

Silver Badge Flight form Mt Valley- Dan Rihn

Soaring at Mt Valley on Labor Day weekend has always been fun for me. The conditions are usually great and there is so much happening at Mt Valley during this weekend it's always a great time. I positioned my ASW-20 there this past summer in order to get more experience in the area and to keep making progress in my Badge flights. I had previously done my 5-hour Silver flight there two years ago and last year (2003) I did a great flight to Lone Pine and return that would have qualified me for my Gold distance but I didn't properly declare the flight so it was just a personal best flight. Ah, you live and you learn. So by the end of 2003 I still needed to complete both distance and altitude requirements Silver Badge for my Silver Badge. My plan for the 2004 season was to have that completed before Labor Day and go for Gold on Labor Day weekend. That plan didn't pan out either, even though I positioned my ASW-20 at Mt Valley all summer it seemed that my schedule, time off and the days Mother Nature was producing good lift did match up. The summer was running out fast and Labor Day was approaching.

The Labor Day weekend started off not looking too good. The wind was howling on the first day. Rather than sit around and watch the tumbleweed roll by, Aaron Munger, Jerry Clark and myself decided to take an expedition and check out some of the land out fields. This proved to be invaluable and I highly recommend doing it. We drove up HWY 14 to HWY 178 over Walker Pass then to Weldon and Mountain Mesa on Isabella Lake. We checked the land out areas around Weldon and further to the west including driving up and down the abandoned airfield on the east end of Isabella Lake. From there we drove to Kelso Valley, checked out the strip there and walked the entire length. We then drove over the pass and down through Jawbone Canyon. From there we checked out the land out capability of the frontage road to the Honda Track, and then we swung by California City to visit with Cindy and Marty.

Not only checking out the land out fields but also looking at the terrain and geography from this viewpoint was great. Even though I had flown over these areas several times this trip gave me a lot more confidence. Seeing the terrain up close and knowing I could land at these places gave me a much better perspective.

The next few two days were soarable for long local flights out to Kelso Valley and back. Each day was forecasted to be better and better. The last day of the long weekend and my last day to fly at Mt Valley for the season was the 6th of September. To make any progress on my Badge Flights for 2004 it was all down to this day. I spent each night at the hotel planning and preparing. Articles written by Mike Muncey and Larry Tuohino were a great help to me. Additionally Larry gave an excellent talk about flying X/C in the pilots lounge room using the relief map. This was truly excellent, I really learned a lot from this talk; names of places, geography and routes were covered in detail. Someday we should have Larry write this down for an article in Zero Sink and the OCSA web site (hint..hint Larry). This preparation and planning is important and now that I look back it was fun too, I really did learn a lot and this knowledge gave me a lot more confidence.

The night of the 5th I input my task as a Gold Distance Goal with the Switchbacks just past Horseshoe Meadows as my turnaround. I knew this turn point very well from my Lone Pine out and back flight last year. As a backup I put in Walker Pass as my first turn point. This was Silver Distance so if I couldn't make the Switchbacks and could only go as far as Walker Pass at least I'd have my Silver Badge. Fortunately Aaron made a GPS waypoint when we drove over the pass so I had a good coordinate and a good visual picture of this turn point. Silver altitude gain is pretty easy, only 3,281 feet, usually you can get this on any day capable of doing any X/C. Gold altitude is tougher, at 9,842 feet of altitude gain, that means an altitude over 16,000 MSL, that's a pretty high cloud base for the Tehachapi area but maybe I could make it up in the southern Sierra. I had come very close a few times launching from Mt Valley so I was optimistic that I could wrap up my Silver Badge requirements and with a little luck get my Gold Badge.

The next day the forecast looked good, perhaps it was a little too optimistic but it was the best day yet. Unfortunately it was going to be a "Blue" thermal day, no clouds to help find the lift. I asked Larry Tuohino to be my Official Observer (OO), I went over my game plan with Larry and he agreed it was solid. So we set the declaration in the Volkslogger and mounted it in the glider. My declared start was piece of property fellow sailplane pilot and good friend Tom Riley recently bought, it's located adjacent to the east end of the runway and just in

the hills to the south. I had been there on the ground so I knew it well. I took a tow to 6,200 feet MSL (2,000 foot tow) and found weak lift. I lost a little altitude so I had a good notch for the barogram. With a little patience I was able find lift south of the airport and began to work my way up the mountains to the Bald Spot. Along the way I got a good start by flying over Tom Riley's property. It took me about 20 minutes to climb up to about 11,000 feet MSL and get started on my X/C. Things were looking up so I headed north to Kelso Valley.

