliders that I had got through the school’s reading program when I was in the fourth grade. You know, the ones with a BIG picture on each page and a little caption below. I thought...Hey, I’m twenty years old now...I’m pretty smart...I have a job and money!...I could buy some “good” materials and build a real hang glider that would REALLY FLY!

With a protractor, ruler, and my best judgment, I flipped through my picture book of hang gliders, estimating the length of the leading edges, the keel, and the height of the control frame. I used the angle scale on the protractor to figure out the nose angle. I figured that the pilots in the book looked to be around six feet tall, measured one of them with the ruler and used that as a conversion factor. Yeah...sure...this will work.

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I went down to the local hardware store to begin pricing out what I needed. 20' by 20' blue vinyl tarps could be purchased for \$4.95. I would need two, sewn together. Other things on the list were... quarter-inch steel cable, I-bolts, cable swages, brackets, nuts, bolts, and washers. So far, I was only up to about \$35.00, no problem. I then went to Gerlinger Steel in Redding to price out some aluminum tubing and aluminum plate. Ouch! Over \$400.00 for the tubing and aluminum plate that I would need. This was out of my price range. I drove home discouraged and upset over the cost of aluminum. Besides, if I was going to build my own hang glider for around \$500.00, I might as well save up and buy one of those "factory made" kits that you could put together. I had no idea of how far the sport had come since my picture book of hang gliders.

So, I began looking for a kit to see how much I would really have to save up. I looked in the yellow pages, no luck. I could not find anything in those old Popular Mechanic magazines that I had. I even called information, with no luck of course. Damn it! There has to be some hang gliders out there somewhere? I mean, where did the gliders in the picture book come from? "Oh no! Maybe they don't make them anymore," I thought.

Sometime near the end of 1991—I was looking through the classified ads in the paper. With no hope of ever finding a source for hang gliders, I began looking for something fun to spend my money on. 'Family Bargains \$500 or Less' It was in this category that I was reading through when, there it was.Hang Glider, \$500.00. I couldn't believe my eyes, a HANG GLIDER! IN MY AREA! FOR SALE! Wait a minute, I must be dreaming again. A quick pinch to my left arm confirmed that I was awake. I sprang up, ran to the phone, and started dialing the number. I was so excited that the numbers couldn't be dialed fast enough and I had to start over. The seller answered the phone and I asked, "Do you still have the hang glider?" "Yes," he said. "Can I come by and look at it?" I asked. "Sure," he said and gave me directions. We agreed on a time to meet and I hung up.

Now there was just one problem... I didn't have \$500.00. I quickly went to my room and retrieved my guitar and amplifier. Next, I went into the garage and got my tool box and several power-tools. I got everything into my car and headed up the freeway. I was on my way to The Old West, a pawn shop in Redding. I sold my guitar and amp for the most I could get, which was only \$75 bucks. Not willing to part with my tools, I put them in hawk for another \$100. With this money and what was left over from my paycheck after bills, I headed to where to glider was. I was still short, but hoped that the seller would be willing to work something out.

I arrived at the seller's house and he got out the glider. We began setting it up. When the wings were spread out, I remember thinking, "this is not like the gliders in my picture book" and "what are these curved aluminum things?" Oh well, I still wanted it. Now... would he be willing to except some kind of payment schedule on the amount that I was short?

I told him how much cash I had and what payments I could afford if he'd be willing to hold it until it was paid for. He agreed to my offer and a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. I had worried earlier that if payments could not be arranged, someone else would get it first.

It was at this point the seller began asking me questions. "Have you ever flown before?" he asked. "No," I said. "Do you have an instructor that is going to teach you?" he asked. "Instructor? What do you mean?" I asked. He then explained in great detail the inherent dangers of hang gliding and that you don't just get into a hang glider and start flying. He also informed me that I would need qualified instruction before he could sell me this glider in good faith. A sinking feeling came over me and I began to think that the deal was off. But, as it turned out, he was an instructor and offered me a lesson package. Normally, at this point, I would have become suspicious that someone was milking me for more money. But, I wanted the glider really bad and when he offered a pay-as-you-go lesson package, how could I refuse? After all, I really should learn how to fly the glider, right? :)

The rest is pretty much history. I have many great memories now of experiences on the training hill, my first altitude flight, and over fourteen years of comradery with fellow pilots. Thankfully, I never found any cheap aluminum or I might not be here to have those memories. The flying dreams no longer taunt me now. The only flying dreams I have now are those of hang gliding. When I wake up from a hang gliding dream, I can smile because I know it's a reality. - *Brian Bokkin*



The author on final approach at Hat Creek Rim.

Headed Your Way...

The next issue of *The Feather's Point* will contain a detailed treasurer's report of this year's activities and the results of the election of club officers.

Merry Christmas

and...

Happy New Year!