The lift was pretty spotty on the way to Kelso. I did find good lift in the Cache Peak area. This area always seems to have some lift. From Cache Peak it was an easy glide to Kelso Valley where I found good lift on the north ridge of the valley. This area known as Boomer Ridge, the lift was strong but it didn't go very high. I was working mostly in the 9 to 10,000 foot level. I decided to go for it and kept moving north. The rocky ridges between Boomer Ridge and Walker Pass were producing small but workable thermals. My biggest concern was that I was not getting very high. I could see Owens Peak very clearly and it was about my altitude. I kept working what I could find but things were starting look like the lift was not really going to break loose. My altitude was beginning to average lower than I liked. I worked the weak lift over the side of the ridge where I could just reach Inyokern airport. I just kept working every bit of scrap lift I could find, I spent about 40 minutes to inch my way closer to Walker Pass and eek out 1,000 feet of altitude. While working these bits of scrap I saw someone much lower than me on the west side of the ridges. This didn't make me feel much better about the situation but at least I could land at Inyokern. There was no way that he could make Inyokern. Later I found out that this was my friend Tom Riley, he was able to climb out of the hole and went back to Mt. Valley scraping all the way home.

Finally over Walker Pass I was up to 10,000 feet MSL. I flew a little further towards Owens Peak but on the north side of HWY 78 I didn't find any lift. So I turned around and decided to settle for Silver distance. Gold would have to wait for next season. I went back to the rock piles where I had found the weak lift before. This time it was even worse so I decided to just keep moving and go for Boomer Ridge and Kelso Valley. If I could make it home I would at least have that Silver Badge. The catch was the way I had declared the flight I'd have to

make it home and that was beginning to look pretty difficult. So I had to concentrate and focus on getting back!

By the time I made it to Boomer Ridge it was looking like I needed to start planning a land out. It was not looking too good to even make Kelso Valley, the ridges between me and Kelso were looking pretty high. I quickly realized I'd have to follow the down sloping terrain to the east. If I could make the Honda frontage road at least I'd have an easy retrieve. So I set up final glide to Honda and just kept bumping along in very minimum spots of lift. Pretty soon I had Honda with a little margin. I relayed a call to Aaron and Jerry to let them know to start getting ready for retrieval. Now that a safe land out was in the bag I started to get pissed that I was going to finish the season again with nothing to show for my efforts. Bummer! I just kept going. Then out of the blue near Smugglers Strip I hit the strongest thermal of the day. WOW, don't loose it concentrate and ride it for all it's worth. In no time at all I was over 11,000 feet MSL. Quickly reworking my final glide it looked like Mt Valley was well inside my glide. I called Aaron and Jerry to let them know that I was not going to need retrieval. So like a shot I went straight home. Along the way I found that the shear line had come in from the San Joaquin Valley. I was able to push the speed up to the yellow arc and still hold altitude or even climb a bit. I blew past Cache Peak and made a beeline for Tom Riley's property. By this time I was having trouble getting down! Lowered the gear dropped the flaps all the way and pulled the spoilers into the traffic pattern for nice landing back at Mt Valley. Home at last!

All this took 4 hours of flying. My OO, Larry Tuohino went a little further north than me; he made it back too but came very close to landing out at Kelso on the way home. A round of cold Beer was needed then it was off to do the paperwork for my Silver Badge. The download successful, declaration was valid and the data looked good. Larry and I shared our stories of our flights and then went off to put the gliders in the trailers for the drive home the next day.

I sent in the data and the paperwork to the SSA Badge Lady and waited. After several weeks I called her only to find out that she was having difficulty with my data not getting a good validation. She tried several things and eventually was needed the help of the Volkslogger and SeeYou software guru Erzam. This turned out to be a lesson in itself, but that 's another long story. After a few days

I got e-mail from the Badge Lady with congratulations. She and Erzam were able to figure out the problems with my data and sure enough it was all valid. So my name would be in the January Soaring magazine that I had earned my Silver Badge. The day before Christmas the actual Badge arrived in the mail. Finally success!

The process of earning a badge can be sometimes frustrating and but also enjoyable. I have flown further, higher and longer than this flight many times but I learned that preparation, planning and paperwork (documentation) are just as important as the flight. I learned a lot from this flight and I look forward to going for Gold and Diamond badges. Hopefully next year I'll be able to be properly prepared, have good luck with my schedule and the weather and ultimately have another badge success to report...

Dan Rihn



